

LAYER CAKE

“Screaming Values”

Stephen Tanzer

Jayson Woodbridge's Layer Cake Wines

“While Canadian ex-investment banker Jayson Woodbridge is best known to collectors of high-end California wines as the relentless force behind the hugely rich Hundred Acre cabernets, he has built up a much larger following for a series of inexpensive wines he makes in considerably larger quantity under his **Layer Cake** label. **For their fruit, accurate varietal character and sheer drinkability, they offer stunning value.**

Woodbridge, who grew up in Toronto before his parents relocated to Vancouver, credits his grandfather for getting him interested in wine. On most weekends he visited his grandparents, who ran Pizza Bella in Toronto, and his grandmother would bake a big layer cake for him. His grandfather, who was a wine lover, would describe the soils in which the vines were planted in terms of a layer cake, adding various elements to the wines in a way that's similar to building a cake.

Woodbridge conceived the Layer Cake project as an homage to his grandfather, who, he said, could never have afforded one of his \$300 Napa cabernets. His first step, he told me, was to taste a couple hundred California wines priced between \$10 and \$30, and he was appalled by what he found. So he decided to attempt “to blow people away with a **\$15 wine that tastes like a \$50 wine.**” The first vintage for this venture was 2005, and he is now selling 30,000 to 40,000 cases a year of five different Layer Cake bottlings: **a chardonnay and a cabernet sauvignon from California, a shiraz from Australia, a malbec from Argentina and a primitivo (a.k.a zinfandel) from southern Italy.**

Woodbridge knows the grape-growers from whom he buys the fruit (he does not purchase any bulk wine), and is able to select the harvest dates. He uses leased facilities that allow him total control over the making and the aging of the wines. In difficult vintages, he may decide not to offer a particular wine. For example, there is no 2007 shiraz from Australia, and there's no 2008 cabernet from California, due to the severe frost that drove the price of grapes too high. Incidentally, his 2007 cabernet from Napa Valley was priced at \$28, but in the future he'll be including mostly fruit from less expensive parts of the state and thus will be able to bring his retail price to the same \$15 level as the other reds in the Layer Cake portfolio.

All of the current releases offer impressive value for everyday drinking, not to mention sound varietal character. I recommend them all, but fans of California cabernet may want to wait for the much less expensive 2009, due out in September.

The **2009 Virgin Chardonnay Central Coast** (\$12), the only white wine in the line-up, is made entirely in stainless steel. Half of the malolactic fermentation...was blocked to keep the wine vibrant. The wine has a green-tinged bright yellow color and brisk aromas of citrus peel and anise. It's a distinctly crisp and refreshing version of chardonnay with an intriguing minerality—think of a blend of sauvignon blanc and Chablis.

The **2007 Primitivo IGT Puglia** (\$15) offers aromas of dried fruits and licorice, showing pronounced evidence of the southern Italian sunshine without coming off as heavy. The palate impression combines creamy, slightly roasted fruits cut by bright acidity, which gives this essentially gentle wine surprising lift. The **2008 Malbec Mendoza** (\$15) has a complex nose combining crushed blueberry and blackberry with nuances of pepper and smoked meat. It offers an impressively concentrated mouthful of sweet but lively fruit and finishes with noteworthy length for a wine of its price.

And then there's the 2009 Shiraz South Australia (\$15), which delivers complex aromas of stewed cherry, smoke, flint, game, eucalyptus and pepper. This one too is superbly concentrated and layered for the price, hinting at a lightly saline character but coming across as fresh and animated. The finish features smooth tannins and a suggestion of saddle leather. Meanwhile, the **2007 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley** (\$28), which has been in the market since early last year, delivers varietally typical cassis and blackberry aromas and flavors complicated by smoke, spices and minerals, and has enough acidity to give shape and verve to its sweet, ripe, intense fruit. **This is a solidly built and serious cabernet.** “ ST June 6th, 2010