

WINE WORDS



by Millie
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Oysters and Hemingway

Last week, when I should have been glued to the computer tapping out a few paragraphs of deathless prose, I was, instead, sitting in the Sutro Room of San Francisco's famed Cliff House slurping dozens (yes, dozens) of Kumamoto oysters out of their shells, chewing each a bit then taking a sip of white wine entered in the 11th Annual Oyster Wine Competition.

Following the tradition of the event, Jon Rowley, representative of the Competition's sponsor, Taylor Shellfish Farm, of Shelton, Washington welcomed the group of 13 judges by reading two appropriate paragraphs from Ernest Hemingway's "Moveable Feast."

Prior to the arrival of about 45 dozen Kumamotos in San Francisco a panel of five veteran Preliminary judges had spent a week blind tasting oysters with each of the 200 wines entered this year. Entries came from British Columbia, California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. After the master panel had tasted all 200 wines and re-tasted 40 of them, the top 20 of the entrants were sent off to semi-

final panels in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Judges who vie each year to be among the lucky ones are, in general, food and wine writers, and restaurateurs. This year, Bronwen Clark, front-of-the-house-manager for Rodney's Oyster House in Toronto, told us a great story about her brother's successes in the annual national oyster-shucking contest that I will share at another time.

The oysters and the wine are served at the same cold temperature. Oysters are iced for an hour before shucking and the wines are served out of an ice bath so that they are poured at the same temperature in each city. The oysters arrive 12 at a time on iced platters. The wines are poured in flights of five so the temperatures are the same in every glass in every flight. There are a few very specific rules the judges are asked to follow: Once the judging

starts conversation stops so concentration can be focused on finding the most blissful combinations. Do not sniff the wine before tasting at least one oyster. The idea of the competition is not to evaluate the wine, but to seek the "bliss" factor: exhibited by the ten wines that go best with the oysters. Kumamotos are chosen because they are small. As Jon says, "The competition would be physically impossible if larger oysters were used."

"Judging is totally subjective. You use whatever scoring system you like and at the conclusion of match-ups you select your ten favorites. The scores, weighted by rankings from the three cities judgments will be

combined to determine the ten equal 2008 Oyster Award winners.

"There was one difference in this year's competition. While April may be the ideal time for assembling the judging panels, it isn't the ideal time for Kumamotos. That small problem has been solved by Taylor's purchase of growing grounds in Baja California (Rancho Bueno, Population 4, nearest neighbor 60 miles away). Our panel of 13 thought they were delicious.

"I closed up the story in the notebook and put it in my inside pocket and I asked the waiter for a dozen of the Portugaises and a half carafe of the dry white wine they had there. After writing a story I was always empty and both sad and happy, as though I had made love, and I was sure this was a very good story although I would not know truly how good until I read it over the next day.

"As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans."

Says Jon of that quote, "the description of Hemingway's experience is the perfect combination the competition seeks to find in ten outstanding wine/oyster matches each year." The winners will be named here when they are available.

Article courtesy of

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