

The Wine Steward's

# THE RED COLLECTOR

## WINE CLUB

February 2019

*Perfection. Again.*

**2014 SULLIVAN MERLOT – Rutherford, Napa Valley**

Last month we showed you Sullivan's perfectly proportioned, place-honest Cabernet Sauvignon sold by the winery for over \$100 and at TWS for significantly less, while supplies last. Now comes its ally, the Sullivan Merlot, also from the estate vineyard. At the winery it sells for \$65. Here, for the time being, it happens at a lower rate we will not publish to protect the innocent.

This wine is gorgeous.

We offer no apologies for submitting Merlot to your club, not when it does THIS. The varietal whose effectiveness in the market was instantly demolished by a 1-second utterance in the movie *Sideways* has so much to give to those whose wine preferences aren't dictated by Hollywood (on the flip side, I'm very glad for what the film did for Pinot Noir!).

This 2014 says "Merlot" with its savory herbaceous aspect riding along with the cherry fruit. It declares its source with an earthiness we've all been trained to call "Rutherford Dust." It's beginning to add one more component to the message, that of "Phase II". Yes, it is developing to that more relaxed and unhurried place of calmed-down red wine where baby fat fruit is moving to something more mellow, and savory components are being allowed to also participate. I love Phase II. It is the reward of patience. Phase III? That's when everyone is oohing and aahing over something too old to actually enjoy: "Wow, Uncle Ray, you really nailed it with your 1997 Sutter Home White Zin! Great cellar dive!" (Then the mad rush for any available sink, toilet, potted plant . . .)

Summing it up: Indulge in this now or soon (or give it to Uncle Ray ten or so birthdays from now).

**XX.XX / XX.XX for wine club members**



***'Pere' makes Vérité while 'Fille' makes Cenyth***

**THE VALUE we STRIVE to PROVIDE ...**

**2015 CENYTH RED WINE – Sonoma County**

Some of our club members are content to support our cause with the assumption we are delivering a certain level of value. These folks aren't incessantly auditing the grocery store wine displays or patrolling the Internet to see how our provisions are priced out there in Retail Land. They are content with their assumption, probably based on a track record of wine goodness - as identified by The Wine Steward - landing in their glass.

But Yours Truly remains hypersensitive to all the ways a particular wine we sell MIGHT be scrutinized. Honestly, I'm perennially twitchy about this! Are we offering a good price based on its exposure in the market? Are we indulging the more 'intellectual' style preference as well as gratifying the hedonist? Are we providing a good mix of types while keeping our membership happy as a whole?

Fortunately for me and for you, we have a lot of vendor friends vying for club placements here. They are motivated to expose us to A LOT of great-tasting concepts and get very creative with their pricing for club amounts of those wines. "Making it up in volume" makes as much sense to them as it does to us. At the receiving end, you the consumer SHOULD be getting value by its different measurements, but sometimes we have to broadcast that to be sure you're aware of all the backstage efforts on your behalf.

So, I'm stealing a lot of wine-describing time from this particular entry to point out that Cenyth Red (based on Cabernet Franc with healthy amounts of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon) received 93 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate. Pricing? Wine.com has it for 58.99. Total Wines supposedly sold the 2014 vintage for 42.97, but that institution is notorious for not having what they advertise – and they don't even mention this 2015, a better product based on drought-induced smaller berries and therefore more intense flavors and textures.

Thoughtfulness versus Hedonism? This particular wine veers toward the first declaration. It is more classical in its framework and therefore more age-able than the more fruit-forward Cab types. The winemaker Hélène Seillan trained in Bordeaux. Her father makes the vaunted Verité wines, while Cenyth is her own project. Along with these early influences, the emphasis on Cabernet Franc and Sonoma County (mainly Knights Valley) sourcing all add up to a more Old-World wine style, albeit from a riper year. Parker's complementary review of 2015 Cenyth includes an allusion to the Right Bank trophy Chateau Cheval Blanc . . . are you getting the idea? Are you getting value? We believe so!

**49.99 / 44.99 for All Wine Club Members**

The Wine Steward's

# World Class

WINE CLUB

February 2019

**Encore!**

**2015 'il Fauno' di ARCANUM – Toscana, Italy**

Here is the third (fourth?) provision of il Fauno to your club over the years. While we usually promote the idea of difference and diversity to your adventurous group, it's good to have a few anchor wines to observe vintage after vintage – as long as the wine itself remains viable from a quality standpoint. il Fauno remains viable.

This is the more affordable wine from the Tuscan estate of Arcanum, employing Bordeaux varieties Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Petit Verdot. While the primary grape of the region Sangiovese also resides on the estate none exists in this blend. This might have some wondering how validly “Italian” il Fauno might be.

We could reference history, remarking that Bordeaux varieties have been growing in Italy longer than they've been planted in the Napa Valley. I would rather reflect on effect, encouraging you to smell and taste this with “Tuscany” on your mind. It works. The spirit of Tuscany – even the unrepresented Sangiovese, somehow – is represented beginning with the fragrance. Red fruits, earthy spice, and the quintessential “sottobosco” (underbrush) wine lovers attribute to the place are happening, sniff after pleased sniff. On the palate there is the brightness of cherry fruit plus a very Sangiovese-like (sorry, it keeps suggesting it!) citric energy. This wine has nothing to do with Bordeaux or Napa, regardless of *cepage*. It is so obviously, deliciously, vivaciously TUSCAN.

The last four reviews of affordable il Fauno from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate range from 92+ to 94 points. That publication has yet to review this 2015, but the reputation of the very good year plus our employed senses are enough to assume another positive rating is in the works.

In the meantime, enjoy this wine now or sometime in the next five years with a juicy ribeye or - or – what the heck – how about pizza tonight?!

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



### ***The Other Side of Italy***

#### **2010 LA QUERCIA – Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, Colline Teramane DOCG**

“The other side of Italy?” Yes, in more ways than one.

Leaving the source of this month’s other offering, the western land of Tuscany, we are heading over the Appenines - the mountainous “spine” of this long, narrow country – to Abruzzo which abuts the Adriatic Sea. We have made a geographical adjustment.

We are also “adjusting” the meaning of the term Montepulciano. Back in Tuscany it’s the name of a hilltop village from which comes the famous *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*. That wine is made from Sangiovese. In Abruzzo, however, “Montepulciano” indicates the name of the actual, very different grape. The “Colline Teramane” part of the title refers to a special sub-region of Abruzzo which was elevated to DOCG status (recognized as more distinctive / special) in 2003. This 2010 is the current release of this Montepulciano producer’s really good stuff, or so we submit!

Finally, we are adjusting the idea of Italian red wine. Let’s say you were confused about the whole “Montepulciano” place-versus-name issue we’ve tried to unravel, expecting Sangiovese to emerge from the bottle. You’d anticipate red color, red fruit, and a vivacious palate feel reflecting acidity. Italy’s Montepulciano **grape** has a dramatically different effect. Prepare yourself for nearly black-colored wine in your glass, intense scents of asphalt and dark fruits, and – especially true of this varietal – a primary palate effect not of acids but of TANNINS, wine’s other form of “resistance”.

This special, tiny-production reserve wine from La Quercia plays the part perfectly. You have an amazingly youthful wine here, as judged by either color, fruit, or gutsy structure. - And it’s nine years old!!

Match power with power here when it comes to your food pairing (and this SHOULD be making you hungry!): Something grilled, so smoky flavors can enhance, and enriched by some kind of marinade. Even if they’re portabella or shiitake mushrooms, season for intensity!

**34.99 / 31.49 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# California Wine Lover's

## WINE CLUB

February 2019

*I'm getting high tonight*

**2016 HIGH on the HOG RED WINE – Central Coast, California**

From the same maker as a Syrah we recently 'clubbed' comes a Rhone-inspired bowlful of red fruit and baking spice that's indulgent yet simultaneously lithe. Let's look (and smell) deeper to find more:

Ah yes, there's the umami element of salty, soy-affected beef. Hmmm, might Syrah be part of this blend? Yes, it turns out that Syrah is at the top of the ingredient list at 41%. But the just-baked, still-steaming-berry-pie-on-the-window-sill fragrance must be attributable to something else? Yep: 31% Grenache. With those flavors prevailing, how about the vibrant feel and musky nuance happening here? That's certainly the 25% Mourvèdre contribution. Mourvèdre lurks in the background of GSM blends, declaring itself with subtlety yet insuring durability. The "M" in your GSM helps with age-ability.

Oh yes: There's 3% Graciano happening here as well, disturbing our convenient suppositions but no doubt somehow improving the wine. While the other three are best known as "Rhone varietals," Graciano is a native of Rioja, Spain. There, a Graciano dollop – 5% or less – affects the main Tempranillo component the same way a little Petit Verdot slightly tweaks Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. What's it doing to High on the Hog? Having tried a few rare straight Gracianos in my career I'd guess it's bringing just a little greenness to complexify all that red and purple fruit. Graciano might contribute a just-trimmed ivy hedge effect. Why is this 3% inclusion important? A touch of "green" – Graciano style - can add one more voice to the whole lotta "red" sung by the other three players. Lovers of music appreciate the use of color via a slightly imperfect tone or rhythm. Not to get too Debussy on you, but I'm betting Graciano is bringing it.

What to bring to this wine? Barbecue is the automatic answer based on the forward-fruit ripeness. Perhaps we should think more creatively for once: How about Korean BBQ ribs? Andy & Yu's Tea-Smoked Duck? Our new truffle-infused Pecorino??

**20.99 / 18.89 for Wine Club Members**



The Chronicle / Craig Lee

## **Sommeliers / Winemakers . . . What's the Diff?!**

### **2014 SKYLARK 'Red Belly' – North Coast**

Some of the best winemakers emerge not from UC Davis or some Chateau-owning family but from other careers in this industry. Most effectively, to my mind, they come from the wine-buying side of the show. Buyers, whether they're doing it for a shop or a restaurant, get more exposure to the wide world of wine than most other folks involved with the biz. Why? They collect the most impressions. Their mental database is enriched by the myriad visits from generously-pouring vendors dying to sell them something. Over time they collect a vast amount of facts and figures about Pinot Noir and Cabernet and Very Good and Really Bad that can ultimately become actual wisdom. USEFUL, applicable winemaking wisdom.

Robert Perkins and John Lancaster are the wine-buying sommeliers for none other than Boulevard Restaurant. While I've enjoyed many a thoughtfully-chosen glass at the bar, the one time I've sat at an actual table serviced by John Lancaster I had a hard time with my role as the receiver. Here was one half of the wine decision-making of one of San Francisco's most famous food and wine shrines. Yet he and I have similar jobs ... how was I supposed to just sit there and not hold his decanter or something?

While I haven't met Rob, I can say that John's a pretty cool, normal dude despite the silly formality of the photo above. Obviously, the shirt and tie are normally preserved for the night job. The stained t-shirt and jeans are the apparel of harvest. The connection between the two, however, is vital in this case. These guys know what people like. They know what works with food. They taste a lot of really good shit and sometimes really bad shit with myriad vendors. Throw in a little technical winemaking know-how and John and Robert are fully enabled to have their own wine brand.

Hence Skylark, a line of wines produced with a concern for the casual consumer's love of fruit and another eye toward the need for balance and freshness in a mealtime beverage. That's a pretty tricky tightrope and rather consumer-sensitive. I can anticipate some of you appreciating the restraint of this 40% Carignan / 40% Syrah / 20% Grenache, knowing you'll read your notes and create some Boulevard-quality food to play along. I can also fret about the less-paranoid cocktail-style wine drinker wanting a skosh more room in the palate's seat and thighs (remembering the old Levi's for Men commercial). Regardless, I'm doing my job just as John and Rob do theirs. The rest is up to you.

**19.99 / 17.99 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# Wine Adventurer

## WINE CLUB

February 2019

*In defense of "Just Right" . . .*

**2016 CHATEAU de MUS 'Gold Label' – Languedoc, France**

With this selection we're catering to Goldilocks' preference for things "just right."

Like the porridge, chairs, and beds in the house of the three bears, wine is often more noticed for its extremes. In the Mediterranean-adjacent land of the Languedoc - the home of Chateau de Mus - the reds can be "too hot" with over-15% alcoholic extravagance. They can be "too cold" with rustic *brettanomyces* funk or an under-fruited impact of tongue-grieving "dirt". While each of these "too's" has its fans, we're appealing to Goldilocks this time - and the rest of you in her camp!

This top wine from the producer - their 'Gold Label' - is a balanced recipe of 70% Syrah, 20% Grenache, and 10% Mourvèdre receiving a moderate aging experience of "not too much" and "not too little" oak. That is, SOME of the wine saw barrel time while the rest took its mellowing nap in stainless steel tanks: Just right.

The color: Mild in its intensity. The nose speaks carefully - not overtly - of spice, smoky fruit, and a vague delicatessen-recalling impression of cured meats hanging from the ceiling. The palate is "fine," not ponderous. It refreshes with its energetic feel while amply delivering all the GOOD qualities of Languedoc red wine. It walks a stylistic tightrope. It straddles the fence of type. It knows where to start and where to end, leaving you a little thirsty for more. Surely, Goldilocks would welcome another glass or two and - falling into Baby Bear's bed - sleepily mumble, "JUSHT RIGHT!!"

This wine is exclusive to us in California and therefore to YOU, the TWS customer. We have a special relationship with its importer based in Virginia, allowing for unheard-of wines heading west to your particular and appreciative audience. We hope you enjoy the Chateau de Mus "Gold Label" for its "just right-ness" and also savor the privilege of exclusivity happening here.

**24.99 / 22.49 for all wine club members**



## Swan Song?

### 2015 CHATEAU LESTRILLE-CAPMARTIN – Bordeaux Supérieur, France

It's quite possible that at least thirty of you have already bought and enjoyed this wine. This very vintage has been shown at no less than three events featuring the imports of Charles Neal, and many Wine Adventurer members sign up for those affairs. The reason for our showing it to at least several of you one more time is not that it has yet to catch on, but that it has been *so* embraced we figured we have a sure thing on our hands. Yes, at each of those Charles Neal tastings this was the best seller; we had to bring in literal heaps of it to fill your orders. Why not enjoy it once more before the 2015 is gone?

Yes, 2015: The long overdue, first fully-successful vintage since 2010. 2011 through 2014 were tricky for Bordeaux with weather challenges causing underripe, greener smells, flavors, and angular mouthfeels. The riper 2015 accommodated fruit at long last, as an addition to Bordeaux's anticipated flavors of earth, tobacco, and roasted *herbes*. It's the whole package with nothing omitted; endearingly crowd-friendly yet sticking to its traditional guns with classic structure.

The goodness of Bordeaux Vintage 2015 was conferred on all the wines made that year, not just the famous high-end names. Quality rolled all the way "downhill" to affordable wines in the less posh regions such as this Lestrille-Capmartin from the Right Bank's Entre-Deux-Mers area. The most famous makers on this side of the Gironde Strait are Petrus and Cheval Blanc. While those are way off in Pomerol and Saint-Emilion (Lestrille-Capmartin is a half-hour's drive from the latter), the wine before you is made in the same spirit, varietally speaking. Here happens the typical Right Bank recipe of 80% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon aged in 100% new oak.

There is good density of color happening here, encouraging a sniff that yields cherries, strawberries, cassis, and sweet smoke. The palate is generous for a Bordeaux at this price point; rich in fruit yet appropriately appointed with Bordeaux's requisite tannins. While the cherries and berries endear, the grip has you reaching for strong-flavored aged cheeses while another hand thumbs through recipes for braised short ribs and the like. For such an affordable wine, this Bordeaux remarkably does it all. We will miss it when it's gone!

**18.49 / 16.64 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# Here N There Whites

## WINE CLUB

February 2019

*Oregon's most important white*

**2017 COCHON 'Cuvée Sophie' PINOT GRIS – Willamette Valley, Oregon**

Longtime TWS participants will possibly recognize the 'Cochon' name. The brand is the baby of our friend Adam Webb, who helped make our Domaine des Plus-de-Vie "house wine." I've always admired Adam's way of being down-to-earth with his way of showing wine to the peeps, PLUS his worldly wisdom per the same subject. He can be familiarly "down home" when he shows you his wine, but behind the affability is a lot of foreign travel plus experience in both winemaking AND selling. He knows more than you think he knows because throwing around his knowledge like some lordly wine snob just isn't Adam's way. Rather, he participates in what he's pouring in your glass (and his); never pontificating but always wondering aloud.

What Adam recently poured in my glass was a real surprise. I've known him to work with grapes from Lodi, Mendocino, Napa, Dry Creek, Carneros, and other parts of Northern California. Until now, however, I had no idea he was planning on an Oregon Pinot Gris. It made perfect sense though, as his partner in Odisea/Cochon hails from the Northwest and has the right connections.

This is Adam's first-ever exploration of the Willamette Valley and its most important white grape Pinot Gris. The variety is a mutation of Pinot Noir, otherwise called "Pinot Grigio" especially in Italy. Some American producers choose that latter moniker, especially when designing a more citrus-y, Italian-style version. "Pinot Gris" alternatively reminds many wine wanderers of Alsace, France. There, the tall and slender "hock" -bottled whites inspire a comparison with German Riesling, but don't jump to conclusions: This Alsatian-looking wine is DRY.

To the nose there is an immediate sense of the lactic; not "buttery" like Rombauer Chardonnay but perhaps more suggestive of fresh cream. Right along with that enriched sense come more energetic impressions of lemon and lime and green apple. Beyond that is a chalk-like earthiness and - lo and behold: I'm using my favorite descriptors for Loire Valley Chenin Blanc! On the palate the wine is dry; broad yet simultaneously racy. It gives relaxed pleasure yet nervously refuses to reside overlong, and when your sip is swallowed a delayed "memory" of citric acid keeps your tongue twitching. I believe a creamy cheese is the ticket for a food pairing here. Aim for one of the domestics we sell from Cowgirl Creamery or venture over the pond for our Bergamino di Bufala from Lombardy, Italy.

**17.99 / 16.19 for all wine club members**



**White can also come in light pink!**

**2017 TERRE dei BUTH ROSÉ – Veneto, Italy**

Happy Valentine's Day – a day or so late!

In the spirit of the Holiday of Love we present a not-so-white wine which remains valid for the Here 'n There White Wine Club – or so we hope.

After all, Terre di Buth weighs in at a mere 10.5% alcohol level, automatically light and refreshing. Regardless of tint, this has the **effect** of white wine.

Furthering my defense: This is a blend of 90% Glera and 10% Raboso. Glera is a WHITE grape. When you are enjoying Prosecco, also from this area, you are experiencing 100% Glera. Raboso is a red grape responsible for the delicate color happening here, and interesting for its being fairly rare; indigenous to the Venetian region.

Add to this: BUBBLES! Come on, who has a problem THERE?! This wine is classified as a “frizzante,” meaning it has more froth than a still wine and less than full-blown sparkling wines such as Champagne. It's “half-bubbly,” un-technically speaking, along the lines of a few other whiter whites we've shown your club. The CO<sub>2</sub> is a by-product of a second fermentation which happened in stainless steel tanks. If all that gas had been allowed to vent you'd have a still (flat) wine. Instead, the bubbles were captured by bottling this mid-fermentation; they can't get out until you LET them out!

Gooseberries, redcurrants, and barely-ripe cherries and raspberries tantalize the nose. A clean and fresh effect of limey-ness occurs on the palate.

This is harmless fun, sipped on its own. Its character is amplified with salumi and various other *antipasti*. Happy Valentine's Day – all year long!

**15.99 / 14.39 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# Tuesday Night

WINE CLUB

February 2019

## *The Holy Grail*

**2017 LYETH ESTATE CABERNET SAUVIGNON – California**

In my relentless, exhausting, enduring, never-ending, sweat-inducing, palate-sacrificing pursuit of wines for your club (I'm being silly, but I DO taste a lot of mediocre-to-bad stuff to identify the good) it is always easier to find value from the more off-the-beaten-path wine types than from the popular and most-demanded. California Cabernet is one of the toughies.

At the Tuesday Night Wine Club price level the Cabernets I'm shown nearly always taste "wrong" in one way or the other. They can be too herbal, too thin, too badly-labeled, too caustic with tannins, under-fruited, or – most criminally to my wine sensibilities – too "fixed" with artificial additives. Frequent readers of these notes (and we know some of you Tuesday Nighters DO read your notes!) have heard this from me before so I'll not digress this time around. Therefore, moving on:

It is with great pleasure that we bring you THIS. Here is a good-looking bottle (we taste with our eyes first, yes?) with honestly good contents within. 87% Cabernet Sauvignon is joined by 13% Petite Verdot to furnish a fragrant nose of fruit and freshly-turned soil, a mouth with cherry and berry flavors, and a textural effect of both indulgence and honesty. This wine is ripe enough to please the casual consumer's palate yet true enough to the idea of Cabernet Sauvignon to sustain this wine buyer's credibility.

I believe it would hold up well to the hearty and nearly-sweet flavors of generously-sauced baby back ribs. Shall we find out?!

**10.99 / 9.89 for wine club members**

## **Another Trip to Spain's Southeast**

### **2017 LAYA – Almansa, Spain**

This inexpensive yet dramatically dark and texturally sumptuous wine comes from the same folks who deliver small trickles of the highly-allocated “Clio” red to us. Clio comes from southeast Spain’s region of Jumilla. Not far away is the source for Laya – Almansa - which may be the country’s best-known source of a particularly interesting grape called Garnacha Tintorera.

Laya is composed of 70% Garnacha Tintorera and 30% Monastrell (known as Mourvèdre in France and other areas). Let’s concentrate on that first, larger ingredient this time around. Garnacha Tintorera’s original name is Alicante Bouschet. While many reds of the Mediterranean came from Spain and headed to greater fame in France, Alicante Bouschet was born in France and made its way to Spain. It is named for Henri Bouchet, a nurseryman and specialist in the hybridizing of roses who also played with grapes. While some familiar varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon are fortunate accidents of natural crossing in the vineyard (Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc are its parents), others are the product of human intervention. Henri Bouchet deliberately crossed Grenache and another of his inventions Petit Bouschet to achieve Alicante Bouschet. This happened sometime in the 1880’s. Europe’s original vines had been wiped out by the root louse phylloxera and was gradually being replanted, often with varieties hitherto unknown or non-existent. While many of the new plantings were selected for their hardiness and reliability for cropping, Henri was solving another winemaking dilemma with his Alicante Bouschet creation.

THIS red grape possessed what few others ever had: A red interior. When you crush a Cabernet or Pinot Noir or Zinfandel grape, what comes out? White juice. Those become red wines by hanging out with their own red skins during fermentation. Squeeze an Alicante Bouschet / Garnacha Tintorera grape and out comes **blood-red** juice. Ferment that juice with the grape skins and what do you get? A very dark on dark wine.

On its own Garnacha Tintorera can invoke too much of a stewed tomato flavor. I know this based on my winemaking days: Tim and I worked with the grape (grown more locally) for at least three vintages. Laya is more complete and less idiosyncratic by the addition of Monastrell. Endearing fruit conquers the veggies, yet the potent darkness of Garnacha Tintorera will not be defeated. This nearly-frightening wine is gothically delicious!

**9.99 / 8.99 for wine club members**