

# The 1WineDude.com Top 10 Most Interesting Wines of 2009

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Here we go again. It is... *that time*.

That time when I present *the 1WineDude.com Top 10 Most Interesting Wines of the Year*. Although I tried last year to set proper expectations around this year end recap of tasty vino, that didn't stop my **Top 10 Most Interesting Wines of 2008** list from being used as a bit of media-fodder "best of" list – which it wasn't.

For those of you new to this annual list, here's how it works: *it's NOT a list of the best wines released in 2009*. It is a list of wines that I *tasted* in 2009 (that's the *only* qualification for inclusion, by the way), and that I personally found to be the most *interesting* of those wines. The list is presented with my *twitter mini-review*, and reflections on why each wine was included.

I just want to caution everyone not to take this list too seriously. Because, well, it's not *meant* to be taken too seriously. Which doesn't mean that a lot of serious thought didn't go into the compilation of this list. It did. As I mentioned in preface to the 2008 list:

*"...there was nothing easy about compiling the list that I'm about to give to you, and I'm sure the inclusions and omissions will piss some people off somewhere. That isn't my intention, and this is not a best-of list by any stretch of the imagination."*

That was even more true for this year's list. For one, the 'competition' (if it can be called that) was stiffer – I tasted more wines, and more wines of higher quality, than I ever have before. I had access – through the kind generosity of many, many people in the wine industry – to more wines than I had in 2008, much of them of high quality. Trying to nail this down to 10 wines was, at times, downright agonizing. Many wines, made by people who in some cases I now count among my friends, that just didn't make it but were *ohhhh sooooo cloooooose*.

The list is *not* based on any numerical rating. The wines were chosen based on my tasting notes from *all* of the wines that I tasted this year. Since I am not employed as a wine critic, I do not taste thousands of wines per year. I do, however, taste well over an amount of wine than (I think) is normally accessible to the average wine lover.

The differences between the 2008 and 2009 lists are exciting for me:

As much as I consider myself a 'red' wine drinker at heart, the majority of the wines that made the cut are whites, with at least one of them being a grape that you probably haven't had before (let alone heard of... or can likely pronounce). The top 3 on the list are very, very exciting wines and I'm particularly stoked to hear (read) what you all think of those.

Sadly, I'm not sure that any of my picks are budget-priced wines – there's something we can discuss in the comments! As with the 2008 list, and despite the high(ish) price tags, my aim is to expose you to something unique, different, and of (what I feel is) exceptional quality for the price – you can comment and let me know if I succeeded.

Enough of my yakin' – let's boogie! I give you –

### The 1WineDude.com Top 10 Most Interesting Wines of 2009...

10) 04 **Cornerstone Cellars Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley)**: *Sublime balance btw focused black fruit & silky tannic structure. Drool...*

This is a wine whose grapes I imagined as Mr T. talking to me in a vineyard in Howell Mountain and basically calling me its bitch. I can think of no higher praise than the "I'm your bitch" compliment, and in this case **I am a bitch for Howell Mountain Cabernet fruit, and this wine offers one of the most stunningly focused representations** of its obsidian and deeply concentrated black-fruit goodness. And for the stunningly high price, it *should* offer that kind of experience. Given my penchant for the Mount, it's certainly possible that Cornerstone's inclusion is too subjective, but it wasn't the *only* Howell Mtn. wine that I tasted in 2009 – but it was the *best* Howell Mtn. wine that I tasted in 2009.



9) 07 **Listed Wines Rose (CA)**: *All syrah, & all strawberry pie. A real homerun: you'd be hard-pressed to find a better everyday pink sipper.*



Listed is a bit of a side-side project by **Jarvis winemaker Ted Henry**, who's side project is **Prime Napa**. The Syrah rose was almost an afterthought for Ted and bottled under a "second" label. The production was very limited and the wine is very, very tasty. In fact, I found it to be **the single most perfect match for grilled salmon burgers that I've ever tasted**. It's a near-perfect everyday wine that takes on no pretensions and is 100% comfortable being in its own skin.

**8) 04 Altair (Cachapoal Vally, Chile):** *Fab Cab blend; black cherry, nutmeg & ok, maybe a touch of pine. It's so f-king good, you won't mind.*



Sometimes a wine is so layered and completely whole that you are totally satisfied by it. Like a winning Jenga puzzle, it's a finished statement – take an element away, or add another unnecessarily, and you risk the whole thing going out of balance and crumbling. This **Altair is that Jenga puzzle of a wine, and notable for inclusion not because it comes from Chile** (does anyone need further proof that Chile is making decent fine wine?) **but because it's so clearly age-worthy and balanced** – both elements that have dogged Chilean wine in terms of criticism from wine reviews (including me). Tasting this wine is a real treat – and one for which you'll pay dearly (\$60+). But if you *do* have the pleasure of tasting it, Altair will convince you that Chile has arrived when it comes to producing modern, excellent Cabernet.

**7) 06 Chateau Fuisse Le Clos (Pouilly-Fuisse):** *Rich & oaky Chard. Set your alarm, you may need it to wake you up when the finish finally stops!*



This stellar French offering closes the deal. It's a finisher. Literally – **the finish on this wine lasts so long that I think it started in the Paleozoic and might finally stop by the time we all travel in pollution-free tubes and have robots for housemaids like Rosey in the Jetsons**. Of course, a finish is only as good as what's on it, and this Chardonnay delivers vanilla, wood, spice, and stone & tropical fruits with a touch of minerals. That's a tall order to deliver all of those elements on the nose, through the palate and into the finish. I mean, that's like *minutes* of a consistent experience *with every sip*. It was all the more amazing to me because my tastes in Chard tend firmly towards Chablis – steely, racy, almost austere, with little or no oak treatment. And then this wine comes along and smacks me in the face with big fruit and big booze and big oak, and tells me I'll smile and I'll like it – and it's *right*. Of course, having been around since the 1850s, you'd hope that they'd have this Chardonnay thing figured out by now, right?

**6) 07 Penns Woods Chardonnay Reserve (PA):**

*Vanilla, tropical fruit, VG acidity. Might be the best E. Coast Chard. I've EVER tasted. Period.*

What, *another* oaked Chard on this list? What the hell is happening to me?!?? **Penns Woods is no stranger to this blog**, because I love what winemaker Gino Razzi is doing there, and his `07 Chard has made the list because **it's the most balanced and nuanced white wine from the East Coast U.S. that I've ever tasted.** I've been

following this one from its inception in stainless steel through barrel sampling and at multiple points after being bottled. The amount of fruit that Gino has been able to coax out of these PA grapes is astonishing, and it was clear early on just **how special this Chardonnay vintage was**, and that the wine was capable of standing up to as much oak treatment as Gino was willing to give it. It's drinking beautifully now, a minor triumph really, and a new benchmark for PA and East Coast wines.



**5) 07 Schloss Lieser Niederberg Helden Riesling Auslese (Mosel):** *Crazy good & fwd-thinking producer. Magic blend of honey-lemon & minerals.*

For those of you that have been asking "*where the f—k's the Riesling?!??*" while reading this post – I give you Schloss Lieser. Winemaker Thomas Haag (son of Fritz Hagg's Wilhelm Haag) comes from German Riesling royalty, and when he took over **Schloss Lieser** in 1992, the estate was in disrepair: no customers, and not a single bottle of wine in its library. Now, **the estate is churning out some of the loveliest and most elegant Rieslings in the Mosel.** When I visited **Schloss Lieser** earlier this year, Thomas told me this regarding Mosel Riesling: "We are talking about a very special and unique style you can't find anywhere else in the world; elegant, with finesse and very low alcohol. Respect *terroir* and the right grape for the region; this is the most important thing, I think: top quality." His Niederberg Helden Riesling Auslese really embodies that statement, and is included here because **the wine gripped me as being particularly elegant among a field of elegant wines from a special vintage produced by some of the world's greatest Riesling producers** – the most elegant of the elegant, in a way.





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**4) 06 O Fournier Alfa Crux Malbec (Mendoza):** *Spectacular – from dense sour cherry to Slim Jim, & everything in-between. This wine floored me.*

I've tasted a lot of wine in **Twitter Taste Live** events. I mean, *a lot* – I've been involved in almost every TTL event that took place over the course of nearly 2 years. **This gem from Mendoza ranks among the best reds I've ever had during a TTL event.** The Alfa Crux moved so deftly between dense red fruit and delectable, savory secondary aromas and flavors that it stands as a new high water mark for the expression of *terroir* in Argentina. Stop raising your eyebrows

– Argentina is coming of age when it comes to premium wine as an expression of place. If you don't believe it, take a swallow of this wine and watch your expectations get reset.

**3) 05 Bonny Doon Le Cigare Volant (CA):** *A bombastic, bold, balanced & beautiful (almost)-biodynamic BD. A minor triumph & a glimpse of CA's wine future.*

Randall **Grahm**, the Mad Hatter genius of the wine world, is no stranger to publicity this year, having taken a heightened interest in social media and released a **critically acclaimed (and entirely unique) book**. **Grahm has, by his own account, endured Gawain-esque travails to find what he feels is a true expression of *terroir* from the burnin' shores of California's lands. With the 2005 Le Cigare release, he is on the verge of achieving that expression.** The wine is, in a word, superb, and like Grahm's book it's at turns brilliant in its balance of new world *oofah!* (boldness and bombast) and old world *ooh-la-laah* (charm and funkiness).





## 2) 2008 Weingut Gysler Huxelrebe Beerenauslese

**(Rheinhessen):** "...might be the best *Huxelrebe* you've never tasted, with honeysuckle, lemon, and grapefruit aromas, balanced with vegetal and citrus notes and a honeyed finish that clocked in at 20+ seconds."

No that's not a misspelling. Yes, I did mean to include a Huxelrebe as my #2 on this list. I tasted Alexander Gysler's amazing Huxelrebe earlier this year **when I met him at his family estate in the Rheinhessen**. He casually (and unassumingly) mentioned that Lufthansa airlines had chosen to include the wine in their first class service. When I pressed him on how he scored such a great gig, he answered, "We were very lucky. In Germany, it's impossible to sell sweet wine." And there's the rub: because of a borderline-mindless

backlash against sweet wines in Germany, gems like this Huxelrebe are becoming increasingly more difficult to sell – and therefore almost an endangered species. Gysler's wine ranks so highly on my list for the simple reason that intense, complex, and balanced sweet wines like this – I'm talking about **the kind of wine that nearly brings tears of joy to your eyes for having been lucky enough to fully enjoy them** – well, they need to be celebrated, because they need to continue to be made or we have truly lost something unique and special in the wine world.

**1) 07 Matthiasson White (Napa Valley):** *Wonderfully unique blend w/ Ribolla. Tropical, spicy & racy. Haven't had one like this in a loong time.*

You'd be hard-pressed to meet a nicer couple in Napa than [Steve and Jill Matthiasson](#). And you'd be hard-pressed to find a more interesting wine coming out of Napa than their stellar white blend, which magically mixes Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla gialla, and Semillon into a balanced and sublime funky-nutty-tropical-racy-spicy blend. I first tasted this wine in January and the memory of it – as well as its significance – has stuck with me all year long.

I say 'significance' because I truly believe that **Matthiasson are providing a blueprint for the future of white wines in Napa**, and are exploring potential that few have yet touched upon. I say 'significance' because this wine came not from the million dollar coffers of a big-name Napa stalwart, but from the hard work of a couple of very down-to-earth peach farmers. I say 'significance' because just as [my introductory review of Volta](#) (a wine that went on to [great critical acclaim from Gary Vaynerchuk](#) and others) kind of put me on the map as someone who just might know what the hell he was talking about, [my early review of Matthiasson's white](#) has helped renew that for me in 2009 (only this time on the white wine side of things).

I was able to convince Jill to pour Matthiasson's white at the last Wine Bloggers Conference 'live blogging' tasting event, and [it was a runaway hit](#) – I mention that not to toot my own horn but to show how down-to-earth and approachable the Matthiassons have been about this amazing wine. **Their white has since gone on to be included in Top 100 lists for both Wine & Spirits and SFGate.com. Accolades well-deserved**, and here's hoping for many more years of interesting surprises from the down-to-earth Napa peach farmers.

Cheers!

