

1996 RUSTENBERG STELLENBOSCH RED (\$29.00) 91

Aromatically, the 1998 Chardonnay is reminiscent of boiled Georgia peanuts, a southern delicacy. A lovely satin texture, medium body, and excellent focus can be found in this nut and spicy oak flavored wine. Projected maturity: now-2002.

The 1996 Peter Barlow, a single vineyard wine from 7 year old vines harvested at a whopping six tons per acre, may be the finest red wine I have ever tasted from South Africa. It possesses a beguiling nose crammed with red/black cherries that are intermingled with super-ripe blackberries and cookie dough. On the palate, it is tight, highly structured, concentrated, serious, has excellent depth of fruit, superb focus, and is highly refined. Violets, assorted flowers, red berries, and cassis are found in this fabulous wine. Its finish is long, full of flavor, and reveals well-ripened tannins. It is extremely youthful, reminiscent of a first-rate young wine from a warm vintage in Bordeaux's Médoc. Projected maturity: 2001-2008.

The 1997 Peter Barlow is dark ruby colored and has a Château Margaux-like nose of violets, dark cherries, cassis, and intensely ripe blackberries. This is a refined, focused, powerful, highly-structured, foursquare wine. It is crammed with tangy currants and assorted black fruits that are intermingled with touches of melted road tar. It should be at its best between 2002 and 2008.

The 1996 Stellenbosch Red was crafted from 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Merlot and 15% Cabernet Franc. This unfiltered, medium to dark ruby-colored wine has fabulous aromatic depth, intense dark fruit, and spicy aromas. It is medium-bodied, densely packed with blackberries, black cherries, and currants, outstanding concentration, and is extremely refined. This complex, rich, highly delineated, and admirably persistent wine is as good as Bordeaux and California reds at 3 to 4 times the price. Anticipated maturity: 2000-2007.

1995 THELEMA CABERNET SAUVIGNON	(\$30.00)	88
1998 THELEMA CHARDONNAY	(\$24.00)	91
1994 THELEMA MERLOT	(\$24.00)	86
1998 THELEMA SAUVIGNON BLANC	(\$19.00)	89

Readers who have fond memories of drinking Heitz Martha's Vineyard Cabernets at their finest will be ecstatic to hear that Thelema's 1995 Cabernet Sauvignon (10% Merlot) is quite reminiscent of those Napa classics. Aged for 20 months in Nevers oak, this effort reveals aromas and flavors of sweet cherry syrup covered with eucalyptus dust. It has excellent focus, power, concentration, and a somewhat tannic finish that will require some aging. This medium-bodied, well-crafted wine should be at its best between 2001 and 2006.

The 1998 Chardonnay has a demure spice and floral scented nose. This superb Chardonnay has excellent richness, plump fruit, a medium to full body, and a broad, expansive, flavorful character. Superbly ripe, crammed with butterscotch, ripe fruits, and toast in a lush, opulent and complex style, this wine is reminiscent of a plump California Chardonnay made by one of that state's top producers. Its persistent,

intricate, and supple finish reveals enticing layers of grilled, spicy oak. This is a wonderful wine that will make for superb drinking over the next 3-4 years.

The 1994 Merlot reveals a medium ruby color with a touch of amber on the edge. It has perfumed, minty, evolved aromas, with some hints of eucalyptus. It is medium-bodied, well-structured, and exhibits a juicy, black fruit-filled character. Its long, somewhat dryish finish would call for some aging; however, its evolved color and scents suggest it should be drunk within the next 4 years.

The 1998 Sauvignon Blanc has a pungent, powerful, grapefruit-scented nose. This a thickly-textured, rich, densely packed, medium to full-bodied wine, crammed with ripe, candied citrus fruits. It is an extremely well-crafted offering with a long, lemon-flavored finish. Drink it over the next 3-4 years.

KRACHER'S BEAUTIES
(by Pierre-Antoine Rovani)

Alois Kracher, the fabulous winemaker from southeastern Austria, crafted a bevy of first rate wines in the 1996 vintage.

Kracher divides his wines into two basic categories: 1) "Zwischen den Seen" (between the lakes), the more traditional cuvée vinified in previously used casks, 2) "Nouvelle Vague" (new wave), a modern, non-traditional approach using new oak barrels. His "Grande Cuvée" is a multi-varietal blend.

These wines are only available in 375ml bottles (half-bottles) and carry the name of the varietals (except in the case of the "Grande Cuvée") as well as a number from 1 to 9 since Kracher

wanted to indicate what he perceived to be their relative level of concentration (#9 is, in his opinion, the most concentrated). Overall, Kracher's 1996s do not hit the summits attained by his other-worldly 1995s. That being said, all of the following wines can easily be recommended; a few are spectacular.

Due to a lack of space, abbreviated notes follow. I have included the residual sugar (g/rs), alcohol (alc.) and acidity (g/a) data to assist readers in their selection. Alois Kracher's wines are imported to the United States by Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700.

1997 CUVÉE BEERENAUSLESE	(\$27.00 - 375ml)	87
84 grams of residual sugar per liter (g/rs), 14.1% alcohol (alc.), 6.7 grams acidity per liter (g/a), 15000 bottles. Produced from an assortment of varietals, the 1997 Cuvée Beerenauslese offers aromas of smoky		
1996 BEERENAUSLESE #1, TRAMINER "NOUVELLE VAGUE"	(\$45.00 - 375ml)	89
88 g/rs, 13.8% alc., 8.6 g/a, 5400 bottles. This wine's lively aromas reveal spicy white fruit and new oak. Apple, herbal and stony flavors		
1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #2, BOUVIER & MUSKAT-OTTONEL "ZWISCHEN DEN SEEN"	(\$50.00 - 375ml)	90
146 g/rs, 12.2% alc., 9.4 g/a, 2700 bottles. My apologies to Alois Kracher for this analogy, but this wine's nose reminded me of floral-scented and jellied room deodorants. It is a lovely offering, crammed with guava		
1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #3, SCHEUREBE "ZWISCHEN DEN SEEN"	(\$55.00 - 375ml)	92
176 g/rs, 9.6% alc., 11.6 g/a, 5400 bottles. Smoky tropical fruits laced with botrytis are found in this TBAs aromatics. The wine has superb focus, an oily texture, as well as an expressive flavor profile crammed		
1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #4, CHARDONNAY/WELSCHRIESLING "NOUVELLE VAGUE"	(\$65.00 - 375ml)	94+
182 g/rs, 11.5% alc., 9.3 g/a, 1600 bottles. This stunning blend of super-ripe Chardonnay and Welschriesling offers coconut, mangoes, papayas, and candied citrus fruit aromatics. Resembling a top-flight effort from Barsac's famous Château Climens, this impeccably		
1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #5, ZWEIFELT ROSE "NOUVELLE VAGUE"	(\$63.00 - 375ml)	89?
258 g/rs, 8.8% alc., 9.3 g/a, 1100 bottles. This amber/bronze TBA Zweifelt Rosé reveals raspberry and sweet brambleberry aromas. It is fat (verging on flabby), medium-bodied, and filled with botrytis-dusted		
1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #6, MUSKAT-OTTONEL "ZWISCHEN DEN SEEN"	(\$60.00 - 375ml)	89
139 g/rs, 12.5% alc., 8.9 g/a, 1100 bottles. This rose, candied tangerine peel, blood orange, and botrytis-scented wine is medium-bodied, silky-textured, and concentrated. Its personality is crammed		
1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #7, GRANDE CUVÉE "NOUVELLE VAGUE"	(\$63.00 - 375ml)	90?
158 g/rs, 12.5% alc., 9.2 g/a, 4800 bottles. Kracher's 1996 Grande		

apricot jam and botrytis aromas followed by a medium-to-full-bodied, well-focused character. This raisin and peach-flavored, intense wine is highly-concentrated as well as extremely persistent. It is presently

slightly disjointed, yet cellaring may promote additional. Anticipated maturity: 2002-2020.

1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #8, COCHONNAY "NOUVELLE VAGUE" (\$80.00 - 375ml) 95

168 g/rs, 11.8% alc., 9.6 g/a, 400 bottles. Coconut-laced over-ripe apricots and peaches are intermingled with botrytis scents in this fabulous TBA. It is Sauternes-like in its flavor profile yet fresher and livelier. This refined wine has superb delineation, breadth, and a

creamy texture packed with toasty yellow fruits. Medium-to-full-bodied and impeccably focused, its finish reveals candied lemon flavors that seemingly last forever. Drink it over the next 15 years.

1996 TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE #9, WELSCHRIESLING "ZWISCHEN DEN SEEN" (\$83.00 - 375ml) 97

231 g/rs, 9.8% alc., 8.5 g/a, 700 bottles. The mind-boggling TBA #9 exhibits mouth-watering aromas of bergamots (a pear-shaped citrus fruit that is the primary flavoring in Earl Grey tea), raspberries, cherries, currants, and botrytis. Its satin-textured, medium-to-full-bodied

character is super-concentrated, highly complex, and powerful. Layers of red fruits, mangoes, pineapples, papayas, and pink grapefruits can be found in its expressive personality and awesomely long finish. This magnificent wine can be drunk now or over the next 25 years.

PIERRE ROVANI'S MOST MEMORABLE MEALS OF 1999

Jean Bardet (Tours, France) – Chef Jean Bardet continues to quietly create extraordinary dishes, certainly meriting Michelin's top three star ranking. The perfect meal at Bardet is achieved by giving the Chef and his sommelier (Thierry Nérison - a *Wine Advocate* hero) a free hand at the dish and wine selection. Within a specified budget, they will create wine and food matches that dreams are made of.

Ben's Whole Hog (Centreville, VA) – This restaurant, located a half hour's drive from downtown Washington, DC (next to a 7-11, and in front of a mobile home park), was the sight of what I hope will be the first of many pork extravaganzas. Ben Morris' ribs, trotters, cracklings, a whole 35 pound pig, and all the fixings (sweet potato soufflé, fried okra, barbecue beans, corn bread, green beans, and cole slaw), as well as peach cobbler and lemon pie, made for a southern feast. As an added bonus, we started the meal with six whole rockfish caught hours before, baked to perfection (accompanied by a sorrel sauce to make the Troisgros family proud) by Vidalia Restaurant's Jeffrey Buben who was joining us for lunch. Photographs of Robert Duvall, a Virginian and patron of this barbecue joint, Morris's battery of hand-made wood-burning ovens, and a poster of the young model/waitress in a swimsuit vie for the diner's attention in this finger-lickin' good barbecue joint. Awesome food, extraordinary wine (BYOB), close friends, and the juke box conspired to render it a memorable occasion.

Le Bernardin (New York, NY) – The world's finest seafood restaurant, Le Bernardin, combines elegance, sophistication, and sumptuous service with flavorful, creative, avant garde cooking (yet not overly eclectic, a pet peeve of mine). Chef Eric Ripert's culinary genius lies in his ability to locate the earth's freshest seafood and then accentuating its purity in a myriad of assertive, yet delicate dishes. Moreover, sommelier Michel Couvreur's exemplary service is only matched by his extraordinary wine list. If Neptune and Poseidon (the Roman and Greek gods of the sea) opened a restaurant, this would be it.

Boyer, Les Crayères (Reims, France) – Gérard and Elyane Boyer's warm, welcoming, luxurious, and romantic restaurant is one of the most beautiful eating establishments in the world, as well as the source of brilliantly innovative, yet classical food. With the exception of Daniel Boulud in New York, does anyone work with truffles with Boyer's flair? Another particularly impressive trait of this restaurant is that Thierry Voisin, the young chef in charge of the kitchens when the Boyers are traveling, is every bit a three star chef in his own right, as the spectacular meal I ate in May attested.

Buerehiesel (Strasbourg, France) – Nestled in a park (called l'Orangerie) in one of the most attractive cities in the world, this beautiful restaurant was the sight of a meal not soon forgotten. Laughter abounded during the meal as my dear friends and I feasted on sumptuous dishes (including the astonishing frog's legs). The service was welcoming and attentive, the wines superb, and Chef Westermann's creations were mind-boggling. This is a Michelin three-star that delivers.

Carré des Feuillants (Paris, France) – The warm and engaging Alain Dutournier, this restaurant's owner and chef, continues to astound me with his culinary genius. The hallmark of his creations is the marriage of the complex with the simple. None of his dishes are busy or eclectic, yet they abound with myriads of flavors. His passion for food is matched by his enthusiasm for wine (reflected in the extraordinary wine list), and he may well be the most knowledgeable chef in the world on the subject.

Daiwa Sushi (Tokyo, Japan) – Another dawn visit to Daiwa Sushi confirmed its honored place in my pantheon of eating establishments. It serves the freshest Sushi imaginable (it is located in Tokyo's fish market), and little else. It is extremely expensive (only cash is accepted), difficult to find (no one speaks English at the sprawling fish market – keep walking until you see a string of shacks, enter the one with blue curtains), and serves at odd hours (only open in the morning), yet it is worthy of year-round dreams.

Daniel (New York, NY) – What has not already been said in *The Wine Advocate* about this culinary heaven? Chef Daniel Boulud is a master, as is Alex Lee, his second in command. Jean-Luc LeDu's wine list is spectacular, and has loads of values if the fashionable regions of the moment are eschewed (stick with Alsatian or Loire Valley whites and red Rhônes and you'll make out like a bandit – not only here, but in most fine restaurants). This restaurant is as good as it gets, and continues to impress with its creativity, dedication to perfection, and superb service.

International Pinot Noir Celebration (McMinnville, OR) – This list would not be complete without the inclusion of the Northwest Salmon Bake that concluded the 13th Annual International Pinot Noir Celebration. As if massive sides of Salmon hanging from alder stakes over a 30 yard pit of flaming logs weren't enough, the spirit of celebration that was evidenced throughout this impressive conference attained a feverish pitch at dinner. Consumers, Pinot Noir producers from throughout the world, as well as wine professionals brought loads of bottles (even though many were already provided) and poured them for everyone. The spirit of shared passion for wine engendered by the conference organizers reached overwhelming proportions at this, the event's final dinner. It was indeed memorable.

Ma Cuisine (Beaune, France) – Here is French home cooking – no fuss, no muss. This tiny restaurant (found in an alley way reserved for pedestrians) has a staff of two. Fabienne is in the kitchen and Pierre (her husband) handles the room. Why is this place always packed with winemakers, locals, and tourists? Because the ambience is homey (right down to Pierre's surly sense of humor), the food simple and excellent. While the regular wine list is first-rate, the reserve list is super.

Mark's Duck House (Arlington, VA) – Numerous lunches with Robert Parker and a gang of thirsty wine nuts at this Northern Virginia Hong Kong-style restaurant regularly produces lunches filled with fabulous dim sum (the shrimp dumplings are super). Moreover, the items that can be ordered in advance (lobster dumplings, suckling pig, and scallop dumplings for example) are as exquisite as anything that can be found in the former British colony. A huge round table surrounded by friends, never ending platters of great food, and a large lazy-Susan brimming with spectacular wines (BYOB), is a formula for success.

Pré Catelan (Paris, France) – Chef Anton, a young man who trained with Joël Robuchon (one of the century's culinary deities), is returning this Paris institution to its former glory. Located in the Bois de Boulogne, it is a refuge from the noise and bustle of Paris' streets. As if lunch served on the terrace of Napoléon III's pavilion on a warm, sunny spring day were not enough, Anton's *langoustine*, bone marrow, *rouget*, and beef creations were benchmarks. The choice of France's most romantic restaurant remains a toss-up – is it Les Crayères or Pré Catelan?