

The Wine Steward's

# THE RED COLLECTOR

## WINE CLUB

December 2018

*Names, Places, Ratings . . . or just the damn wine!!*

**2015 ILARIA CABERNET SAUVIGNON – Napa Valley**

This our third club submission of Ilaria Cabernet. The first was the 2011, a great success in a very challenging vintage (one patient club member just opened his, giving it a glowing report). The next was the 2013, from a year when it was pretty hard to screw up your Napa Cab.

I'm wondering what more you want to know having told you the Ilaria story before?

Anna Monticelli did the UC Davis thing with her final year happening offsite at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Then came her 2000 vintage stint at Chateau Cheval Blanc followed by assistant winemaking gigs at Napa's Seavey and Bryant Family wineries. Nowadays she's Piña's winemaker, and under that roof her own Ilaria project happens.

This 2015 of which 300 cases were made utilizes 82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, and 6% Merlot. The sub-appellations of Atlas Peak, Howell Mountain, and Saint Helena are all referenced. Robert Parker has weighed in with a preliminary 92+ point rating. His former reviewer Jeb Dunnuck declares a "93". "Blah blah blah" . . . for a wine anything but "blah"!!!

While former vintages of this Cabernet have been similarly dark, this 2015 is especially intense. I imagine the smaller berries of the last of three drought years are the cause. Color and opacity happen with a vivid, nearly-blue maroon. The nose of asphalt, blackberries, and violets is vivid. The mouth of bittersweet chocolate-wrapped fruit is foreboding and simultaneously irresistible. This is an endearing monster cab, useful now depending on your tannin tolerance and the rareness of your ribeye; extremely durable for later use as well. It should hang onto its fruit while softening up for the next 7-8 years.

**59.99 / 53.99 for All Wine Club Members**

## **A New Hope**

### **2015 LYNCH WINE COMPANY MERLOT – Sachau Vineyard, Livermore Valley**

As a longtime observer and sometime participant in the Livermore Valley wine scene I can report with satisfaction and some jealousy: A restless inquiry into raising local wine quality is afoot. This Merlot, a grape not appearing on my “must grow here” list, is one indicator. The wine itself should be the primary measurement, but what’s even more heartening is the mindset behind it; an *attitude* that will hopefully be applied to more bottlings than this. I’ve long maintained great wine requires quality raw material (grapes) and technical know-how, **PLUS** a sense of wonder. That last part? The humble admission that the world of wine always has more to teach you and that you’ll actively pursue all the experiences you can reasonably collect, the ever-growing combination of which will directly or indirectly enhance your own winemaking endeavor. Alex and Andy walk that walk, drink that drink, and – as you’ll see by my entirely handing over these notes to their own reflections – talk the talk. They report:

*“Way too much about us:* 2015 Was Andy’s tenth crush in the wine business, and Alex’s third. Inspired by the high quality, small lot Merlot that Wente produces, and the notion of getting behind an underdog, we decided to purchase 1.5 tons of Merlot from the Sachau vineyard. With Lynch Wine Company, we have an opportunity to help promote both the Livermore Valley and Merlot. We don’t have any visions of growing the business in any major way, nor of leaving our day jobs to do this full-time. We enjoy getting out to visit wine shop owners, sommeliers, and restaurateurs, and advocating for the valley and this once shunned grape varietal. We love the time we get to spend together working on something we are so passionate about.

A little more about Andy’s professional background: He started off as a Lab Assistant at Wente in 2006, and has worked himself up to Winemaker. He has now been in the business for a dozen years and has studied under and alongside many winemakers. He attended UC Davis, but not for winemaking, for Philosophy. Learning from other winemakers has formed the bulk of his practical winemaking foundation. The combination of so many great teachers, and a lot of self-driven study helped him to create my own philosophical winemaking direction, which continues to evolve. This past year he continued the thirst for knowledge, and obtained his wine business focused eMBA from Sonoma State University.

A little more about Alex’s professional background: She graduated with a degree in Biology and Psychology from University of Virginia in 2012. She came to work at Wente for the 2013 vintage where she helped the production team to form a better understanding of red wine phenolics. She then went on to work for Trinchero for a couple of years where she was an integral part of the lab team and continued to learn practical elements in wine chemistry and microbiology. In 2016 she returned to Wente as the lab supervisor. She has since been promoted to Enologist II, and has become an integral part of the Winemaking team, while still overseeing the lab.

**What it’s really all about - the fruit:** Sachau Vineyard, possibly the most well-known vineyard in the area for high-quality red Bordeaux varieties, is located in the southern hills of Livermore Valley. Clone 181 is planted to Rootstock 5BB, with an average vine age of 16 years. Soil type: Positas gravelly loam. Elevation: 845-800ft. Aspect: NE x SW. Yield: 3-3.5tons/acre.

**Winemaking regimen:** The grapes were hand-picked at ripeness, in the early morning off of 0.37 acres of the Sachau Vineyard. They were de-stemmed and crushed at the winery into a single open-top 1.5-ton fermenter. We cold soak for approximately 24 hours before yeast addition to let the natural microflora begin to proliferate. No tartaric acid adjustment was necessary, as the fruit came in with beautiful natural acidity. Yeast was pitched approximately 24 hours post crush. We like to do a mixed regime; very few punch downs in the beginning, a lot in the middle, and very few at the end of the ferment. Wine was pressed at dryness and put into 50% new, 50% used French oak barrels. First sulfur and racking was in January. Thereafter, we added sulfur once or twice and didn’t rack the wine until it was time for bottling. The wine was bottled in September 2017 (approximately 22 months in barrel). 88 cases produced.”

More than you wanted to know? Let’s call it compensation for so rarely bringing you Livermore Valley wines. All I will add is my feeling that this well-structured Merlot displays plenty of endearing fruit right now and is immediately accessible. To lose that fruit with too much cellaring would be a shame, so consider using this wine within a maximum of five years. Pepper steak is coming to mind . . .

**49.99 / 44.99 for wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# World Class

WINE CLUB

December 2018

**Exceptional**

**2015 PALAMA 'Metiusco' – Salento Rosso, Puglia, Italy**

What's great about this wine is what it isn't. Puglia, Italy – the “Heel of the Boot,” we often call it – is a pretty hot place. The anticipated wine tendencies of alcoholic over-ripeness and cooked fruit pruneiness are so often realized that many oenophiles write off the region entirely. To such generalizers Puglia is the Place of Plonk.

The generalization isn't fair. Yes, this is where Italy's Zinfandel locally known as Primitivo proliferates. Yes, allusions to California's Lodi region are often deserved. BUT REMEMBER: We are in Italy. An Italian winemaker will nearly always aspire to a more delineated, food-friendly wine. Puglia the Place wants to frustrate these plans and often does, but some thoughtful Puglian producers are now arriving at wines honestly reflecting the local warmth *with the accompaniment of restraint*.

Palama has been providing us with that kind of wine-restraining yet warmhearted, place-honest success for many years now. Their bargain Primitivos and Negroamaros are no strangers to our “Bang for the Buck” bins at the front of the store. However, this is the first time we've seen and tasted and selected 'Metiusco,' a much smaller-production Palama project incorporating those two varieties and adding Malvasia Nera. Our friend from import house Small Vineyards, Tom Kelly, showed me this wine as part of a group of “direct imports” from which I could choose and enjoy a relative amount of exclusivity. After all, wines made in the hundreds – not thousands – of cases can't be represented everywhere! Our ongoing relationship with Tom has won us this level of access.

There's an almost bergamot-like fragrance happening here. Never heard of a bergamot? It's a green / gold-colored sour orange, the fruit of which is useless but the peel extremely potent as an ingredient in Earl Grey tea and in many a gin. The smell is often described as floral and vibrant, perhaps a bit like a grapefruit but less bitter. The suggestion of bergamot alone implies a wine less ponderous and more lively, and this theme happens not only in the high-toned nose but on the ripe-yet-lithe palate as well. Lovers of thin-sliced Italian charcuterie: Include this!!

**31.99 / 28.79 for all wine club members**



***The Dentelles de Montmirail, Southern Rhone***

***Because I wanted to go back***

**2016 LES CLOS des CAZAUX 'La Tour Sarassine'- Gigondas, Southern Rhone, France**

Two years ago I visited the Rhone Valley with an importer representing a few different wineries from there. Fran Kysela is best known for his provision of the wines of Domaine de la Mordoree and Grand Veneur / Alain Jaume. Bottlings from both of these have made recent appearances in your club, and the prevalent wine style of each could be called “modern” and nearly “New World,” within the bounds of their Old World geography. Bigger, more jammy fruit is the trademark of each of those players. Knowing them to be so vital to the importer, I assumed fruit bomb-style Rhone wines were his only product types. Then, on this January 2017 trip, we stopped at Le Clos de Cazaux and my understanding of his portfolio immediately broadened.

Here was a producer whose wines indicated restraint and balance. While clean and devoid of rusticity, these deceptively “smaller” wines followed the forms of a wine day before certain wine critics induced a score-chasing, fruit-promoting style. While I endeavor to represent all “good” types to you, I must frankly report that Cazaux is MY type; a slight step back in alcoholic size and a big leap forward in durability based on acidic nerve. I hereby confess that this time around it's about me: I wanted to taste this producer's wine again!

50% Grenache (a lower amount per the usual Gigondas), 40% Syrah, and 10% Mourvèdre are the grapes at play, grown on the chalky and granitic slopes of the Dentelles de Montmirail (see photo). Low yields and the high mineral content are certainly contributing to the concentration, nerve, and purity happening here. Keeping these good things in check and providing for years of evolution is this particular producer's winemaking choice of entirely omitting the use of barrels. Only tanks and vats accommodate this wine during its pre-bottling rest. This less-oxidative environment is a natural preservative.

Like many Gigondas, Les Clos de Cazaux has a durability rivalling that of nearby Chateauneuf-du-Pape. I personally believe its conservative styling allows it to go longer. That said, I'm often disappointed with the uncorkings of 10-15 year-old Southern Rhones, wishing for more youthful fruit. Hence, the open bottle of this 2016 on my desk!!

If it matters: 94 Points Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, 93 Points Vinous, and 92 from Jeb Dunnuck

**The Wine Steward's**

# California Wine Lover's

## WINE CLUB

**December 2018**

### **Relative Rareness**

**2016 RABBLE TEMPRANILLO – Mossfire Ranch, Paso Robles**

“Rare?”

This wine label once exclusive to smaller, independent wine concerns such as The Wine Steward does indeed land on some grocery store shelves nowadays. Rabble, formerly known as Force of Nature, has upped their production of Cabernet, Zinfandel, and other varietals in the line. What remains a smaller production player, however, is this Tempranillo. Whether the winery is more cautiously calculating that the varietal has yet to acquire mainstream awareness or simply wants to emphasize other things in its program, Rabble Tempranillo remains a rarity as a wine made in the hundreds – not thousands – of cases annually.

“Rare?”

There's another, more important kind of “Rare” going on here per my reckoning as a wine buyer attempting to identify varietal truth and wine goodness. Certainly, great Tempranillo is no stranger here at The Wine Steward, but nearly all of it comes from its homeland of Spain. To my mind and mouth California is still trying to figure it out, and our domestic representation of the type has thus been sporadic at best.

A truly rare success happens in this bottle. Tempranillo is rendered recognizable and delicious and truthful. The fragrance give you sultry tobacco smoke, red peppercorns, dark cherries, and black fruits. The palate is full yet crunchy like a good Ribera del Duero; gratuitous to a certain point before its dusty/loamy tannic farewell. The wine is scrumptious enough to work as a stand-alone cocktail but is a far better candidate for a winter feast of roast lamb or (how Spanish can you get?) *jamon serrano* from our cured meat & cheese case!

**20.99 / 18.89 for Wine Club Members**



### ***Yet Another Sempre Vive – The Best Yet?***

#### **2015 SEMPRE VIVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON – Napa Valley**

It was just last June when we brought you this wine's 2014 predecessor. Before that we showed you an older 'library version' and before that we impressed you with Sempre Vive Merlot. The frequency of this one label's appearance in your club has been unusual, perhaps having some of you wondering, "Is Jim getting some kind of payoff?" Absolutely not. What's really happening here is the identification of one great wine after another from a producer you don't see everywhere else. That's my job – finding you really good and distinctive stuff.

Sempre Vive is ONE vineyard in Calistoga, the northernmost section of the Napa Valley. To obtain single vineyard Cab from this high rent district can mean paying three times as much as this wine costs. Even then you may be paying more for name than for quality contents. THIS wine, per its price, surpasses expectations, surprising the nose with a huge depth of fragrant ripe fruit and indulging the palate with a mouthcoating richness of cassis, blackcurrant, and sweet brine-cured olives. Let me assure you, this Sempre Vive tastes better than many \$40 Napa Cabs I'm shown by our myriad vendors.

Add to this the goodness of the 2015 vintage. 2012, 2013, and 2014 were all delicious, fruit-forward vintages for Napa, but 2015 was special as the final year in a sequence of drought years. Vineyards which withstood the lower rainfall provisions up until now had finally had it. The 2015 crop amount declared this, not necessarily with fewer clusters but with smaller berries on each cluster. A smaller grape translates to a higher skin-to-juice ratio. Color and flavor is extracted from the skins, so this higher factor in 2015 made for a particularly intense flavor profile and enriched mouthfeel. The smaller 2015 crop was the farmer's disappointment and the winemaker's delight. Some of those delicious '15 Cabs must necessarily cost more. This Sempre Vive stands out even more as an amazing exception.

**23.99 / 21.59 for all wine club members**

# Wine Adventurer

## WINE CLUB

December 2018

### *Another Hard-To-Finder*

#### **2017 MARCHETTI 'Due Amici' – Rosso Conero, Marche, Italy**

Last December we “clubbed” the 2016 version of this highly-effective (you bought us out!) wine. Four months ago I sat down once again with Tom Kelly to peruse his newest pre-arrival samples to see what we’d “club” this year around. Lo and behold, ‘Due Amici’ did it again – and even better this time, methinks.

What’s strange: The newly-arrived shipment appears to have the wrong back label, as the vintage is represented as “2015”. We’re still getting to the bottom of this, but I feel the producer must have mis-labeled. I am tasting a very youthful red wine here; too young in exuberant color, scent, and texture to be a year OLDER than what we gave you last year! So, with this unresolved at publication let me just say the probably 2017 in my glass right now is one kick-ass red wine and I’m pleased to share it with you. Much of what you’ll read below is a simple re-do of last year’s notes, as they still apply, but know that I’m even happier with THIS year’s submission! **(UPDATE: Wrong label confirmed by importer!)**

Many of you have attended the Italian event presented each July by our friend Tom Kelly. Tom’s company imports lots of great things - mostly from Italy - which are available year-round. In addition to this well-stocked inventory is a batch of smaller-production surprises Small Vineyards admires and also imports. Their quandary: “To whom do we sell these less-convenient little batches?” The answer comes in the form of a pre-arrival program. This importer, based on Tom’s advocacy, chooses The Wine Steward to be its sole East Bay provider of these fringe specialties. . . . of which ‘Due Amici’ is the latest to roll off the boat and into TWS. Here is a red based on Montepulciano, assisted by Sangiovese. Those names have Tuscan connotations for many of you. On that other, western side of the Apennine Mountains “Montepulciano” is a wine from a place by the same name. *Tuscan Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* is made from Sangiovese.

Ah, but we’re not in Tuscany, but on the Adriatic Sea EAST of the mountains. Here, “Montepulciano” is an actual grape variety just like Sangiovese – but different. Montepulciano makes a more purple-colored wine. Sangiovese comes in “red”. Montepulciano’s way of making you hungry is with tannins (like Cabernet Sauvignon). Sangiovese does it with acidity. Putting the two together actually moderates the effects of each. This is pretty darn friendly stuff as Italian wine goes; something some might actually drink on its own. Pizza and richly-sauced pasta dishes would be great here, too.

**18.99 / 17.09 for all wine club members**

# CABERNET FRANC

## DOMINANT FLAVORS



STRAWBERRY



ROASTED  
PEPPER



RED  
PLUM



CRUSHED  
GRAVEL



CHILI  
PEPPER

### *From an unlikely source?*

#### **2016 BRESSIA 'Monteagrello' CABERNET FRANC – Mendoza, Argentina**

We all know Malbec is Argentina's most famous varietal. Largely accounting for this is the fact that it was the **first** Argentine red most of us tasted, and the first impression stuck. We as American consumers of Argentine wine are now about two decades into the relationship and should now be asking, "Is Malbec Argentina's BEST varietal?"

Begging another question: "How deep is your wine love?" Are you tasting outside the box, seeking alternatives to the standards? Have you tasted the red blends of Argentina which – to my palate – are more successful than 100% Malbecs – and have you tasted the Cabernet Francs?

Yes, Argentine Cabernet Franc. Its varietal bottlings from here are far fewer in number than those of Malbec, but I've enjoyed a better rate of success from these at various price levels. What Argentina tends to coax from that grape is rare, a tightrope walk balance between varietal truth and gratification. Cab Franc can be TOO honest with its eccentric red pepper-verging-on-green-pepper quality. Some wine geeks dig this, but the prevalent palate rejects. Yet what is Cab Franc without it? No longer Cab Franc, right?

This wine and many of its Argentine Cab Franc peers successfully respond to the dilemma. A careful perusal of Bressia's aroma renders an inventory of rose petal, strawberry preserves, and – yes – a tinge of pepper. So, there's a floral component, a fruit component, AND Cab Franc's idiosyncratic earthy pepper component. The latter does not go unaccompanied, nor does it dominate.

The palate is similarly complex. A faint tinge of green ("CAB FRANC!") has its hand held by silky textures of mellow cherries and a vague sense of cocoa. This is more sensually silky in its middleweight redness than Malbec's bigger yet more-ungainly declaration of purple bombast.

This, my friends, is highly successful Argentine Cabernet Franc. Factor it into your reassessment of that which is good from that wine country.

**28.99 / 26.09 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# Here n There Whites

WINE CLUB

December 2018



## ***Loire Valley SB Strikes Again!***

**2017 DOMAINE PAUL BUISSE SAUVIGNON – Touraine, Loire Valley, France**

Grown in clay / limestone. Fermented in stainless steel tanks to keep the temperatures in check and thereby preserve the fruit. Goes great with goat cheese. What else can we tell you?!

The point is, we've shown you Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc before and will certainly do so again because it works for so many of you. Whether it's grown in the best-known Loire Valley SB places of Sancerre or Pouilly-Fumé, or in outlying and less-pricey satellite sub-regions, the effect is recognized and appreciated.

The nose of this wine stops just short of being New Zealand-ish. The missing component (mercifully, to some) is the capsicum effect so many Kiwi SB's emit. Avoiding that, we are enjoying an aroma replete with spices (black AND white pepper?) and green-ish tropical fruit, along with the requisite citric delivery.

The mouth is cleansing, lean, enlivening, vibrant, juicy, lush, and nervy-licious. Serve it chilled at your holiday table and see how many appreciate the refreshment of this white against the weighty fare you'll also lay out. This wine some consider exclusive to summertime afternoon sipping is like a snowball hitting the side of your face on a winter night, with the scarf you're wearing absorbing most of the blow. You gasp. You laugh. You're wide awake in the moment.

**15.49 / 13.94 for all wine club members**



***Palate Scrubbing Bubbles!***

**ARCANGELO FRIZZANTE – Salento, Puglia, Italy**

As you'll note right upon pulling the cork from this elegant-looking bottle, this wine from the heel of Italy's "boot" has the special "kick" of carbon dioxide. You might not have anticipated the surprising POP, but you may remember another wine from this importer (Tom Kelly's Small Vineyards) providing the same effect. The success of that sparkling Garganega, clubbed not once but twice, has inspired this selection.

'*Frizzante*' indicates the wine is bubbly, though not so CO<sub>2</sub>-charged as Champagne or Prosecco so the cork needn't be restrained by a wire cage. This *frizzante* is made with the indigenous Verdeca grape, picked early to have a lower potential alcohol. Check it out: This almost Vinho Verde-like vino happens at a mere 11%.

The scents of green, rained-on foliage, banana, and white pepper invite you to a tingly sip of clean, lime-driven nervousity. Relating this to a gin and tonic wouldn't be too far a reach!

**16.49 / 14.84 for fun-loving wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# Tuesday Night

WINE CLUB

December 2018

*Macedonia?*

2017 JORDANOV MERLOT – Tikves, Macedonia

The idea that Merlot is a wimpy also-ran to Cabernet Sauvignon is just plain wrong in so many ways. Consider that Bordeaux itself is actually more devoted to Merlot in acreage; all the wines of the Right Bank emphasize it and there's hardly a Left Bank example omitting it. Many a Washington State winery produces a Merlot that rivals or even outshines its Cabernet offering. As for size, many think Cabernet is a bigger, therefore better wine. I alternatively submit that the two primary Bordeaux grapes are simply different in effect. A Merlot-based Right Bank wine is more affable in feel and more ready to drink at an early age; it lands broadly, not narrowly. A Left Bank red emphasizing Cabernet is actually more austere in its youth; more angular and "grumpy," if you will.

Then there's this one . . .

I'm admittedly confused. We carried this Merlot from one of the world's oldest wine producing regions several years ago and also submitted it to your club at that time. When Tom Kelly of Small Vineyards showed me a flown-over barrel sample of THIS vintage last September I found it gracious and endearing, fully ripe and rich on palate. This morning the bottle in front of me declares a slightly different message. The fruit in the nose is intense. The cherries and berries on the palate are fully ripe. The palate feel, however, is a surprise. This "wimpy" varietal is presenting quite the acidic AND tannic effect that I don't recall from the earlier sampling.

Food will be one remedy, and I suspect a bit of aging time will be the other. We don't usually talk about aging wines of this price (and I'm thinking months, not years in this case) but this wine wants to get over its little bout of seasickness, methinks. Let's see what happens in a few months, shall we?

13.49 / 12.14 for wine club members



### ***What this wine is for***

#### **2017 EL CIPRES MALBEC – Mendoza, Argentina**

Wines like the Wine Adventurer Club Cabernet Franc submission notwithstanding, Argentina’s wine scene is Malbec driven. It is how we know that place and therefore what it emphasizes, or the other way around. Regardless of the chicken and the egg question, one thing’s for sure: Malbec belongs here.

It derives a thicker, color-conferring skin at this sun-drenched region starting at 3,000 feet and heading up from there. It likes the lower rainfall, high desert climatic feature. It likes the significant diurnal shift, that difference between warm daytime temperatures and cold nighttime ones.

I think that last feature is what makes Argentine Malbec such a sensory paradox for some. When we examine this El Cipres visually we appreciate the intensely dark color. This may have us anticipating a nose that’s rich with warm, soft fruit. Instead, the scents are quite florally lifted, perky, and nearly citric. Violets, licorice, peppercorns, blueberries, fresh tar . . . those are all “high register” tones. Now for the mouth: There is body, certainly, AND acidity. This, for the red-blooded cocktail wine drinker, is more anxious in effect than expected or desired. Yes, Malbec is a Bordeaux variety but it’s certainly not the same as an oak-laced Cabernet Sauvignon.

And that, my friends, is why the Argentines are famous not only for Malbec but for their asado-style BEEF. That heavy dish needs a full-fruited yet enlivening wine to go along for relief. By the same token, Malbec needs juicy protein to calm its nerves. Is El Cipres a stand-alone cocktail wine? For some of you it will be, but for any meat eaters out there you have an even better option.

**11.49 / 10.34 for wine club members**