

Big winners among NorCal wines

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

At the start of a new year, I customarily find myself seated with two to four other judges in a curtained cubicle of a barny building on the Citrus Fairgrounds in Cloverdale in Sonoma County. We usually constitute one of about 20 panels at the annual San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, the nation's largest such judging, which in recent years has drawn around 7,000 wines, all made in the United States.

This January, however, I took on a new role at the competition. Seated by myself at a desk in a back room far removed from other judges, my assignment was to taste every wine declared to be the best of its class and then write a few remarks about each.

Unlike other judges, who taste blind, I was handed the bottle from which their pours had been drawn, so I knew the producer, vintage, appellation and so forth.

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