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Brentwood hosts wine competition dominated by Contra Costa wineries

By Rowena Coetsee Contra Costa Times

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BRENTWOOD -- A hush fell over the room as the judges took their first sip.

Before each were half a dozen glasses of sauvignon blanc and chardonnay, neatly grouped on white-clothed tables punctuated by bright yellow spit buckets.

Score sheets at the ready, the six noses and palates began passing judgment on the 40 entries in Contra Costa Winegrowers Association's annual competition at Brentwood's Community Center.

"That one's definitely corked," said David Gibson as he gently sloshed a chardonnay around to release its aroma, then inserted his nose into the glass for a deliberate sniff.

"This is full-blown wet dog in a cardboard box," he pronounced.

Such is the evocative language of wine tasting, where experts in the art often reach for fanciful expressions to describe the subtle smells and taste of fermented grapes.

Swish, sniff, sip, spit. Repeat.

Glass after glass, the panel deliberately made its way through the dozens of bottles that awaited judgment.

The judges cleared their palate with a swig of water between tastings, which rarely involve swallowing, said Ken Young as he contemplated the hint of berry in a red Zinfandel.

"If you drank it all, you'd lose your objectivity," he laughed.

To ensure neutrality, the competition was a blind tasting, each wine wrapped in a brown paper bag with reserves stored in plain cardboard boxes that bore only numerical codes signifying the type of wine and which winery produced it.

"It's fair playing fields," Gibson said, noting that by contrast some magazines will rate wines knowing where they came from.

The bounty spread before them had come from nine wineries, seven of them in Contra Costa County, where all the grapes had been harvested.

Among the array of whites, reds and blushes, there were varietals and blends such as Zinfandel, Syrah and pinot noir, as well as Viognier, Grenache rosé, Sangiovese and Carignane.

The task was to evaluate each in 10 categories that ranged from appearance and acidity to sweetness and flavor.

Rich Reader held up a glass of Viognier to the light, his practiced eye noting what would be almost indiscernible to the average person: This wine was a more vivid gold than the others, he said, as he gave it a top score for color.

Nearby, Kimmie Spears tipped her glass against the white background of the tablecloth; it's a way to get a better look at how clear or cloudy a wine is, she explained.

Spears pushed her eyeglasses up to get a good whiff.

"It's got a good balance of citrus and tropical fruits," she said authoritatively before rattling off a list of the blend's nuanced flavors.

"It's got some white grapefruit, a little bit of Granny Smith apple, but also the creaminess of coconut. It has some floral undertones -- maybe some hibiscus and honeysuckle."

And with that, Spears gave the sample a 9 out of 10 for complexity along with top marks for acidity and sweetness.

Would she order it if she were dining out?

"Absolutely," Spears said. "I'd give it a gold. It would go great with, like, a spinach salad."

Contact Rowena Coetsee at 925-779-7141. Follow her at [Twitter.com/RowenaCoetsee](https://twitter.com/RowenaCoetsee).