

Mouthfeel: Confessions of a Wine Slut

By Mari Kane

Robertson Cellar's tasting room was crammed when my friends and I arrived at Crush Hour, thirty minutes before closing time. The aroma of rough-hewn wood and negative ions combined with perspiration and rotting fruit, creating an earthy bouquet so thick it could be bottled. There were young golfers bantering with aging hippies, retirees talking to river rats, and barrel-chested men towering above petite, coiffed women who passed glasses to each other. Bodies were pressed three deep against the counter and when a couple turned to leave, we leaped into the space they vacated.

"Well, judging from the crowd, I guess we can conclude that their wines are good," Rebecca said with a laugh.

"Excellent observation, my dear," said Greg, affecting a Sherlock Holmes accent. "Perhaps there is a crowd to price ratio to be deduced here."

We laughed at our own pretentiousness even though we were indeed on a mission, as students of Wine Marketing 101, to observe patterns of consumption and purchasing at one of Sonoma County's oldest wineries.

But we could barely hear each other in the swirling vortex of descriptors and hokum in which we stood, where everybody around us was a critic.

"I'm getting dried raisins."

"I get warm plywood."

"I'm getting wet, hot asphalt, but in a good way."

"Are those tartrates in your glass, or just floaters?"

After flagging down the cute bartender, Greg said, "What do you gals want to start with - the zin?" He raised one satanic eyebrow and leered. "They have five different bottlings, ya' know."

Rebecca looked at me and laughed, "Oh sure, why not? It's all part of our research, right?"

Squeezed on both sides, we huddled in the two-person space as if under an umbrella and began our analysis of the Sonoma County and Russian River Zinfandels. We then proceeded through the Reserve, the Westside Vineyard and the Rocky Range Zins. By the time we arrived at the Late Harvest, my brain was afloat.

"May I have some water, please," I asked, sliding my glass toward the bar babe. Once rehydrated, I nosed my pour of the boozy dessert wine and gazed around the room.

Alcohol fumes stung my nostrils as I watched a customer trying to sell wine to another guy. Raspberry jamminess coated my tongue while a group of retirees conspired to split a case for the quantity discount. My chest blazed as I saw the bartender high fiving a bunch of guys in ball caps.

Through my alcoholic mist, I admired the way he interacted with the crowd, and I imagined how I would look behind the counter, pouring wine. With my hair pulled back and my shirtsleeves rolled up, I'd be the picture of rustic hospitality. My banter would be witty yet informative, and occasionally I'd tell customers things they didn't already know. Quick with the bottle and never, ever spilling, I would entice people with the wine and inspire them to take home cases of it. Canny but beneficent, and always the consumer advocate, I would be worshiped like a tasting room goddess dispensing...

"Hey, Mari. Ya' wanna' go look for the head?" Rebecca said.

Instantly, I came back to myself, an unemployed single mom gripped with visions of vinicultural grandeur. The dream tasted inviting, and left a warm, appealing finish.