New Wines, New Faces: Oriel

Irish entrepreneur creates a new, single label for several great wines from around the world

Robert Taylor

Who: John Hunt is a former marketing executive for Proctor & Gamble who went on to start several companies that he later sold, including Seattle Coffee Company, which Starbucks purchased for $72 million in 2003. Hunt founded Oriel in 2000 with the goal of creating wines of reliable quality from the world's best wine regions, each bottled under the Oriel brand. The growing roster of winemakers involved in the project includes Philippe Melka of Bryant Family, Alain Raynaud of Colgin and John Duval, who makes Penfolds Grange.

What to Drink: The classic Barolo Etereo 2000 (97 points, $65, 175 cases made) is ripe and exotic, with loads of plum, meat and toasty oak on the nose, while the 2001 (91, $75, 300 cases made) offers aromas of cherry, plum and cedar, with ultrafine tannins and a long finish. The St.-Emilion Absolu de Quinault 2002 (91, $NA, 350 cases made) shows complexity and length with plenty of blackberry and toasty oak.

Where: Across the globe, from Bordeaux and Napa to the Maipo Valley and Marlborough. Hunt contracts each winemaker to make a small-production wine for the Oriel brand, giving only these simple instructions: "Make something you're proud of." He hopes to be able someday to offer wines from 50 different winemaking regions around the world.

When: The first Oriel bottling was the classic-rated 2000 Barolo, and the portfolio now includes 30 wines from nine countries. Eventually, Hunt hopes to be able to supply restaurants with their entire wine lists. (The wine list at Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning restaurant Cru in New York features a complete page devoted to Oriel wines.)
Starting Young: Hunt's winemaking experience dates to the late '70s, when at the age of 14, he started making wine and beer in glass demijohns in his parents' London attic. Before studying economics at London University, he chased hot-air balloons around Europe, and found himself gravitating to the best wine regions as he did so. "Grapes are clever little creatures that grow up in fantastic climates," he says, "and fantastic cultures grow up around them." Hunt's family also operates a winery in Priorat, and he serves as director for Songlines, a boutique Australian winery specializing in Shiraz, whose wines are made by Duval.

"This Won't Work! You're Mad!": Those are two of the printable things Hunt heard when he was pitching a single wine label that would offer wines from nearly all the world's best winemaking regions. "There's a lot of pain in buying wine," he says, but by having one brand responsible for 30 or 50 different small-production wines, Hunt claims the overhead costs are greatly reduced--a fact reflected in the wines' prices, most of which sell for $25 or less. The company has no vineyard holdings and no wineries, so rather than taking a loss in a weak vintage, Hunt and the winemaker simply choose not to make a wine--a much easier decision when you don't already own a vintage's worth of second-rate grapes.

Power to the People: Hunt is trying to take the mystery out of what's in the bottle. Each Oriel wine label features a map of the region from which the grapes came; a description of the vineyards and winemaking styles employed; a percentage breakdown of all the grapes in the blend, with the dates they were harvested; a tasting note; and the winemaker's name. Hunt has even considered tracking each case along the shipping route, to ensure that temperatures haven't fluctuated erratically in transit, and affixing a temperature gauge to the label so consumers will know they are enjoying their wine at the optimal temperature. The Oriel Web site even features recommendations from chefs and sommeliers for dishes to serve with each of the wines, including recipes.

The One That Got Away: One of Hunt's favorite winemakers, Laurence Féraud of the Rhône Valley's Domaine du Pégaü, was considering making Oriel's Châteuneuf-du-Pape red, but was unavailable in the end. "She did offer to make me a beer, which is something I would love to do, but we have to focus on the wines. You'd be surprised how many winemakers would like to make a beer."

Where to Find It: Oriel wines are available at hotels, restaurants and wine shops in about 20 states, as well as at www.orielwines.com.

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