

The Wine Steward's

The COLLECTOR

WINE CLUB

January 2024



We are pleased to provide a great value from a winery I've respected for years, the **2020 ROBERT CRAIG 'Howell Mountain Cuvée'**. This blend of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot, and 2% Malbec totally plays to the historical house style of the producer. Robert Craig wines are always "handsome" with deep color and age-worthy structure. Have a look at what just landed in your glass: The purple-verging-on-black-ness is immense. Take a whiff: Sweet graphite joins black raspberries and distant rumors of vanilla sauce. Now a sip: THERE'S a Robert Craig wine talking! Fruit is coupled with firmness - *mountain* firmness! . . . As you'd expect from Howell Mountain, a Napa Valley appellation well ABOVE the valley floor. In fact, one defining requirement for this American Viticultural Area is that it occurs above the fog line.

What we DON'T expect from Howell Mountain is a wine at this price. Bottlings from this revered and harder-to-farm area - whether Cabernets or blends - far more often cost you at least \$100. With this 'Howell Mountain Cuvée' you're getting the perks of high-rent location, veteran winemaking, and - most essentially - quality red wine that's evocative of source, and durable to boot.

You're welcome!

49.99 / 44.99 for all wine club members



It's been too long!

This provision of **2021 TURNBULL NAPA VALLEY CABERNET SAUVIGNON** was a long time coming. I have long-respected the brand, ever since the winery cranked down production numbers to make a better wine and get it out of Safeway. In its newer, smaller-production manifestation it has been clubbed here several times - but the wholesale price has become club budget-prohibitive of late, hence the delay in reappearing. Basically put: Your numbers accommodated a price concession - at last!

This plays a delicious counterpoint to the Howell Mountain Cuvée also provided this month, in that the fruit sourcing (all estate) comes from more valley floor-oriented vineyards in Calistoga and Oakville. What should we anticipate with that consideration? A more ready-to-drink Cab that's easygoing in feel (compared to the mountain effect).

That's happening here. It always does in Turnbull's "Napa" bottling. The color is just a little less purple and more maroon compared with the Robert Craig. The fruit in the mouth is a bit more plummy and cherried; less dauntingly "rocky". On the palate there's more smoothness. Yes, Cabernet tannins are there but they're more manageable; "fine-grained," we'd call that effect. This is certainly ready to enjoy but don't let it fool you: Turnbull Cabernets such as this have at least seven to ten years in them!

59.99/ 53.99 for all wine club members

The Wine Steward's

World Class

WINE CLUB

January 2024



Why this is Happening . . .

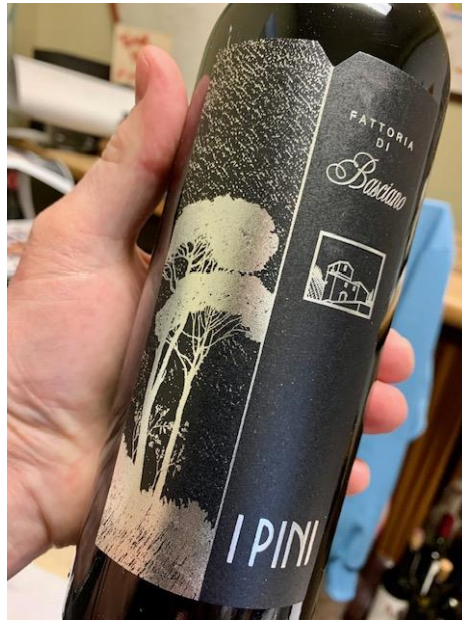
Consider yourself doubly lucky - or cursed. You're *lucky* if you recognize the unique goodness of this wine, *cursed* if it freaks you out. Either effect is possible, as wines from The Rocks District of Walla Walla Valley are VERY distinctive. Their "unusuality" takes some getting to know.

"Walla Walla??" Yes, your club which nearly always sees foreign reds is receiving a *domestic* one. That said, what's happening here is anything but "domestic," per the exotic character. The place does this, and "Voice of Place" is integral to wine love. We're doing our duty!

Frenchman (with Champagne connections) Christophe Baron visited our Northwest with the aim of starting a Willamette Valley (Oregon) project. Something distracted him, a place well east of that rainy Pinot Noir place: The Rocks District of Walla Walla - not actually in Washington but in Oregon, just over the border - where the terrain remarkably resembles that of Chateauneuf-du-Pape. Yes, large *galet roubles* don't just litter the vineyard surface; they PERVADE it. Christophe recognized a great wine place waiting to happen, developed the Cayuse line of wines from here, and is probably making serious bank.

Cayuse wines now sell for about \$150 per-bottle and -up. What you have before you - **2018 DOUBLE LUCKY 8** - is a second label wine representing the barrels not quite making the Cayuse "cut". Here is the very identifiable work of Christophe Baron (more importantly, of The Rocks District area) told by three grapes. It is comprised of roughly equal parts Syrah, Grenache, and Tempranillo. It reminds some of Northern Rhone wine. I think that's part of the game, but the wines from here are a little crazier; kind of like the look our new Border Collie puppy sometimes gives me...

A True "Cult" Wine for 47.99 / 43.19 for Wine Club Members



A Tasty Super Tuscan

I really like this wine. I also really like the way it fills a void left by the departure of 'il Fauno' from our shelves. That red blend from Tuscany was excellent nearly every vintage and provided great value. So what happened? Its wholesale price skyrocketed and the 'QPR' (Quality to Price Ratio) thereby adjusted to our losing interest. That wine is still good but now costs more than it should, by our read.

Thus, I was delighted to taste **2021 'I Pini'** by another Tuscan concern, **BASCIANO** - rendered by the Masi Family in Chianti Rufina, northeast of Florence. Now, this red cannot be called "Chianti". Why? It is not based on the area's most traditional variety, Sangiovese. In fact, it contains *none* of it. Like its TWS predecessor il Fauno, i Pini is *Bordeaux* oriented in varietal makeup: 1/3 each Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and (Rhone variety) Syrah. The wine has great darkness and a "core" which middleweight Sangiovese would be hard-pressed to provide.

So, we're delivering dark satisfaction, and YOU like that. - But considering OUR devotion to regional identity, how "Tuscan" can such a Sangiovese-less blend be? I would ask you to consider: Upon smelling 'I Pini,' does it play like a Bordeaux - or a Napa Valley blend? I'd submit that TUSCANY shines through. The Cab and Merlot and Syrah are platforms for the place, which is sensed by flavors of iron and *sotto bosco* (underbrush). Thus, the validity of the term "Super Tuscan," which unofficially describes a Tuscan red allowing for experimentation beyond the glorification of Sangiovese. Bravo, 'I Pini'!

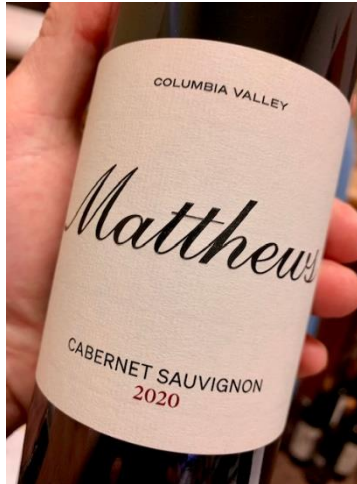
33.99 / 30.59 for Wine Club Members

The Wine Steward's

Pacific Coast

WINE CLUB

January 2024



A Price Change Loometh . . .

This 2020 MATTHEWS CABERNET SAUVIGNON is sold out at the winery and in most other venues, yet we were able to acquire all that remained in a local warehouse. This hasty “grab” was based on two factors: We really like this wine for the price, and there’s no way we’ll be carrying the 2021 follow-up. Why? Because its rate will shoot up to \$50 - winery price - and retailers will be challenged to sell it anywhere less than \$40. I have no idea what pressures are inducing this inconvenience. Maybe the producer reviewed its cost of doing business and realized a price hike was the solution. I say, “Good luck with that, since you’ve already got people used to a far better cost!”

Here is 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Merlot, and 1% Malbec from a family-owned and -operated concern in Prosser, near the eastern end of the Yakima Valley. The actual fruit for this blend hails from reputed regions such as Horse Heaven Hills, Royal Slope, and Red Mountain. A new winemaking team has worked with vineyard managers to update viticultural practices, including a 30% reduction of yields. *AHA!* - that loss of fruit (i.e. money) must account for the new pricing!

This wine, which placed #33 on Wine Enthusiast’s 2022 Top 100 list and received a 94-point rating from the same publication, is delightfully smooth in texture and savory in personality. Yes, there is lovely fruit - but alongside are more “umami” aspects of broth and *nori*. Here is a curl-up-on-the-couch after dinner Cab - if there’s any left after dinner!

28.99 / 26.09 for all wine club members



Pedigree

Yes, we're staying in Washington State AND with the Cabernet varietal for your other January club wine. We've already proclaimed our appreciation for Washington's provision of value and delicious differentness, and lots of you prefer Cabernet - so we think you'll be understanding.

Now, recognize that this Cabernet, while very good, is a little less luxurious and complex than the Matthews. **2020 NINE HATS CABERNET SAUVIGNON** provides vibrant darkness to the eye and "happy" fruit to the nose. The mouth is juicy and "fun" in frame and feel, and dark chocolate tannins appear in the crunchy finish. It's not of the same "stature" as Matthews Cab, nor is it priced the same.

What Nine Hats has is *pedigree*. This is the "second wine" of none other than Long Shadows, a project we have long admired and often featured in our annual Washington State events (the next one happens within a few months). Long Shadows reds are among the best in the state, selling for around \$75 but behaving like Napa Valley wines costing twice as much. Barrels that don't make the cut for Long Shadows varietal bottlings head for the Nine Hats program.

. . . so consider yourself lucky!

21.99 / 19.79 for all members

The Wine Steward's

Wine Adventurer

WINE CLUB

January 2024



Never Say "Never Again!"

Maybe you don't remember, or maybe you never watched the movie (so to speak), but there was a day when all that was coming north from Australia's Barossa Valley was saucy, stewy, soupy, or any other adjective of grotesque-over-the-topness you'd like to apply. For a while there, we were seduced by the sauce. "Bigger is better!" we happily proclaimed . . . before we O.D.-ed on the thick, menthol-y stuff, abruptly crashing to a barfing "never again!" perspective. - Or was I alone on this journey?!

When a vendor dares to bring a Barossa Valley red upstairs these days, he or she had better be wearing protective body armor. If they pour any more of that shit that got me sick way back when, there'll be hell to pay. Well, Lisa was wearing naught but a black dress when showing me this **2021 YALUMBA BUSH VINES GRENACHE**, so confident I'd admire a very alternative Aussie red. Her boldness has been rewarded with not just a placement on our shelves, but a WINE CLUB placement!

Here, Grenache is allowed to be Grenache. That thin-skinned, color-deprived grape which compensates with pretty, kirsch-y charm is happening just as it should. One might say this lovely red is more "Rhone" than "Australian" in size and shape and voice. Cherry and raspberry fruit, vibrant acidity, and wisps of potpourri and - perhaps - tobacco happen with on-the-toes poise. Wines like this remind us to say "Never say 'Never Again'!"

21.49 / 19.34 for Wine Club Members



The Lost Bordeaux Grape . . .

This red has been “clubbed” in previous vintages; a track record directly attributable to SANTA CAROLINA’s ‘Reserva de la Familia’ CARMENÈRE’S consistency as an excellent example of the type.

Carmenère is categorized as a Bordeaux varietal. Ironically, however, it is represented by very little acreage there these days (some say it’s entirely gone, incorrectly). Widely planted before the mid-1800’s phylloxera outbreak, it was not replanted once the lousy pestilence was resolved. Why? It was not a reliable performer. Carmenère was an important component of Bordeaux blends WHEN it ripened, but it did not ripen reliably. A farmer, always a victim of Mother Nature’s whims, must make good bets. The Bordeaux winegrower, with the opportunity of a do-over replanting, omitted fickle Carmenère.

At about the same time, cuttings of this grape variety along with several others were loaded onto ships bound for the New World country of Chile. Apparently some labels blew off/washed off those bundles of sticks, and Carmenère was planted as “Merlot” and identified as such for the next hundred years.

Now, follow me here: Within the Bordeaux family of grapes Merlot is an early ripener; its fruit is ready to declare by early Fall. Carmenere, which has a propensity for “green-ness” in scent and flavor, cannot compensate with fruit flavors until a much later picking. If you’re treating your mis-identified Carmenère as Merlot and picking it early, well, you’re making shitty green wine.

Thank goodness that sometime during the 1990’s an ampelographer correctly identified Chile’s Carmenère vines based on analyzing the shape of its leaves . . . giving the grape the chance of more thoughtful treatment!

Here is the result: An elegant wine displaying both Carmenère’s more savory, “green” aspects along with riper roasted red pepper and plum characteristics. What other wine writers sometimes fail to point out is the varietal’s potential for a smoother mouthfeel than any other so-called Bordeaux player. The seductive silkiness happening in ‘Reserva de la Familia’ is another positive feature of The Lost Bordeaux Grape!

The Wine Steward's
'Here 'n There'

Uncharted Whites

WINE CLUB

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ZING - and More

By now most of you are aware of the Grüner Veltliner varietal, and that it is the most identifiable wine of Austria. We now grow the grape here in California - with pretty darn good results - but there's still nothing quite like Grüner from its original source. Some of the uninitiated see the funky name along with the German-looking bottle shape (called a "hock") and run the other way, assuming they're in for a sweet wine experience. Nope: This vibrant **2022 STADT KREMS** is dry.

Certainly, there is *fruit* to be found here but "fruit" is not the same as "sweetness" - in wine talk. I'm smelling the wine as I write these notes, and would narrow the "fruit" definition down to limes and lemons. Many unoaked wines of the world share these aspects, but Grüner Veltliner is special for its inclusion of white (or is it black?) pepperiness and - some say - a distinctive grain bin or "lentil" effect.

What this wine buyer will declare is, you can do no better than this particular example for the modest price. It has all of the GV-defining features described above, and those happen with bracing levity and refreshment. I have attended special industry tastings where far more expensive examples of the varietal were poured. Were they better? More profound? Yes, but I responsibly say to you that the "returns" diminish the further up the price ladder you go per this grape. Believe me, you're doing just fine right here!

19.99 / 17.99 for all wine club members



MARQUÉS de CÁCERES BRUT - Cava, Spain

We're presenting you with a sparkling wine in January because we kind of forgot to in December, which is a bit of a TWS tradition. Better late than never! Now, bubbles come from many places and at many price levels and qualities, but Cava is special for a few reasons.

95% of Cava is made in the Penedes region of northeastern Spain (Catalonia), near Barcelona. That - for most intents and purposes - comprises the Cava world. Far from there, however, Valencia and Rioja are permitted to make sparkling wine utilizing the "Cava" term. That is confusing, so let's confuse further: This particular producer, a large concern, is based in **Rioja** but this wine is **not** from there. Instead, Marqués de Cáceres chooses to have separate vineyards and a facility for growing and making Cava where it traditionally happens. Let's just say, you're getting the "real" Catalan stuff here. The three traditional grapes are all employed: 50% Xarel-lo, 30% Macabeo, and 20% Parellada.

So what makes Cava special? 1. It is made exactly like France's Champagne, with the second fermentation happening in bottle. This is more inconvenient, but required, and gives you a sparkling wine with a firmer, more "important" feel than - say - Prosecco which happens in great big tanks. 2. It costs a helluva lot less than Champagne. Usually, that is: There are some magnificent higher-end Cavas out there. Cava doesn't have the "cred" of Champagne, which the whole bubble-drinking world craves, and that helps the price. Also, a basic Cava such as this one, while respectably re-fermented in individual bottles, needn't stay in the winery's aging rooms nearly as long. A quicker "spin" is the other money saver.

The low price point and thoughtful-yet-careless brightness happening here encourages the wine lover to consider sparkling wine more often. That's why I appreciate Cava; it's nearly always very good and accommodates a more frequent use of a deserving category: Bubbly!!!

13.99 / 12.59 for all wine club members

The Wine Steward's

“Curious?” Club

WINE CLUB

January 2024



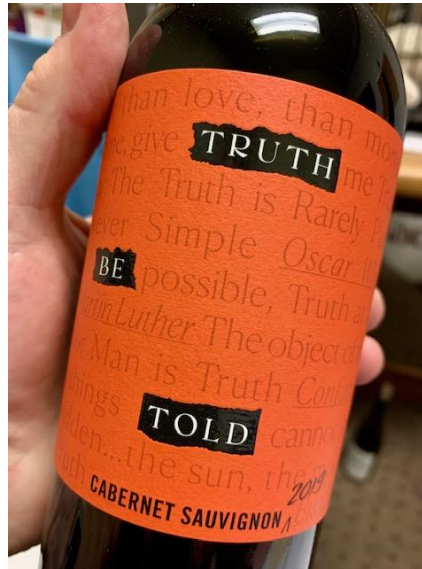
Italian Love

Italian reds tend to be lively, on their toes; middle in weight and big on vibrancy, not ponderousness. Italians certainly understand and appreciate that, but if this powerhouse wine country wants to appeal to the likes of us they'd better amplify a little; give us a little more "love"!

They just did. **2019 FALESCO 'Vitiano'** should appeal to more of you based on what it's made of. Here is a blend of equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Sangiovese. The latter ingredient keeps it "Italian-tasting" with red fruit zest, and / but the scents and palate are darkened by the inclusion of the Bordeaux varieties.

Deep herbal qualities (I attribute those to the Cabernet and Merlot) are joined by black olives, grilled bread, and dark plum. The palate is smooth and rich - for an Italian red at a very decent price. Whether you're having a hamburger or pizza or pasta with red sauce, 'Vitiano' is a great glass of wine you don't need to ponder. "Satisfaction" is its basic provision!!

13.99 / 12.59 for all wine club members



2019 TRUTH be TOLD CABERNET SAUVIGNON . . .

We take you once again to Washington State, from which we enjoy a higher rate of success for value than from just about anywhere else - especially when it comes to darker, New World-style wines.

Let me expand on that by identifying another source of inexpensiveness when it comes to reds: Lodi. I taste a lot of value wines merely identified as “California” and know IMMEDIATELY - even with the first furtive sniff - that the wine is Lodi-based. This could be a personal objection - because wine tasting is subjective, of course - but more often than not the Lodi red wine experience (on the low-price end) delivers soupy/stewy, stomach-turning green-ness and simultaneous red-ness; a roller coaster ride of disagreeing smells and flavors. Cheap Lodi reds have lawn mower bag implications . . . Not for me.

Washington State, another provider of low-priced (as well as trophy level) reds, simply does better. The wines agree with themselves. This does. 88% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Merlot, and 6% Malbec join forces to provide ripe berries, plums, licorice, tobacco, and wet stone. As many descriptors as you’re reading there, they all smell and taste and feel “right”. How cooperative!

(Or maybe it’s just me!)

16.99 / 15.29 for all members