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Blue Nun descendant now a summer treat

by Katherine Cole, special to The Oregonian

Tuesday September 08, 2009, 12:02 AM

WINE NOTES: Muller-Thurgau is lightly fruity and lower in alcohol, with a little bit of spritz

If you were drinking wine anytime between the 1950s and the mid-1980s, you probably remember Blue Nun. Bland, pallid and softly sweet, this blue-bottled plonk was wildly popular back then for reasons that are unfathomable today.

Blue Nun has gotten a makeover since her heyday -- she's now tasting drier and more respectable -- but at her peak of popularity, she was the most prominent of a German class of wine called *liebfraumilch*, or, in yet another example of bizarre wine parlance, "milk of the beloved lady."

These simpering, low-alcohol white blends consisted mostly of a grape called Muller-Thurgau, which was a riesling crossbreed developed in 1882 by a certain Professor Muller of Thurgau, Switzerland.

Today's wine literature doesn't have a lot of complimentary things to say about this grape. So why are we thinking about it this week? Because there's a fair amount of it growing throughout the wine-producing regions of Oregon. Many estates incorporate their Muller into their white blends, but at least eight local wineries bottle it on its own.

These Oregon producers tend to be value-oriented supermarket brands; this wine tends to be low in alcohol and inexpensive. Which leads me to believe it's the perfect wine with which to bid adieu to the brink-of-the-Second-Great-Depression summer of 2009. Because it's cheap, it's plentiful and it's not too tough on the liver.

I recently blind-tasted my way through every Oregon Muller-Thurgau I could lay my hands on. You can watch my videocast of this tasting by searching for "kcoleuncorked" on YouTube, or you can check out my favorite picks below:

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2008 Airlie Willamette Valley Muller-Thurgau (\$11.50): If you like slightly sweet wines, give this gently fizzy aperitif a try; and if you really like it, go ahead and pour yourself another glass, since it's just 10 percent alcohol by volume. Notes of Asian pear and apricot on the nose and palate plus nectarine on the finish are fresh rather than cloying. Find it at any Fred Meyer.

2007 ChÃcteau Benoit "Cuvee A" Willamette Valley Muller Thurgau (\$12): Minerally and dry with a bit of spritz, this sipper continued to refresh even as it sat in the glass warming to room temperature. A delightfully subtle 11.5 percent alcohol by volume. Find it at Great Wine Buys; Haggen Beaverton-Tanasbourne Town Center and Murray Hill; Market of Choice Terwilliger and West Linn; Pearl Specialty Market; Renaissance Premium Wines & Cigars; and Whole Foods Markets Bridgeport Village and Pearl District.

Honorable mention

2007 Montinore Estate Willamette Valley Muller-Thurgau (\$7.50): Made in a dry style, this freakishly inexpensive white could easily be confused with pinot gris. Notes of white peaches and crabapple give way to a lingering finish of Meyer lemon and spices; and at 11.2 percent, the alcohol level is refreshingly restrained. Find it at any Fred Meyer or Made in Oregon.

Note: As always, the aforementioned prices are approximate and store lists may be incomplete. You can ask your wine merchant to special-order any wine listed in this column.

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