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Habit-forming Schaefer on wine

By Dennis Schaefer

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Most folks know Jeff Fischer, or perhaps I should say the voice of Jeff Fischer, from his alter ego role at the center of the “American Dad!” TV series. Acting is his real day job. But having been bitten by the wine bug, his professional life has become a springboard to funding his winemaking life, as founder and sole proprietor of Habit Wine Company, based in Los Olivos.

What started out as a garagiste project has morphed into annually producing several thousand cases of wine. Mr. Fischer, though, is probably different than most winemakers: He only makes wines that he likes to drink - and hopes that others share his disposition. What a concept!

I had the opportunity to taste through recent bottlings. Some of them are sold out at the winery but you can still find them at restaurants and retail shops around town.

* Habit Rosé, Santa Ynez Valley 2013 (\$21): Made entirely from grenache grapes, specifically picked for rosé, the resulting wine is bottled in clear glass, showing how light the extraction was. Just barely tinged with a slight pinkness, it displays aromas of strawberry, fruit cocktail (in a good way) plus a well measured amount of florals and minerals. On the palate, the flavors are strawberry, raspberry, white peach and grapefruit peel along with hints of lemon verbena and tangerine. It’s a seemingly simple and straightforward wine that has the most discrete subtlety in revealing itself, if you just pay attention. The midpalate brings on a burst of acidity - like squeezing lemon juice on oysters - that keeps things lively and makes for a zesty and upbeat finish. I can hardly wait for the 2014 version to be released shortly.

* Habit Gruner Veltliner, Santa Ynez Valley 2013 (\$30): Very few vintners in California have tackled this native Austrian grape, but the Habit version is right on the money. The nose is unapologetically aromatic with pear, lime, minerals and a smidgen of LePage’s glue (a good thing!). Stone fruit and lime are in the flavor mix as well as hints of persimmon, white pepper and a saline minerality. Unlike a lot of gruners, this one has great character and texture in the mouth, perhaps from the time spent aging on the lees (spent fermentation yeast cells). And it lingers long on the palate as it does on the finish. Perhaps the best and most serious (but fun) gruner in California; it shows the true potential of the grape in our climate and terroir.

* Habit Sauvignon Blanc, Happy Canyon, McGinley Vineyard 2013 (\$30): A little different from the norm sauvignon blanc here: the grapes get extended skin contact and are aged sur lie in stainless steel without malolactic fermentation. The result is citrusy lemon-lime on the nose, like a refreshing breeze on a bright sunshiny day, a touch of white florals and a crushed seashell minerality. Grapefruit, lemon peel, lemon-lime and more of that saline seashell minerality come through on the palate as well. It’s not as big or bombastic as some other Happy Canyon sauvignon blancs; it concerns itself more with balancing all the elements into one racy, seamless package. An ongoing textural undercurrent and an appealing tanginess immediately invite another sip.

* Habit Pinot Noir, Santa Rita Hills, La Encantada Vineyard 2012 (\$50): Plum, cherry, rhubarb and a modicum of wood spice are the lilting aromatics of this cool-climate pinot. Elegant and polished on entry, it’s supple and distinct with flavors of plum, cherry and mulberry plus hints of nutmeg and sandalwood. Well-rounded in the mouth, it seems pure and pristine, as if the winemaker just wanted to let the grapes from such a specific and well-regarded vineyard site do the talking. Like his other wines, it’s subtle and restrained, and literally glides across the palate.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer’s column appears every other week in the Food section. Email him at food@newspress.com.