

The Wine Steward's

The COLLECTOR

WINE CLUB

March 2024



A Vintage that Does No Wrong

While I can't elaborate on a producer we've never shown you before (and had never heard of before), I **will declare with confidence** that you're in very good hands with the provision of this Cabernet. First of all, WE tasted it and said, "Yep!" Getting a little more specific, the "Yep!" was the affirmation of wine we thought you'd all like sooner than later. I'd call this a "drink now and for the next 7 years" Cab.

Let's bolster your esteem of this with my identification of its purveyor. The broker representative who showed me Cardano Cabernet is one of three such people who have worked with us since we opened in 1999. All else have moved on. Steve is trusted, and represents a book consisting of Napa's most famous and hard-to-get wines such as Scarecrow and Realm and, and, and... - And he also showed and sold us this month's other club wine, the Hudson 'Phonix'. Take it from me: We're in good company!

This Atlas Peak-derived blend of 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 12% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Merlot is a shoe-in for one more reason: It's a 2019. It may well be that a Cardano Cabernet from some other vintage might not have cut the club "mustard," had I ever tasted any other. No matter: 2019 Cardano is – without knowing much more – a product of its delicious vintage. In one wine I smell the truth of Cab, the extra-ness of a mountain appellation (something ethereal above the fruit) and the delicious darkness of a vintage that can do no wrong. This is appealing wine – I'll bet!

39.99 / 35.99 for all wine club members



From the Ashes – and Avoiding the Smoke!

2020 HUDSON PHOENIX hail from one of three of the most venerably-important vineyards in Southern Napa’s Carneros region. I count those as the Truchard, Hyde, and Hudson Vineyards. The eponymously-labeled bottle before you implies this hails from the latter.

So famous is this placename that wines sourced from here would typically cost beyond the budget we try to stick to for your club. Sought-for producers Kistler and Kongsgaard both access Hudson fruit and charge a pretty penny for the results. This particular “Phoenix” blend of 64% Merlot, 18% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 18% Cabernet Franc typically sells for \$85, making it that special kind of red landing partner-less in a rare one-bottle wine club month (we do that about once each year).

But no: You get two bottles again this month, and why? We got a very “adjusted” wholesale price on this, no doubt due to the stigma of the 2020 vintage. While anyone tasting this beautiful red will agree it totally avoids “smoke taint,” this bottling normally destined for the wine lists of great restaurants encountered many refusals. Even the fine dining establishments where great wine is curated by trusted sommeliers played it safe by largely keeping 2020’s off their lists.

The Wine Steward – and you – win. We’re able to access a world class red at an unthinkable price and so, thereby, are you. Carneros produces the most provocatively elegant Merlot in the Napa Valley, on which this “Right Bank” Bordeaux-style blend is based. That happens gloriously in this deeply-scented, seductively-textured red we have no hesitations about bringing to you valued members!!

61.99/ 55.79 for all wine club members

The Wine Steward's

World Class

WINE CLUB

March 2024



Remember 'il Fauno'?

This is the “brother wine” to a red which has more often visited your club, Tenuta di Arceno’s ‘il Fauno’ red from Tuscany. While grown and produced within that location’s famous Chianti Classico subregion, it cannot utilize that moniker. Why? Because ‘il Fauno’ is a blend of Bordeaux grape varieties, completely omitting Tuscany’s driving force Sangiovese.

This month we bring you **Tenuta di Arceno Chianti Classico Riserva** from the renowned 2019 vintage. THIS qualifies for the familiar appendage by virtue of including 90% Sangiovese. The other 10% is Cabernet Sauvignon, a permitted addition. What might other Chiantis employ as “spice rack” amendments? While Merlot and Cab can happen, some producers call themselves more “traditional” by applying drips and drabs of native Colorino and/or Canailolo, or easy-to-pronounce Cilieggiolo.

In the case of this wine, we enjoy more darkness of color and fruit due to Cabernet’s augmentation of typically red-fruited Sangiovese. – But THIS vintage’s Sangioveses – even the 100% renditions – are naturally darker. Mother Nature did that to Tuscany in 2019!

Enjoy this with a good ribeye or – as tradition dictates – *Bistecca alla Fiorentina!*

41.99 / 37.79 for Wine Club Members



Montalcino Mellowness

In the notes above we noted the goodness of Tuscany's 2019 vintage. You could also throw darts – blindfolded - at a broad representation of 2020's and not hit a bad one. These are great back-to-back vintages for the type.

We take you a little south of Tuscany's Chianti Classico region to the hill town of Montalcino, where the surrounding vineyards are largely inhabited by the *Sangiovese Grosso* clone of the famous grape producing vibrantly red-fruited wines of a “middleweight” size. Inasmuch as Sangiovese never packs the punch of – say - Petite Sirah or Cabernet, the famous Brunello di Montalcino wine is the “biggest” expression thereof. These are the “linebackers” of the Sangiovese team; significantly-sized yet agile, packing a punch!

This is that wine's little brother, **2020 Capanna Rosso di Montalcino**. Yes, Capanna makes venerable Brunello, and while that bottling has the advantage of aging longer and providing more **mass** it also costs more and is less affable in its youth. “Rosso,” a 100% Sangiovese coming from the producer's younger vines and seeing less time in oak, provides value and “ready-to-drink-ness.”

Sangiovese's intrinsic cherry and redcurrant flavors are prettified by rose petals, and nicely complicated with an herbal / bark element. The palate is juicy and enlivening, causing hunger-inducing salivation. This is a beautiful red to enjoy as soon as you'd like – as long as a plateful of protein is happening nearby!

33.99 / 30.59 for Wine Club Members

The Wine Steward's

Pacific Coast

WINE CLUB

March 2024



Exceptional

Last month's notes described our growing confidence in the provisions of Paso Robles, where producers are nowadays conquering the challenges of the region's heat. Making a big red from there is never a problem. Making a big red that knows when to behave with restraint (unlike my border collie puppy, much of the time) is the trick. Making a red that's not so big, but more medium in size yet soulful in effect? THAT'S even harder . . . and it happens here.

2020 CHERRY HOUSE RED WINE is the second label red of Villa Creek. Like Tablas Creek, Adelaida, and a handful of other Paso Robles producers who manage to reference “restraint” in many of their offerings, Villa Creek has also mastered the art. Winemaker / Proprietor Cris Cherry employs 50% Grenache, 40% Carignan, and 10% Mourvèdre – plus the marine sedimentary soils of certain Paso plots – to deliver a refreshingly “underdone” yet characterful red.

Cherry House, in nose and mouth, brings to mind fruits that are lively and “red” in character such as, well, CHERRIES as well as raspberries and cranberries. That latter descriptor covers not just the flavor but the nervy, nearly-bitter (in a good, enlivening way) texture exciting your palate. This is as much “food wine,” *a la* something you might find in France's Languedoc, as it is a stand-alone drink. Its usage depends very much on your palate and tolerance for reds with good acid/tannin structure. I can easily enjoy it on its own but would prefer to apply rich grilled meats or barbecue!

22.49 / 20.24 for all wine club members



Sonoma County Speaks

2021 VALRAVN CABERNET SAUVIGNON represents a certain kind of “culmination” that’s personal to me but may mean nothing to you - yet. I’m a longtime fan of what the people making this wine do in general, and I like those people personally, BUT some of what they put out – however good – is simply not a good fit for The Wine Steward. The Valravn Folks (who also bottle under other label names with similar styling) would rather give you a more honestly slender red than one that’s overdone with alcoholic jammy-ness. Sometimes erring on the side of the former type makes for a wine fewer of you would want, as commendable as that pursuit of balance might be. My hesitation *per* some of their offerings has been especially true for their Cabernet over the years. I believe we’ve put Valravn Cab on our shelf only twice over the many years it’s been made.

Here is (I hope!) is a meeting of minds – rather, palates – between theirs and yours. This 2021 should satisfy you Cabernet lovers with its blackcurrant fruit power and tannic guts, yet it complies with “house style” with HONEST Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon character of alternative-to-fruit qualities like earth, herb, bittersweet chocolate, and dry-cured black olives. While amply-sized, it is properly “framed” with meat-preferring acidity.

It is truthfully delicious, complex Cabernet Sauvignon. We hope you notice!

22.69 / 20.42 for all members

The Wine Steward's

Wine Adventurer

WINE CLUB

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Slam Dunk

This Southern Rhone red, **2022 Côtes-du-Rhône by Saint Cosme** (pronounced “comb”), is always a dependable drink. One of its local fans is a friend and great customer who drinks wines typically costing far more, yet an upcoming fundraiser event to which he is donating will feature MAGNUMS of this very wine; a very smart buy.

The actual Saint Cosme winery resides in the village of Gigondas, nearly as famous as Chateauneuf-du-Pape and a mere catapulted stone’s throw from that slightly more famous neighbor. They produce several Gigondas bottlings and venture out as well. Louis Barruol adeptly handles grapes from many a Rhône subregion including several in the Northern Rhône such as Condrieu and Côte Rôtie. He also collaborates with Importer Kermit Lynch on a few projects, and even heads to upstate New York to help with one of my favorite Riesling from there.

. . . But back to this “dependable drink,” a humbly-termed “Côtes-du-Rhône” made from Southern Rhône fruit - which will have the European wine student assuming it’s based on Grenache and might include additions of Syrah and Mourvèdre. That’s an educated yet incorrect assumption. While not without the kirsch-y charm of a Grenache-based wine, this red employs NO Grenache. Rather, a dark and emphatically-fruited bottle of thoughtful pleasure was made entirely with SYRAH. Go figure!!

20.99 / 18.89 for club members



Languedoc with a Lesson

“Mas” is the southern French term for “farm” or “farmhouse”; a fitting term for an honest Languedoc red that’s dependable yet avoids putting on airs. **Domaine Cavel’s ‘Le Mas’** is a blend of 40% Syrah, 35% Grenache, and 25% Mourvèdre which never saw the embellishment of barrel aging. Six months in concrete vats was its pre-bottling resting place, a venue meant to preserve and focus on the elements of place and fruit.

If you smell it immediately upon uncorking and pouring, you’re bound to experience the factor of **reduction**. I’ve spoken of this with respect to previous submissions. A red behaves in a “reduced” way (with connotations of smoky/poopy-ness) when it was aged with a minimum of oxidation. Choosing those large-format, air-impermeable concrete vats over more porous oak is the INTENTIONAL cause.

“What? That’s INTENTIONAL?? Why would I want poopy wine??”

Yes, you do want poopy wine. – As long as that less-attractive element blows off to something the producer wanted to preserve for you. You see, reductive (less oxidative) winemaking keeps fruitiness effective longer. The only downer is the first whiff which may be misunderstood. Believe you me: Several of our actual wine vendors know less about reduction than you now do, having read these notes.

At any rate, I poured this for my note writing, then had to abandon my sniffing and sipping for a brief tasting appointment. I have returned to my glass to discover – as expected – a very pretty red sporting red fruits and wind-delivered dried herbs; medium bodied and lush and crunchy; ready to provide relief to rich meats from the grill. ‘Nuff said!

The Wine Steward's
'Here 'n There'

Uncharted Whites

WINE CLUB

March 2024



From the Birthplace of the Grape

I can't tell you exactly when it happened, but I can tell you it happened HERE:

Some attentive farmer was reviewing a nearly-ripe Grenache crop row after row and suddenly stopped, eyes widening and taking note: A vine expected to be sporting red grapes was remarkably featuring white clusters thereof: A rare mutation had just occurred. The little vine's output no doubt landed in that year's red wine project but, more significantly, it was identified and sourced for cuttings for future propagation, i.e. more vines: Grenache Blanc was born.

Or shouldn't we say, "Garnatxa Blanca"? The label for this wine does, as that spelling is accurate per the place where the mutation originated. We are in Catalunya, Spain. More specifically, we are southwest of Barcelona by a two-hour car drive, and just south of world famous Priorat. I STILL haven't identified the precise location, so here goes: TERRA ALTA, which you should henceforth remember to be the birthplace of Grenache Blanc (oops). Now - of course - France grows it. So does California and so on, but it started HERE.

White tree fruits and a rumor of resin, with a palate that's soft and clean, are your rewards for being a great wine student and patient reader!!

18.49 / 16.64 for all wine club members



PINOT GRIGIO versus VERMENTINO

With this presentation of **2022 Argiolas ‘Costamolino’ Vermentino** I’m officializing a concept that’s been rolling around this wine seller’s head for many years now. May I please suggest that Italy’s Pinot Grigio varietal is a bit like Vodka, in that it is usually meant to appeal to casual consumers by tasting “less” than “more”. Higher-end Pinot Grigio examples aside, that wine pleases the peeps by remaining comfortably conventional with “barely there” white fruit flavors. It is *safe*.

Vermentino, on the other hand, is the “Gin” of Italian wines. It’s noisier, with a louder voice of vivacious herbs and green melon qualities. Vermentino is an *overstatement* demanding to be heard, yet still making the crowd happy *via* its recognizable scents and flavors. Pinot Grigio, like Vodka, pleases by saying less. Vermentino, *a la* Gin, happifies with its lovely, abundant noise.

Vermentino, like Pinot Grigio, gets a lot of play in Mediterranean vineyards. In Provence, France it assumes the name of “Rolle” and appears as a nervy contributor to many a dry rosé. On the Italian mainland it might assume other names, but Tuscany’s “Vermentino” is a worthy reply to that of Sardegna.

This island, well off the coast, does Vermentino best by my read. You’re trying it from a producer who has arguably done the most to make this wine place known. ‘Costamolino’ is the entry-level no-oak example by this Sardegna caretaker, and you can buy up a little to acquire their top-notch example ‘IS’.

Introvert or Extrovert? Vermentino is the latter, in an accommodating way!

18.49 / 16.64 for all wine club members

The Wine Steward's

“Curious?” Club

WINE CLUB

March 2024



An Important Blending Grape, Isolated

2021 RIO MADRE RIOJA is a very good wine AND a rare, important lesson on what the Graciano variety contributes to wines of this famous Spanish location. Yes, “Rioja” is the PLACE where the reds are generally based on Spain’s noble grape Tempranillo. Graciano, a Rioja native, might be blended in; to the tune of five or ten percent. Here, for your edification and (hopefully) satisfaction is a rare isolation of Graciano. As an aside: You may as well get to know the type as we’re now growing it in several California locations!

As a late-ripening variety, Graciano doesn’t always perform well in Rioja’s northerly “Alta” and “Alavesa” subregions. That’s okay when you’re adding just 5% to your Tempranillo; the grape’s contribution of darkness and green-ness is actually a good fit in that small amount. Making an all-Graciano wine such as Rio Madre has the producer hedging his bets by heading to a warmer and more southerly section of Rioja, “Rioja Oriental,” previously known as “Rioja Baja.”

Daunting in its glowing purple-black color, Rio Madre’s nose implies charcoal, cassis, potting shed, and woodsmoke. The palate is medium-full, with tannins made bearable by concentrated plum sauce. This is a red demanding your attention – and labor in the kitchen!

14.99 / 13.49 for all wine club members



The Rioja you were Anticipating

Faustino is an “Old Guard” producer in Rioja, Spain. If you were to see the classically-designed labels of their other bottlings you’d get it: This winery has been around for a while. Most of their Reservas and Gran Reservas are meant to cellar for quite a while; sometimes for decades, not just years. We famously hosted an event some time ago where Faustinos up to forty years old were uncorked and admired for their remarkable freshness.

THIS bottle, obviously, sports a more modern look. Let’s just say you’re safely in the hands of a venerable producer who always honors Rioja’s Tempranillo grape, but that in this case you’re trying their entry-level offering not intended to amaze but to simply satisfy. Faustino wants this happier, less-significant “Tuesday Night Red” to look a little distanced from their up-a-notch line of reds, label-wise.

So, approach this Tempranillo accordingly. Don’t scrutinize a small pour of it. Enjoy a full GLASS of it. Think of it as an alternative to a good, inexpensive Chianti and you will be satisfied. Cherries and plums and the background warmth of subtle oak flavors will all add up to a damn good drink from a producer who knows a thing or two about providing satisfaction!

14.99 / 13.49 for all members