

## A VERY GOOD YEAR

Judges in this year's *American Fine Wine Competition* in Fort Lauderdale sipped easily through 630 wines, awarding two Best of Show, 10 Best of Class and 41 Double Gold medals.

BY MARK GAUERT

**A wine tasting competition can** look a little like a poker tournament, smell like a flower shop - and sound like a séance.

"Is that ... butter I'm tasting?" one judge might say at the tasting tables, trying to divine the spirits swishing around his mouth.

"I'm getting more of a butter scotch," another might posit, about the same chardonnay rolling across his palate.

Once the 20 judges in the recent American Fine Wine Competition at the Hyatt Pier Sixty-Six in Fort Lauderdale had swirled, smelled, sipped - and, yes, spit (viewer discretion advised, if you watch the video, [www.cityandshore.com](http://www.cityandshore.com)) - the poker game began.

"I'd give that one a silver [medal]," one judge might bid.

"I'd give it a bronze plus," another says.

"That wine," frowns a third, "had no identity."

A moment of quiet, poker-faced reflection follows. Another clarifying sip, or two...

"I could go bronze," the first judge relents.

"I could go bronze," says the third.

"Bronze it is," the second judge says.

And on and on (and on - there were 630 wines from over 200 wineries entered in competition this year) the blind sampling, the bidding and the judging went. First a full day swirling, smelling, sipping and spitting the white wines. Then a second full day on the reds.

A wine competition may sound like fun, but, even with snacks to clear the palate between flights, and a break for lunch; it's a lot of work. And, no, there is no, uh, *recreational* distraction.

"We're here to evaluate, not get drunk," said judge Julie DeFriend, sommelier and maitre d' of the five-diamond Oak Room restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky.

The word around the judges' tables, however, was that this was a particularly good year to be a judge in the American Fine Wine Competition.

"Just look at all the Double Gold-rated bottles," said AFWC president and co-founder Shari Gherman, in the prep rooms setting up wine flights for the judges. "Those are some happy judges in there."

Indeed, this year's happy judges awarded two Best of Show, 10 Best of Class and 41 Double Gold medals - mostly to wines from wineries in California, Oregon, Washington state, New York, Virginia, New Mexico and Ohio - up from 31 Double Gold medals last year. The Best of Show in the white-wine category went to a 2008 Estate Chardonnay from Chamisal Vineyard in Edna Valley, Calif.; the Best of Show red was a 2006 cabernet franc from McKeon-Phillips Winery in Santa Barbara County, Calif.

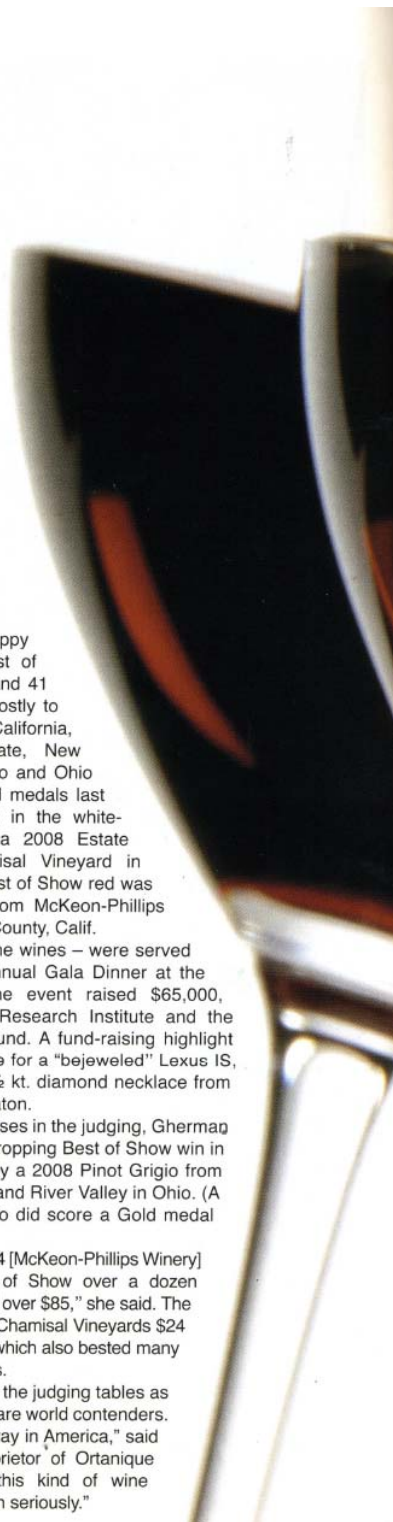
The winners - and all the wines - were served Feb. 12 at the Fourth Annual Gala Dinner at the Hyatt Pier Sixty-Six. The event raised \$65,000, benefiting the Diabetes Research Institute and the Sun-Sentinel Children's fund. A fund-raising highlight of the evening was a raffle for a "bejeweled" Lexus IS, from JM Lexus; and a 6 ½ kt. diamond necklace from *Jewels in Time* in Boca Raton.

There were no big surprises in the judging, Gherman said, like last year's jaw-dropping Best of Show win in the white wine category by a 2008 Pinot Grigio from Ferrante Winery of the Grand River Valley in Ohio. (A 2009 Ferrante Pinot Grigio did score a Gold medal this year, though).

"The big surprise was a \$44 [McKeon-Phillips Winery] cabernet franc won Best of Show over a dozen cabernet sauvignons priced over \$85," she said. The same could be said for the Chamisal Vineyards \$24 Best of Show chardonnay, which also bested many more expensive white wines.

All news toasted around the judging tables as proof that American wines are world contenders.

"Wine has come a long way in America," said judge Delius Shirley, proprietor of Oranique in Coral Gables. And, "this kind of wine competition should be taken seriously."



**Editor's note:** Many of the wines awarded medals at the American Fine Wine Competition, presented by Patriot National Insurance Group (PNIG) – particularly those from smaller vineyards – are difficult to find in South Florida. Many, however, can be ordered directly from the winery and shipped here. Or, ask your wine merchant for help locating a particular vintage.

For complete results, including all 41 Double Gold winners, see [www.cityandshore.com/wine\\_spirits.html](http://www.cityandshore.com/wine_spirits.html)

**BEST OF SHOW RED**

2006 Cabernet Franc from McKeon-Phillips Winery, Santa Barbara County, Calif.; \$44.

**BEST OF SHOW WHITE**

2008 Estate Chardonnay from Chamisal Vineyards, Eden Valley, Calif.; \$24.

**BEST OF CLASS WINNERS**

**OTHER RED WINE CATEGORY**

2007 "19 Block Cuvée" from Hess Collection, Mount Veeder, Calif.; \$36.

**MERITAGE STYLE BLEND**

2007 "The Sisters" from Jones Family Vineyards, Napa Valley, Calif.; \$35.

**SAUVIGNON BLANC**

2009 "Block 21" from Kelleher Family Vineyard, Napa Valley, Calif.; \$28.

**CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

2007 "Rapture" from Michael-David Winery, Lodi, Calif.; \$59.

**PINOT NOIR**

2007 Hawk Hill Vineyard from Talisman Wines, Russian River Valley, Calif.; \$46.

**SYRAH**

2008 "Nth Degree" from Wente Vineyards, Livermore Valley, Calif.; \$50.

**PETITE SYRAH**

2007 "Ellie's Vineyard" from Wilson Winery, Dry Creek Valley, Calif.; \$35.

**ZINFANDEL**

2008 "Diane's Reserve" from Wilson Winery, Dry Creek Valley, Calif.; \$60.

**DESSERT WINE**

2008 "Essensia Orange Muscat" from Quady Winery, California; \$17.

**SPARKLING WINE**

2001 "DVX" from Mumm Napa,

Go online  
to see video of the American  
Fine Wine Competition at  
[www.cityandshore.com](http://www.cityandshore.com)