



It has become a bit of a habit to begin the new year with wines from Italy. This happens because one of my favorite Italian importers, Small Vineyards, has a fall shipment that includes many of their best, small production wines. This month we have a real treat, as both selections come from top winemakers and the soon-to-be-legendary 2015 vintage. Call it the “perfect storm” of ideal growing conditions and two men’s technical skill.

2015 Perazzeta Mercurio (\$16)

It seems impossible, but it has been almost four years since I last featured a wine from Alessandro Bocci, the dynamic owner/winemaker of Perazzeta. For several years I could have been accused of featuring them too often, but no one ever did. When you drink this wine you will understand why this egregious error must finally be corrected.

Perazzeta is not an old estate. Unlike many properties in Tuscany with storied, multi-generational history, Alessandro only started buying land in and around Montalcino twenty years ago. He is a passionate grape grower who is so fanatical that he sells off more than half his production every year because it doesn't meet his standards. His importer has told me that you would not believe the people who line up to buy his grapes, but confidentiality contracts prohibit his disclosure. All of his vineyards are farmed using organic methods and he walks the vines daily to analyze their progress.

Bocci owns vineyards in two areas, the Maremma, where the grapes for this wine are grown, and a small holding where the winery is located in Montenero d’Orcia, near Montalcino. Mercurio, named for the Roman god of speed, is a “Super Tuscan” which means it is made using a combination of traditional and international varieties. For this wine, Alessandro uses a combination of 50% Sangiovese, 30% Cabernet Franc and 20% Alicante Bouchet. In the Maremma, Sangiovese can produce thin, vegetal wines unless kept in check with diligent vineyard work, which of course he does. The Alicante Bouchet contributes a lot of color and aroma, as well as tannins. Cabernet Franc provides aroma, rounds out the mid-palate and also softens the harshness of the Alicante. The wine is fermented and aged only in stainless steel tanks, which preserves freshness and color.

While Chianti and Montalcino may have a more established reputation of winemaking than Maremma, this area was the original home of the Etruscans, one of the oldest civilizations in human history. The Etruscans are credited as the first culture to train vines up trees to increase the quality and quantity of the fruit they harvested. Later the region became better known for cattle, with the low marshy expanse providing a rich grazing land for the famous Maremmana breed. Under fascist leadership in the 1930’s, the swampy region was drained and soon became populated with immigrants from the Veneto, who brought with them the knowledge of growing grapes in rich, fertile soils. Since the mid-1980's the area has become a hot-bed for new producers, many of whom produce a more international style wine that is typical of Tuscany. This is what gave rise to the “Super Tuscan” whose origin began in the southern Maremma district of Grosseto, not in Chianti.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for thirty minutes to allow the bouquet to develop and the tannins to soften. The Alicante Bouchet gives this wine a surprisingly deep color, and once you give your glass a swirl you will see the thick, purple-stained tears roll to the bottom. Swirl again and take in the rich notes of fresh muddled black raspberries, mixed with red rose petals and chopped black rhubarb. Bocci shows his deft skill by managing the aggressive tannins of Alicante, as this wine reveals itself in soft layers that go on surprisingly long for such an inexpensive wine. Drink over the next two to three years with a bowl of pasta Bolognese or wood fired pizza with roasted red peppers and mushrooms.

2015 La Quercia Tesora Rosso (\$20)

I am not sure what heaven will look like, but I have an idea that it will bear a striking similarity to Antonio Lamona’s La Quercia. Located on a wind swept hilltop in Abruzzo, this estate is a nearly self-reliant farm that is an hour’s drive from the nearest medium size town. With thirty acres of vines, and ten acres of olive trees, it is an idyllic spot with a view of the Adriatic Ocean located only a few miles away.

While it is tempting to call this estate rustic, there are many elements to La Quercia that are very modern. Lamona’s family has farmed this region for centuries, but he is the first to bottle wine under his own label. His father’s generation and earlier sold the grapes to the local cooperative who created a wine blend from all the growers in the area. Starting in the late 1960’s, Antonio began farming his entire estate using organic procedures, which even today is very rare. While not certified organic, it has been more than 40 years since he applied any

Club members receive a 10% discount on all purchases, 15% off mixed 12-bottle cases, and 20% off a 12-bottle, solid case purchase of weekly and club features

man made chemicals on his vineyard, olive trees, garden or pasture land. He practices the same non-interventionist farming in the vineyard he purchased in nearby Puglia. It is from those vines that he creates his newest creation, Tesora.

This is an unusual wine for the region, and a combination of grapes rarely blended. To make Tesora, Lamona uses a combination of 50% Montepulciano, 40% Primitivo and 10% Aglianico. Like Mercurio, each component plays a vital role in the harmony of the final wine. In this case, the Montepulciano contributes body and texture; Primitivo adds spice and power; Aglianico lends color and tannin to the final blend. To build additional dimension, Lamona dries a portion of the Primitivo grapes, like they do to produce Amarone. This imbues the wine with a richness, and density of fruit, that pokes out like an element of dried dates and figs in the nose. I often find the wines from Puglia to be a bit dense and alcoholic, but here is an example that manages to show power, and finesse, at the same time.

You will want to make sure you decant this wine for up to an hour before serving. Then when you pour a glass the bouquet will hit you with a combination of ripe, almost stewed red cherries, fresh black figs, Maduro cigar tobacco and red licorice. In the mouth this wine is quite big to start, with firm but well integrated acidity and tannins. As with all the wines of Puglia, this wine has a lot of fruit and good length. This bottling is very versatile, working with richer pasta dishes or with braised meats, such as pot roast or lamb shanks. Drink over the next three to five years.

Pasta Bolognese

In my opinion there is no better comfort food than a slow simmered, Sunday evening bowl of Pasta Bolognese. The trouble is, to make properly it takes hours, and how often do you have time. This version cuts down on the preparation time, but not the depth of flavor or silky texture. There are a couple of unusual steps, like adding a small amount of baking soda to the ground meat, that make all the difference. (This technique also works really well for chili too.) This recipe works exceptionally well with both wines this month.

1 pound 93 percent lean ground beef
2 tablespoons water
¼ teaspoon baking soda
Salt and pepper
4 cups beef broth
6 ounces pancetta, chopped coarse
1 onion, chopped coarse
1 large carrot, peeled and chopped coarse
1 celery rib, chopped coarse
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons tomato paste
1 cup dry red wine
1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup),
plus extra for serving
1 pound tagliatelle

1. Toss beef with water, baking soda, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper in bowl until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

2. While beef sits, bring broth to boil over high heat in large pot (this pot will be used to cook pasta in step 6) and cook until reduced to 2 cups, about 15 minutes; set aside.

3. Pulse pancetta in food processor until finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses. Add onion, carrot, and celery and pulse until vegetables are finely chopped and mixture has paste-like consistency, 12 to 15 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

4. Heat butter and oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. When foaming subsides, add pancetta-vegetable mixture and 1/4 teaspoon pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated, about 8 minutes. Spread mixture in even layer in bottom of pot and continue to cook, stirring every couple of minutes, until very dark browned bits form on bottom of pot, 7 to 12 minutes

longer. Stir in tomato paste and cook until paste is rust-colored and bottom of pot is dark brown, 1 to 2 minutes.

5. Reduce heat to medium, add beef, and cook, using wooden spoon to break meat into pieces no larger than 1/4 inch, until beef has just lost its raw pink color, 4 to 7 minutes. Stir in wine, scraping up any browned bits, and bring to simmer. Cook until wine has evaporated and sauce has thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in broth and Parmesan. Return sauce to simmer; cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer for 30 minutes (sauce will look thin). Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper to taste.

6. Rinse pot that held broth. While sauce simmers, bring 4 quarts water to boil in now-empty pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Reserve 1/4 cup cooking water, then drain pasta. Add pasta to pot with sauce and toss to combine. Adjust sauce consistency with reserved cooking water as needed. Transfer to platter or individual bowls and serve, passing extra Parmesan separately.

Club members receive a 10% discount on all purchases, 15% off mixed 12-bottle cases, and 20% off a 12-bottle, solid case purchase of weekly and club features