



Forget red and blue. Wine tasting compares red and whites from presidential states

By Dorothy Gaiter and John Brecher | Tastings

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With just weeks left until the election, many questions remain to be answered, including whether the Obamas really have a built-in wine cellar in their house and, if so, what's in it; whether Sarah Palin prefers Australian Shiraz or a hearty red Rhone with her just-skinned moose; and whether John McCain's wife, who owns a beer distributorship, takes her work home to him.

And then there's the most important question: Between the states of the presidential candidates - Arizona and Illinois - which makes the better wine? It's our job to find out. So on a beautiful night in Washington, D.C., at Proof, a popular wine bar and restaurant, we tasted two dozen carefully chosen wines to find the answer to that question. And this won't surprise you: We didn't know the answer until the very last label was revealed.

It was our third Presidential Taste-Off, in which we invite a bipartisan panel of wine-loving Washington pooh-bahs to join us in sampling wines from the home states of the two presidential candidates. In 2000, Texas beat Tennessee and in 2004 Massachusetts was a surprise winner over Texas. That means this method has a 50 percent chance of correctly predicting the winner of the election, which is probably better than some pundits.

We invented the Presidential Taste-Off to hammer home the point that good wine is being made all over the U.S. these days. There is now a commercial winery in all 50 states.

Wine has had an interesting role in this year's presidential race - and not in a good way. Despite wine's increasing popularity all over the country - red and white are equally enjoyed in states both red and blue - it still is used too often as a pejorative that equates with Eastern Establishment Elite and weakness. Remember how Barack Obama made a point of drinking a beer in Indiana and Hillary Clinton showed her toughness by enjoying a beer and a shot? In fact, back on her campaign plane, Sen. Clinton drank Yellow Tail Shiraz from Australia.

This business of running from wine is a shame, especially considering that there is far more interest than ever in the 50 states of wine. Over the years, we have written about various wineries in Arizona and Illinois. Their wine industries are quite different, but the one thing they have in common is that they've been growing like a vine recently.

In 1997, there were 12 wineries in Illinois. Now there are 79. There are about 1,100 acres of vines, and most of the wines made there are from native American grape varieties or hybrids because the weather is too tough for most types of vinifera, the vine species that produces classic grapes like Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. The growing season is short, winters are cold, and rain and humidity create problems with fungal infection, said Bradley Beam, an enology specialist at the University of Illinois. Even so, local interest is high in the wines of Illinois, he said, and he expects the industry to grow rapidly in the next few years.

In Arizona, the modern industry is just 25 years old. There were only nine bonded wineries in 2002. Now there are 26, with an additional 10 or 12 on the way. There are still only 450 acres of vines and they are

almost entirely planted with vinifera varieties. There's special excitement about grape varieties from the Rhone Valley of France, such as Syrah and Grenache. Rod Keeling of Keeling Schaefer Vineyards, who is president of the Arizona Wine Growers Association, told us that the dry climate is helpful, though the soil is a challenge.

We asked the wine associations in each state - the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Association and the Arizona Wine Growers Association - to choose the wines. We set some ground rules: The wines had to have some commercial distribution; several wineries should be represented; no sparkling or dessert wines; and only wines made from grapes grown in the state. We also originally asked them to focus on vinifera wines, so that we could compare apples with apples, but Illinois wanted to include some hybrids because that's the state's strong suit and we agreed. (The Journal paid retail prices for the wines.) We ultimately had a fascinating array of wines. There were 10 whites, 12 reds and two roses. Some were straightforward - Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir - but several were more unusual, such as a Syrah, Mourvedre, Grenache, Petite Sirah blend from Pillsbury Wine Co. in Arizona.

Our tasting panel convened at Proof, one of the burgeoning number of wine bars and wine-centric restaurants in Washington. Once again, the group included the co-chairmen of the Congressional Wine Caucus, California Reps. George Radanovich and Mike Thompson. Rep. Radanovich was a winemaker himself until a few years ago, when he sold Radanovich Winery in Mariposa County in his district, which also includes Yosemite National Park. Thompson, whose district stretches from the San Francisco Bay area up the North Coast to the Oregon border and includes Napa, sells grapes to wineries from his own organic, biodynamic vineyard. Our panel again also included CBS News White House correspondent Bill Plante, one of Washington's best-known wine lovers. Rep. Radanovich is a Republican and Rep. Thompson is a Democrat. We are also a mixed couple: John is a Republican and Dottie is a Democrat.

Proof's patient and charming wine director, Sebastian Zutant, served the 24 wines to us blind, with napkins covering the labels. We hit a winner with the very first wine, a white that was crisp, clean and quite flowery. Dottie called it "floral, with a nice backbone." Plante liked its "citrus taste and nicely fruited finish." Rep. Radanovich thought it was pleasantly crisp. We were happy with such a good start and kept it on the table.

We generally enjoyed the wines. Most of them had lovely noses. Sure, there were some misfires - Rep. Radanovich noted that one had "a wet-wool-sock nose," while Rep. Thompson said another had "a fisherman's-dock nose." One white had a cotton-candy finish and a red tasted more like peppermint than grapes. But, on the whole, the wines were pretty good and there was something nice to say about most of them, even including a semisweet rose that was not among our favorites but about which Rep. Thompson said, with a faraway look, "I can see this on a hot day with heirloom tomatoes and buffalo mozzarella, served well-chilled." (It turned out to be Willett's Winery & Cellar Frontenac Rose from Illinois.)

In some cases, the winemaker's intervention left the wines heavy with oak. But throughout the tasting, we kept saying that, overall, the winemaking seemed better than the grapes - in other words, that passionate, talented winemakers were working awfully hard to make good wine from grapes that, in many cases, simply didn't seem fully ripe or very intense. The wines were pleasant, but generally lacked complexity and depth. It seems clear that the vineyards are still young and very much a work in progress, but good things will be happening. The roots just need to go deeper, and we mean that both literally and figuratively.

There were some clear winners, however. No. 5, a white, was pleasant, light and easy to drink. John found it clean and well-made. Plante felt it lacked intensity and seemed "muddled," but Rep. Radanovich went to bat for it, feeling it opened up nicely. No. 10 was also a good white, filled with grapefruit tastes. And No. 12 was quite pleasant - clearly a Chardonnay, we thought, and similar to many successful commercial Chardonnays, such as Meridian from California.

Among the reds, there was just one winner: No. 22, which tasted a bit like a Rhone red, with some roasted fruit. There was a hint of cream that we didn't like, but the wine was well-balanced and charming.

No. 21 just missed. It was grapey, with nicely intense, true tastes and a good shake of black pepper that we liked. "Most body yet," Radanovich wrote in his notes. It clearly seemed to be a Cabernet Sauvignon. In the

long run, though, we couldn't get over the nose, which seemed to all of us to have a faint touch of vinegar. We ultimately eliminated it very late in the competition.

So we were left with five wines. That meant there would be a clear winner. Zutant slowly revealed our favorites. No. 1 was a Malvasia Bianca (\$20) from Arizona. This is a floral vinifera grape that's grown throughout the world and, when it's good, it can be a charming, light, pretty wine - as this one was. No. 5 was a Chardonnay from Illinois: Fox Valley Winery Chardonnay 'Reserve' 2007 (\$19.95.) No. 10 was a Viognier from Arizona, Dos Cabezas Wine Works Viognier 2006 (\$20), and No. 12, as we'd guessed, was a Chardonnay - from Illinois, Blue Sky Vineyard Chardonnay 'Estate' (Shawnee Hills) 2007 (\$24).

It was 2-2. No. 22, the Rhone-like red wine, would break the tie. Zutant stood with the bottle, the label still covered. "You know you're about to decide the next presidential election," Plante deadpanned. Slowly, the napkin came off.

The wine turned out to be Keeling Schaefer Vineyards Syrah, from Arizona (\$20).

The winner: Arizona. But here's an interesting postscript: No. 21, the wine that just missed the cut, turned out to be a Von Jakob Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 from Illinois. Had it smelled just a little better, it would have been a winner and we would have had a tie. In other words, Arizona really did win by a nose.

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