

The Wine Steward's

# The COLLECTOR

WINE CLUB

February 2024



## *Insecurities, Begone!*

We recently utilized this **2013 CARRIAGE HOUSE RED** from Washington State's Yakima Valley's Dubrul Vineyard on our WineBar menu. The theme of that week's red tasting flight was a progression of older to newer wine. Carriage House came first, then a 2014 Bordeaux, then a 2016 Chianti Classico, and so on toward younger and more fruit-forward experiences. The idea was to start with a wine style many never try otherwise; that of *development*. So many of us age our wine for just twenty minutes – the duration of the car ride home from the store - and the primary flavors we witness are the only style we know. Thus, the provision of this lesson on aged wine didn't happen without hesitation or trepidation on my part: "Would our customers understand and appreciate this wine type so unfamiliar to many? Would our courageous cause be met with rejection?" I maintain this healthy level of insecurity with every wine submission; whether to the WineBar Menu, to your Wine Clubs, or to a customer on the sales floor. "Will this wine work for that person?" Yes, I'm a little paranoid.

It turns out I was fretting for naught. Those tastes of Carriage House were so appreciated they were followed by orders for entire glasses and bottles. Hurray! Now, you longtime club members have seen this wine before, as it is always good and I get to represent it in these notes: A little explaining goes a long way. For newer (or forgetful) members, know that this is Dubrul's **INTENTIONALLY-AGED** offering. This 2013 is their *current* vintage, kept in a cold cellar for nearly a decade before a late release. Carriage House is meant to demonstrate the developability of this winery's wines, and the loveliest part is you're not paying a surcharge for the experience. This mellowed "Phase II" Cabernet Sauvignon / Merlot / Cabernet Franc that's very ready to drink is a terrific value, by my (slightly insecure) read.

**44.99 / 40.49 for all wine club members**



### *Can you handle the truth?*

**2019 DOREN CABERNET SAUVIGNON** comes mainly from one small Sonoma Valley vineyard, with another tiny contribution from a nearby plot in Glen Ellen, a mile or so away. This 5-barrel production (120 cases) is the longtime passion project of Ben Doren. I've known Ben for at least ten years, especially per his "day job." Ben owns Alluvial Wines, a brokerage for small producers from here and abroad. Several of his finds have landed on our shelves, yet his eponymously-named label has only occurred here once. Why? Styling. More Cabernet customers anticipate gratification in the form of ripe fruit and rich textures. That is certainly not happening in a Doren Cabernet, regardless of vintage.

Ben's love for the traditional European wine style (as echoed by but a few local Cabernets such as Heitz and Mayacamas) adjusts his winemaking. Perhaps the most critical contributor to his Cab is when the grapes are harvested. Well before most Napa Cab producers make the "Pick Now!" call, Ben's grapes are already in the fermenting vat. This earlier gathering makes for less fruity, more savory flavors. A leaner, lower-alcohol framework is the refreshing byproduct: How often do you see a 13.5% alcohol Cabernet?!

This is decidedly designed for food, not cocktail wine-style guzzling. Bring it to the table to see how the higher acidity and spicy scents and flavors react to protein. — And let us surmise in one more positive direction for this distinctive wine: I believe Ben's Cabernet will age **BETTER** than most others of greater mass and fruit ripeness due to its acidic backbone. We may well have another "Carriage House" (see above) experience on our hands, if we wait!

**44.99/ 40.49 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# World Class

WINE CLUB

February 2024



## *Curmudgeon Cracks a Smile*

This red, **Mastroberardino 'Re di More' Aglianico** takes us to the Irpinia section of Campania, Italy. Mastroberardino can be considered the most influential producer of this area, a champion of not only Aglianico but Lacryma Christi and the whole line of white varieties for which Campania is known (had a good Falanghina lately?). Likewise, Aglianico is considered the most important red grape of Campania. In fact, many a wine writer adds it to the short list of Italy's greatest varieties including Piemonte's Nebbiolo and Tuscany's Sangiovese. "Importance," winewise, is measured by complexity, durability, and food pairability.

Aglianico certainly meets all three of those criteria, yet its placement in your club has been very rare. Why? Because this varietal's identity is so powerfully curmudgeonly that those new to the experience might misunderstand and balk. "Curmudgeonly" is my word for wines which challenge you with other-than-fruit scents and flavors, and – often – a difficult-to-embrace tannic structure. Consider Taurasi, Campania's greatest example of Aglianico: Its scents can be downright *grimy*, and its palate feel dauntingly *grumpy* unless you have the patience to age away the effect.

Mastroberardino's 'Re di More' (King of Blackberries) refuses to forsake its Aglianico character of rusticity, when it comes to how it smells and tastes. Where it compromises a bit is with its more drinkable palate feel. I feel more confident about handing you this honest yet more affable (within the context of Aglianico, that is) version than just about any other I've tried. You deserve to know it!

**35.99 / 32.39 for Wine Club Members**



### *A Great “What is It??”*

Welcome to the Cru Boutenac section of Corbières, Languedoc, France.

*“Where?!”* you say.

Welcome to **Chateau Ollieux Romanis**’ higher-end, smaller production red, **Atal Sia**.

*“Huh??”* you wonder.

Let’s figure this out. Corbières is the largest-producing sub-region within southern France’s vast Languedoc region, of which Boutenac is felt to be one of the most important sections. The “Cru” appendage is unofficial but prevalently applied. Chateau Ollieux Romanis is among the most influential players here, obsessed with the furtherance of quality and, thereby, higher regard for this historically less-esteemed wine location. Let’s just say Corbières has always provided rustic wine value and never felt compelled to transcend the role until players like this one got hungry.

Their “Atal Sia” (“So Be It” in an ancient Occitan tongue) means to show you the potential of the location without the aid from or distraction of oak barrels. This is 60% Carignan (the most “historical” grape of Corbières), 30% Grenache, and 10% Mourvèdre rendered entirely in vats and tanks. All that Carignan guarantees a dramatic, dark density. Alleviating this somewhat is the uncommon choice of carbonic maceration (whole cluster) for the fermentation, bringing a sense of exuberance of fruit. To my palate, this could be a modern-style Chateauneuf-du-Pape – at 1% alcohol less than the more famous wine.

Serve it slightly cool the next time the weather is warm enough for revving up the grill. . . . And grab some to age for later. The significant core of minerality should preserve Atal Sia for quite a while!

**41.99 / 37.79 for Wine Club Members**

The Wine Steward's

# Pacific Coast

WINE CLUB

February 2024



## *Growing Confidence . . .*

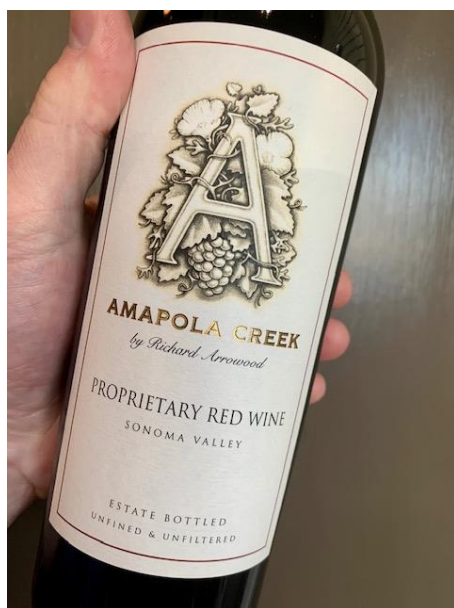
The provision of this **2021 SAN SIMEON CABERNET SAUVIGNON** is yet another indication of our growing confidence in a wine region we used to largely disregard. Have we relaxed our standards or does the place make better wine these days? The latter.

Paso Robles is a pretty hot place. One generation of winemakers ago did nothing but reflect that in their bottlings, rather than pursuing restraint. In that day, we came to anticipate heat-induced stewed fruit aromas and raisin-y flavors from here.

San Simeon, farmed and fermented by the land-wealthy Riboli Family, is a great example of the “New” Paso Robles and we have referenced them not once but TWICE for your wine club in the past few months (the last entry was a Syrah so many of you have re-bought). The name itself is a bit deceiving with its allusion to a coastal town (the home of Hearst Castle). Most of Riboli’s vines, including the source for this Cabernet, are in fact in a much hotter section of Paso Robles on the east side of Highway 101.

Ultimately, that’s the impressive part: This Cabernet – along with the Syrah coming before – is grown in one of Paso’s warmest subregions yet avoids the “stew and raisin” effect. Is the wine “big”? Yes, there’s no avoiding that. Is the fruit “fresh” rather than baked? Certainly. I’d call this a “Crowd Pleaser” Cab which appeases with very understandable fruit and the impact of palate feel. The other wine in your February pack appeals a little more to the intellect, but you must admit the San Simeon is damn useful!

**22.49 / 20.24 for all wine club members**



### *Place and Pedigree*

Long ago, Richard Arrowood learned the wine business *via* stints at Korbel and Chateau St. Jean. Thus enabled, in 1986 he started the now-venerable Arrowood Winery. It was one of the first tasting rooms I ever visited in 1990 or so, where I shocked myself by buying up for a \$30 MERLOT!!

The winery was purchased by the Mondavi Family in 2000, and later by Jess Jackson. While Dick remained involved with his eponymously-named winery he started his own new project in the meantime, **Amapola Creek**. Though he officially retired and sold that business in 2019, Amapola Creek wine labels continue to recognize his contribution to this day; “Richard Arrowood” happens right there under “Amapola Creek.”

That’s where we run out of specifics. Look for a vintage on this label – and on the back – and you’ll find none. Seek out the mention of the grapes contributing to this blend and you’ll come up empty. We know that Cabernet Sauvignon is the driver and that Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Petit Verdot are probably contributors, but the proportions thereof are a mystery.

And that’s fine with me, because what we DO know is that this is sourced entirely from the Sonoma Valley and that its Moon Mountain subregion probably plays a part. That’s all the guidance MY nose and mouth want this time around. I admire reds from here. They sport fruit, and/or their messaging elaborates on that with compelling extra effects. Smell this for its dark cherries AND its cedar and sage. Taste it for its blackcurrants AND its shady earth and tobacco. Regardless of the specific grape recipe, this has “place” written all over it, not to mention pedigree!

*A great wine for . . .*

**21.49 / 19.34 for all members**

The Wine Steward's

# *Wine Adventurer*

WINE CLUB

February 2024



## *That Place I Keep Talking About . . .*

Welcome to **2021 Mas des Agrunelles ‘L’Indigène’ Terrasses du Larzac**. – And you’re saying, “Umm, okay?!” All right, I’ll start explaining this place I’m pretty excited about, even if I’m alone in the enthusiasm!

We are taking you not far from the seventh largest city in France, Montpellier, which is near the Mediterranean coast. From that important university town we’ll head inland – north and west – to find the higher-elevation Languedoc subregion of Terrasses du Larzac.

Like other Languedoc wine places “Rhône varieties” prevail here; and the Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre blends get a little lonely without another significant Languedoc (and sometimes Rhône) player, Carignan. This particular bottling utilizes 60% Syrah, 25% Grenache, and 15% Carignan.

The soils here, happening higher, are more eroded than what you’d find below. They’re therefore “poorer” in nutrients and higher in mineral content. If you were to compare a typical Terrasses du Larzac red with one from the Southern Rhone, you’d probably identify a more apparent “spine” of minerality in the former: Familiar flavors, different feel.

So, think “Rhône” with a twist!

**22.49 / 20.24 for club members**



### ***Honestly Italian / American-Attracting***

The first thing you'll notice about this bottle is its extra adornment of a grape vine cutting. I wonder if that foreign matter is USDA-approved?! It must be, as **Cantina Zaccagnini's Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** has sported the decor for many a vintage. Fittingly, the wine's nickname "il vino di tralcetto" signifies "from the vine."

Romance aside, let's explain an important Italian wine type that can confuse the heck out of the typical American consumer. The term "Montepulciano" is famously used two very different ways. In Tuscany, west of Italy's vertebrae-like mountain range, there exists the famous subregion Montepulciano. That is a PLACE featuring Tuscany's best-known grape Sangiovese. Across the Apennines, on the east (Adriatic) coast of this long, skinny country, a certain red grape called "Montepulciano" proliferates. Two regions, the Marche and Abruzzo, feature this grape. "Montepulciano d'Abruzzo" is this grape as rendered (grown and made) in Abruzzo.

That settled (I dearly hope, until the next reminder), let me submit that Montepulciano the GRAPE may make more sense to American palates than Sangiovese coming from Montepulciano the PLACE. Why? Because it is darker in color, attracting many of us who "taste" with our eyes. Because it is darker in its perfume; black fruits and walnut skin confer a nearly Cabernet-like effect. Because it is sturdy with tannins on the palate. Whereas many Italian reds offer hunger-inducing "resistance" with their acidity, some – including Montepulciano – do it with the mild astringency of *tannins*. American Cabernet drinkers, by and large, understand and appreciate tannins more than they tolerate acidity. This will therefore resolve with the introduction of protein, i.e. meats of just about any kind!

**20.99 / 18.89 for Wine Club Members**



The Wine Steward's  
'Here 'n There'

# Uncharted Whites

WINE CLUB

February 2024



## *A Proper Under-\$20 Bordeaux Blanc*

Here's a fresh and lively white from one of France's most famous wine regions. Its naming is interesting, and perhaps intentional. Inexpensive **"Chateau Haut-Rian Blanc"** sounds a lot like one of the most expensive and sought-after examples of the same type, "Chateau Haut-Brion Blanc." The latter will set you back at least \$800. Yes, \$800, for one *bottle* of a dry white wine! Now, we're not saying the wine we're handing you is anything like that trophy, but perhaps the Haut-Rian marketing department wanted to test your gullibility with that association!

Bordeaux Blancs costing over \$25 (and upwards toward Haut-Brion) tend to be a combination of Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc with a generous treatment of French Oak. That latter "ingredient" helps to add aromatic complexity and enrich the palate feel and length. Those wines can often age very well.

Bordeaux Blancs costing less, such as this 60% Sémillon / 40% Sauvignon Blanc, typically spend their relatively brief aging period in stainless steel tanks. This environment preserves the perky fruit and prevents the semi-oxidation alternatively afforded by a barrel. The aim is a drink-now glass of vibrancy and refreshment.

Whether or not you're a fan of raw oysters, know that whites like Chateau Haut-Rian are the Bordelais' choice for that fare. It's also great for washing down other seafood dishes, salads, and delicately-treated pastas!

**16.99 / 15.29 for all wine club members**



## *UNIQUELY GOOD*

“Unusual” can also be “Delicious”. Both happen here, but let’s concentrate on the former first.

The Wölffer Estate - or headquarters - is actually in Long Island, of all places. From there they grow and make wine, cider (we just brought in some), gin, and brandy. As their brand expanded beyond their means to grow enough “ingredients,” they went abroad to launch new products. Last year we sold Wölffer’s “Summer in a Bottle” Rosé from Provence, France and now we bring you a white from a very different part of the world. **Finca Wölffer White** hails from Mendoza, Argentina. So, you have the “unusuality” of a New York wine enterprise spreading its wings.

More unusual than that is the unique combination of grape varieties at play in this blend. I had yet to see Chardonnay combined with 24.5% Sauvignon Blanc, 12% Chenin Blanc, 11% Pinot Gris, and 9.5% Torrontes until witnessing this. Torrontes, by the way, could be called “Argentina’s white grape.” On its own it usually expresses too much of itself, with an overwhelmingly perfumed florality. I can detect Torrontes in the background of this wine, occurring at a better-behaved “nuance” level.

Citrus, green herbs, and blossoms all happen with discretion in the nose. The mouth is clean and lush, with a fun finish of hunger-inducing salinity. This should do very nicely with tonight’s fresh cracked Dungeness crab!

**16.99 / 15.29 for all wine club members**

The Wine Steward's

# “Curious?” Club

WINE CLUB

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## *Some Like Them Dark*

The other wine in your February duo is delicate in color, wispy in aroma, and “barely there” on the palate. This **2021 Laya** represents the “flip side” of red wine, stylistically. It is “dramatic” in all ways and to my mind there are three contributors determining this.

**The Place:** We are headed for Almansa in Southeast Spain. While we often extoll the virtues of wine regions with coastal influence, Almansa is inland and up, and the Mediterranean’s moderating effect isn’t felt here. Instead, we identify such a place as having a “continental” climate with greater extremes of temperature. The hot summer days in particular contribute to the warmth of this wine.

**The Importer:** My persistent hope is that a location will be more identified in a wine than its maker’s fingerprints, but in 2021 LAYA there is definitely some winemaking culture in play. Seizing on the already-extreme ripeness found in Almansa, we know this particular importer for preferring to exploit the style rather than restraining it.

**The Grapes:** 30% of this blend is represented by Monastrell, Spain’s Mourvèdre. This is the most important red grape in this country’s southeast, offering saucy richness to the wines. The *main* contributor (70%) is Alicante Bouschet, called Garnacha Tintorera here. By either name, this is a red grape that almost uniquely possesses red, rather than clear, juice. Whereas red wines normally achieve their color from the skins, this LAYA is darkened by both skin and juice!

**The Math:** There’s A LOT happening in this inexpensive yet impactful red, for at least three reasons!

**11.49 / 10.34 for all wine club members**



### ***PINOT NOIR From ITALY??***

Yes, there's a good deal of Pinot Noir grown in Italy; especially in the country's northeast where we're headed with this wine. **2020 Sartori Pinot Noir** hails from "Trevenezie," a broad area encompassing sub-regions Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Trentino-Alto Adige. That's a lot of placenames - and perhaps confounding – but at least Sartori kept the varietal name familiar to you. They *could* have more accurately called this "Pinot Nero," the Italian name for Pinot Noir.

Sartori also kindly provided a very understandable and likable wine. It's neither dark nor dense by any means, but "real" Pinot Noir rarely plays in that direction of hedonism. The more delicate color should prepare your nose for something more delicately brisk, refreshing, and food-friendly.

Understand, though: You could lose this wine in the wrong glass shape. To demonstrate this in the extreme, I poured Sartori side-by-side in two dramatically different glass formats. Glass #1 was a heavy, stemless tumbler. If this choice sounds ridiculous, perhaps you've never been to an Italian-American restaurant with red-checkered tablecloths where such a glass might well be utilized for inexpensive wine-by-the-glass offerings. At any rate, from this glass there was NO scent. Blindfolded, I might have sworn the tumbler was empty; devoid of wine or otherwise: Dead silence! Glass #2 was a New World Pinot Noir glass coming from Riedel's Restaurant Series; a dramatically-shaped, stemmed bowl with a vertical extension at its top (often used at our WineBar). From this format the wine sang beautifully with spicy-floral-fruity perfume and vivid lushness. A bigger wine? Not in size but – yes – "bigger" in identity.

Do yourself and your wine a favor; employ good stemware for an enhanced nose and mouth experience!