



**Clay's Trip to the Culinary Institute of America
Greystone Campus
St. Helena, California, Napa Valley
Mastering Wine I**

Installment One

We arrived at the Minneapolis Airport in plenty of time for our 9:10 departure on Sunday, August 13, 2006. After only three tries Jim made it through security, but thanks to Northwest Airline being one hour late, we still had plenty of time to get to our gate. Air traffic control was able to give our flight priority routing so we were only 30 minutes late in arriving at San Francisco Airport.

After picking up our rental car we headed North on highway 101 into San Francisco and would follow it most of the way until we had to turn off to get to **Napa Valley**. We wanted to make a detour into the city to stop at China Town, since I had a request from my wife for some tea from the Ten Ren Tea Company on Grant Street. That was when I discovered that Jim isn't able to navigate with a map for beans, but we made it.

After crossing the Golden Gate Bridge we stopped in Sausalito for lunch and then completed our drive to **Saint Helena** and **Greystone** without further incident.

Greystone is actually a huge three-story building made of local rock. At the time it was built it was the largest unsupported rock wall in the world. It was built in the late 1800's by a wine making cooperative as a winery. Notables involved in the project were **Charles Krug** and the **Beringer** brothers, along with some others who no longer have wine labels in the market. The winery was gravity fed with grapes being delivered to the top floor to be washed, destemmed, and crushed. They flowed by gravity to the second floor to barrels for fermentation and barrel aging. When it was time to bottle, the wine flowed to the first floor where bottling took place. The building changed hands a number of times with the **Christian Brothers** owning it for the longest period. Eventually the building was bought by the **Culinary Institute of America** and turned into their professional chef preparation campus on the West Coast. The wine professional program is relatively new to the campus and is unique in that the Hyde Park campus does not have such an extensive program.

Jim and I stayed in the campus guest house, fifty feet across the driveway from the door of the classroom. Morning commutes were not a problem.

Monday, August 14, was the first day of class with the usual completing registration and learning about class expectations. **The Rudd Center for Wine Studies** is a special building with high volume air handling so no extraneous odors enter the classroom. Students were asked not to wear cologne, perfume, aftershave, or use any other strongly scented personal grooming products, like hair gel.

Our instructor was Karen McNeil. She and her husband own Fife winery in the Napa Valley. Karen's fame is in the fact that she has written a number of wine tasting articles for many publications, written "**The Wine Bible**," reference book, and most recently completed a second book "**Food, Friends and Wine**." The later is the title of the PBS television program that she hosts. She is recognized worldwide for her expertise in wine tasting and frequently judges international competitions.

In the morning we had a demonstration and practice for wine tasting, learning how to do it properly and what to look for. We learned what characteristics to look for such as body, color, acidity, tannin, finish, that make up a complete tasting of a wine. Practice was on two Chardonnays; one was aged in stainless steel and one was aged in new oak barrels.

Lunch was always in the teaching kitchen of the CIA. The food was what the culinary students had been making that morning. This is not junior high home economics where students learn basic cooking skills. This is where students learn French, Spanish, Italian, Asian culinary techniques to be able to work in the finest restaurants in the world. Our lunches were, in a word, marvelous.

In the afternoon we spent the entire time learning about the “markers” of different wine varieties. We did blind tasting of white wines and after doing individual wine notes, we discussed as a class and compared ideas. Where we all agreed on certain characteristics, those were the markers of a particular wine made from a particular grape. After a break, we did the same thing with red wines. The idea was that we would be able to compare different wine varieties and be able to explain what to look for or expect in a style of wine. It was very challenging. At the end of class we each were given three “mystery wines” to taste and then try to match up with the wines of a companion.

Our class day ended with a reading assignment to prepare for the next day.

For anyone who showed up to class thinking that they knew enough to easily handle the class, this first day pretty much humbled them. I know I was. Fortunately or unfortunately, that was sort of the intention. By the end of the week we were able to give detailed and professional descriptions of wine. Two things stick in my mind from this day, besides the tasting practice. Your favorite wine in the store may not be a good wine. It is perfectly acceptable to like, even adore, a wine that does not meet the wine-makers and wine-critic criteria for a good wine. Individual taste and preference will determine what you like to drink, but it may not get high ranking or win awards. The second thing that sticks in my mind is that Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are so closely related genetically that in most blind tastings, they are difficult to tell apart, at least at the premium level. Wine makers have worked hard to produce wines that have mass appeal, and for that reason, most popularly priced Cabs and Merlots do taste different and do have different markets. The movie “Sideways” notwithstanding in its snide remark about Merlot, the consistently most sought after and most expensive red wine in the world is the Bordeaux Petrus, which is 100% Merlot.

More on the field trips and subsequent tastings in the next installment.