



A little class, some fun in a glass — nothing to wine about

BY JERRY ZEZIMA

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With the success of "Sideways," the 2004 film about wine snobs, I have decided to make my own wine movie. I am calling it "Backwards." When it comes to oenology, a word extremely difficult to pronounce after a few glasses of Carlo Rossi, that's exactly what I am.

To prepare for my big-screen debut, I recently took a wine class in Uniondale, N.Y. Actually, it was only the first session in an eight-week course, but I figured I could learn enough in two hours to know the differences between Bordeaux and Burgundy (the main difference is the spelling) and how to properly read a label ("Wow, 15 percent alcohol. I'll take this one!").

The course, called Vino University, is taught by noted wine expert James Dunne, who has a dry (of course) wit and is anything but a snob. Perhaps that is why he let me take the class even after I told him I once made my own wine. It was such a disaster that the winemaker at the vineyard where I picked the grapes — then took them home and stomped on them with my bare feet in the bathtub — said my wine tasted like, and I quote, "nail polish remover."

"The wine we use in the class," Dunne assured me, "will be better than that." When I entered the large suite at the Long Island Marriott Hotel & Conference Center and saw about 50 people seated at tables elegantly appointed with fine wine, fruit and crackers (what, no beer nuts?), I knew I was in for an experience that not only would tickle my palate but also enable me to impress the sommelier at my local pizzeria (when it comes to

sophisticated aromas, no one is sommelier than I am) by ordering a bottle of something that does not have a twist-off cap.

Dunne began the class by instructing us to notice the seven glasses of wine, six red and one white, in front of each of us. Being extremely perceptive, I had not only noticed them at least five seconds before Dunne mentioned it, but I had also started to sip one of the reds. Unfortunately, this was a "faux pas" (a French phrase meaning "your fly is open"), because I should have sipped the white wine. "We are not here to get drunk," Dunne said, "but I want you to relax, so go ahead and drink the white."

I am not exactly a fan of white wine, but I hadn't had dinner yet, and I have always believed you should never eat on an empty stomach, so I drank the white. Then, I sat back to listen to Dunne discourse learnedly, and entertainingly, about his favorite subject.

He talked about harvesting and rain and dryness and alcohol and aging and sugar and alcohol and wood and labeling and, finally, alcohol. He taught us to notice how, when we swish wine around in our glasses (I don't wear glasses, but I managed to get the hang of it anyway), it will run down the sides either slowly or quickly and what that means. (It means you are wasting too much time playing with wine and not enough time drinking it. At least that's how I interpreted it.) Dunne also taught us how to sniff wine ("Go ahead and stick your nose in the glass.") without drowning.

We then tasted six kinds of white wine while taking notes on fluidity, color, bouquet, mouth feel, balance and aftertaste. We also had to write comments and give our impressions. My impression was that this was a great example of higher education.

Because time was getting short, we rushed through the six reds, but by then, it didn't matter. I had already passed with flying colors. As I wrote in my comments, "Veni, Vidi, Vino" ("I came, I saw, I drank a lot of wine"). I still might not be an expert, but after Dunne's class, I am a little less backward about wine. And next time I go out for pizza, I'll know just what kind to order.

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