

VINE GUY

He said/she said: The next big thing

By Scott and Cindy Greenberg

It doesn't matter where we are. Whether it's at a wine tasting, traveling on a plane or just dining with friends, the second most common question we're asked is, "What is the next big thing?" Then we spend the next 15 minutes deciphering what the asker is really asking. After all, "big" has a different connotation for every wine lover.

As we started writing this article, we realized that even we had a different definition of what "the next big thing" meant to us. So we thought we'd settle this once and for all and share our personal picks for "the next big thing"... at least for this year.

HE SAID: I'm looking for the next cult classic. After all, California legends like Araujo and Bryant Family or the "Garagiste" wines Valandraud and La Mondotte of Bordeaux had to start somewhere. I want to be one of those wine psychics who can tell (brag to) friends in a couple of years, "Oh yeah, I used to buy that stuff when it was only \$100 a bottle."

So my goal is to find powerfully rich wines that capture a unique expression of the varietal or region without having to fight thousands of other wine collectors for the privilege of purchasing a scarce bottle at a premium. The wines may be from smaller producers (less than 500 cases) or large production wineries (more than 1,000 cases). Either way, I want the wine to send shock waves of flavor over the tongue and curl my toes.

Neal Family Vineyards, Napa Valley, Calif. Thanks to an alert reader, I had the pleasure of meeting Mark Neal and his winemaker, Gove Celio, at a tasting here in town. The Neal family is one of the largest vineyard management companies in Napa, with more than 1,900 acres under supervision. In 2001, Mark fulfilled a lifelong dream when he built his own winery. Several vintages later, they developed a small following through their mailing list (they give e-mail subscribers discounts before they release the wine to the market).

The 2003 Neal Family Rutherford Dust, Napa Valley, Calif. (\$75) is fermented in small stainless-steel boxes and "punched down" several times a day to extract maximum color and flavor. The wine is aged for more than two years in French oak barrels, which imparts wonderful toasty oak nuances to the nose. Additional scents of violets, black cherries and, believe it or not, dustiness, compliment the flavors of ripe blackberries, cassis, dark plums and ripe berries. Smooth, semisweet tannins bring the fruit into focus and balance while the perfect acidity emphasizes the long, elegant finish. While it could certainly benefit from a few

years of cellaring, you'll have a hard time not opening it now.

SHE SAID: I want the up and coming. I'm looking for a winery with small-to-medium sized production (250 to 1,000 cases), not well-known and still reasonably priced. The wines have excellent structure and are made by a winemaking team who can't afford a publicist yet, in short, a rock band that's still passing out demo tapes. I want to be able to say: "I was drinking those wines before anyone heard about them."

Parallel Vineyards in Napa, Calif.: Talk about rock bands! We're talking Feedback before they became U2. Parallel (the name comes from a skiing technique) was started by a bunch of friends from Park City, Utah (best snow in the world!) who moved to Napa Valley, Calif., bought some land, and hired a vineyard manager and a winemaker — but not just any vineyard manager and winemaker: Jim Barbour has been managing vineyards in Napa since 1975 and is considered one of the most talented people in the business. And if you're a looking for a lead singer, Philippe Melka is just the winemaker to front your band. Originally from France, he has spent time in the legendary cellars of Petrus, Chateau Cheval Blanc and Chateau Haut-Brion in Bordeaux. In Napa, he has made wines for such notable producers as Bryant Family, Vineyard 29 and Lail Vineyards and was recently named as Food & Wine magazine's 2005 Winemaker of the Year. His wines definitely have what it takes to go platinum.

Made from a blend of top quality fruit from Howell Mountain and Calistoga (82 percent cabernet sauvignon, 18 percent Merlot) the 2003 Parallel Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, Calif. (\$45) has big fruit, complex structure and tannins to go the distance. Its nose is full of gorgeous blackberries, dried sage, smoky oak. Wispy hints of vanilla and Asian spices drift in at the end. Rich flavors of blackberry, black currants and baked cherry fruit explode in the mouth while the firm tannins keep the balance in check and provide a beautiful mouthfeel. The long and generous finish features roasted coffee and hints of licorice that give the wine a sense of balance and terroir.

There you have it. Our picks for the next big thing... according to us. By the way, just in case you're wondering what the most common question we're asked: "Where is the restroom?"

If you have a next big thing you'd like to share, e-mail us at scott@vineguy.com



The power of Pierre Rovani

An interview by Scott Greenberg

“Nobody’s palate is more important than your own.”

— Pierre Rovani

Pierre Rovani is regarded as one of the most powerful wine critics in the world. His wine reviews regularly appear in the highly respected bimonthly journal *The Wine Advocate* and the best-selling *The Wine Buyer's Guide*.

Pierre's rise to fame began in 1996 when, working as a wine merchant at MacArthur Beverages, a fine wine shop in Washington, D.C., he was asked by noted wine critic and publisher of *The Wine Advocate* Robert Parker to join him.

Since then, Pierre has been responsible for tasting and critiquing more than half of the world's wine-producing regions, including most of France, Washington state, South Africa, Germany, Austria, New Zealand, Champagne and many others.

Following graduation from Vanderbilt University, Pierre enjoyed experiences on Capitol Hill, as a founder and co-owner of an electronic publishing company, a White House correspondent, and a business consultant prior to following his passion for wine.

I had the pleasure of sitting down with Pierre at one of his favorite restaurants for an incredible, edible experience and a chance to catch up with the globetrotting wine critic.

» **Vine Guy (VG):** When did you first become interested in wine?

» **Pierre Rovani (PR):** When I was a child, perhaps 3 or 4 years old. My parents are French and instilled a French culture in our home — history, geography, language, food and, of course, wine, which was served at dinner every night. My father served us (my older brother and me) a small amount of wine in a tiny brandy snifter that focused the smell of the wine and forced us to sniff and sip. He would also talk to us about the wine. I evidently took to it since my fourth-grade show-and-tell was on the region of Beaujolais.

» **VG:** Truly a young protégé. Now that you're older, and do this for a living, how many wines do you taste in a year?

» **PR:** About 10,000, and the overwhelming majority of these wines I would never recommend... except to my worst enemies (smiles).

» **VG:** Are you as picky with other beverages or food selections as you are with wine?

» **PR:** I believe I only have this one life and I am going to put in my mouth the things I enjoy. I don't think I am a "snob." I love Big Macs, Double Whopper with



Cheese and macaroni and cheese. I am also very picky about coffee.

» **VG:** How did you come to work with Robert Parker and *The Wine Advocate*?

» **PR:** When I was at MacArthur's (a wine shop in Washington, D.C.) in 1993, Bob (Parker) was a customer. I would read Bob's reviews and when I would disagree with him, I would send him a fax with my reviews.

» **VG:** For example?

» **PR:** The 1990 Leoville-Poyferre, the 1990 Cheval Blanc and the 1990 La Mission Haut Brion. I had the utmost respect for Bob. I was just sharing my opinion and Bob reacted very well. So, in 1996, I started working with him.

» **VG:** It seems like one of the greatest jobs in the world!

» **PR:** I am an opinionated bastard. I just found a job where I get paid for it!

» **VG:** What wines do you like to drink when you're not reviewing?

» **PR:** After a huge day of tasting, I love a good beer. But I mean a really good beer, like a Czech pilsner. When it's cold outside, I love a good cider. Eric Bordelet makes great pear and apple ciders. I always have some in the fridge. When it's hot outside, there's nothing better than moscato d'Asti from La Spinetta.

» **VG:** I know that you and Parker are very involved in charitable events, donating wines as well as private dining/tasting events. What charitable events are on your horizon at the moment?

» **PR:** Loads of them. Bob and I have helped raise millions of dollars for charitable causes all over the world. We consider ourselves lucky that people will spend gen-

erous amounts of money to bid on our wines or to have dinner with us. But recently we thought it would be wonderful to create our own charitable foundation and invite all of the incredible people who have donated so much in the past to come to Washington to participate in an event featuring debauchery and hedonism for a good cause.

» **VG:** When is this event?

» **PR:** June 2 and 3. Bob and I are going to set new standards — benchmarks if you will — for an extraordinary food and spectacular wine experience. We will be pouring liquid perfection (100 point-rated wines) matched with the greatest chefs cooking in America today as the focus of the two-night affair will be laughter, immense pleasure and doing what's right. Just like everyone you know, Bob and I have lost close friends and family to cancer. So this is our chance to fight back.

» **VG:** Who are the beneficiaries of this event?

» **PR:** This event will benefit the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, a world-class research facility working to find a cure for cancer, and the Apple Tree Institute, which is dedicated to critical early learning and literacy for at risk pre-school children in the Washington, D.C. area.

» **VG:** Where can people get additional information or learn how to make contributions to the fund?

» **PR:** Additional information is available on our Web site, www.wineadvocatefund.org.

» **VG:** Last question: What is the single best piece of advice you can give to someone just starting a wine collection?

» **PR:** Nobody's palate is more important than your own.