



## 2016 De Wetshof Chardonnay “Limestone Hill” (\$18)

As a general principle, I only enjoy Chardonnay that is made without wood if the vines grow in limestone. It is because Chardonnay grown in most places in the world is bland, and the use of oak in fermenting, and/or aging, is what builds dimension in the final wine. The exception to this is when Chardonnay is grown in limestone soils. Then it develops a character that is interesting and unique. My selection for this month is a rare example from South Africa that is grown only in, as the name implies, limestone.

What I learned while traveling in South Africa is that limestone is a very rare soil type in their wine lands. Most of the soils of South Africa are variations of a series called Table Mountain sandstone. It is a mineral laden soil created by the weathering of one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world. Limestone exists because 180 million years ago a portion of what is now the Indian Ocean was trapped between rising ranges that formed the coastal mountains, known as the Cape Folds, and the Great Escarpment. This is the high plateau that creates the savannah of the southern half of the continent. For almost 100 million years the creatures of this trapped inland sea lived and died, and their calcium rich shells settled on the bottom. Pressure from the water compressed them, and when the region drained a few million years ago, left behind is a thick layer of limestone. This is the soil where the grapes for this wine, cryptically named Limestone Hill, are planted.

During my days in the country I visited with producers in several regions. The final appointment was with the wineries of Robertson. Many of the producers in the region are large, very commercial operations as the climate is warm and the soil is quite fertile. The only winery which caught my attention is De Wetshof, who craft a whole line of Chardonnays that are absolutely amazing. Even more interesting, or perhaps salacious, is how the De Wet family, ended up in Robertson.

The first De Wet to arrive in South Africa was Jacobus, in 1693, as an official of the Dutch East India Company. He was favored by the then governor, Simon van der Stell, and appointed as cellar master for his wine estate. There are rumors, still denied today by the family, that he was Simon's illegitimate son. Although impossible to prove it would explain why someone from Holland, with no winemaking experience, would be appointed to such a prominent position. Jacobus himself sired an illegitimate child with Josina Pretorius, and although he never married her, she had the boy christened as a De Wet. All of the current family members trace their lineage back to him. 150 years later in the mid-1700's, the family were prosperous farmers in Brandvlei, a valley northeast of Stellenbosch. Then Daniel de Wet (not the current owner) scandalized the family, running off with his older brother's fiancé. To escape the somewhat understandable wrath of his older brother, Daniel, now known in his family as Daniel the Dastard, and his new wife settled on a remote farm called Retreat on the outskirts of the Robertson District. It is from this family that we have the current day De Wets who produce this wine.

Despite their early entry into the wine business, the current owner Danie De Wet did not found this winery until 1949. Today he and his sons, Johann & Peter farm almost 1600 acres of land, 430 of which are planted to vines. The Robertson region is blessed with ample rainfall most years and they receive cooling breezes from the Agulhas Coast located to their south. The days are typically quite warm, but by late afternoon things cool off and the nights can be quite cold. The extreme diurnal temperature swings allow the De Wets to grow white and red varieties, with the grapes reaching full ripeness while retaining great natural acidity. They do produce a complete line of reds and whites, although their American importer focuses only on their Chardonnays.

When you open this wine you will want to decant it for a few minutes. If you take this extra step, even for a white, you will be rewarded with an exotic nose of dried apricot, persimmon, brown butter, creamed corn and baked Gala apples. In the mouth this wine gives a brief impression of richness, then is quickly framed by a keen edge of minerality, with a briny quality not unlike the sensation of slurping an oyster, without the bivalve flavor. Drink this wine with a simple broiled cod with composed butter of shallot and chive, or lemon risotto with seared scallops.

## 2014 Lafage Tessellae Carignan “Old Vines” (\$16)

For this expression of terroir we will return to the old world, where this quality is most apparent, and examine a fantastic red made by one of France's most dynamic winemakers, Jean-Marc Lafage, along with his wife Elaine. They farm a large property, 160 acres, with the main vineyard lying south of the city of Perpignan. From this location, at an elevation of roughly 800 feet above sea level, in soils rich in schist, they produce a collection of wines from old vines, primarily Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre and in the case of Tessellae, Carignan.

Unlike limestone, which is a sedimentary soil, schist is a metamorphic rock. This means it began as one type of soil, in this case clay, and over millions of years under pressure it changed to schist. The clay was formed over 480 million years ago as a sedimentary soil. Over time the tectonic plates moved back and forth over the clay, squeezing out the moisture and at the same time, bending and folding the rock. As the Pyrenees Mountains formed, 20-80 million years ago, this stone was then pushed up and exposed to the elements. It has very poor water retaining capability and is therefore a great medium for grape vines, who's roots will reach deep to the bedrock in search of moisture. Although it is often described as contributing a “peppery” quality to wine, I believe this has more to do with the grape type. To me, schist displays a very subtle flavor similar to holding nail heads in your mouth while working on a carpentry project. The subtle notes of Carignan are the perfect variety in which to see this phenomenon.

The Carignan variety enjoys a bit of a checkered past in the history of French wine. After WWII many growers replanted their neglected vineyards with this variety because it is relatively high yielding and ripens easily. Keep in mind that most growers at the time sold all their grapes to local cooperatives, who produced very generic red wines, often described as “plonk.” By the 1980’s there was a glut of cheap wine in the European market, called the “wine lake” and in France the vast vineyards of Carignan planted along the Mediterranean were labeled as the culprit. It did not help that wines made from Carignan are best when the vines are really old, and most planted along the Mediterranean were only 20-30 years of age. One of the early challenges of the European Common Market was to solve this problem, and curb the over-production of many French, Italian and Spanish wine regions. One approach was to limit the amount of Carignan that could be used in appellation specific wines, limiting it’s value to quality conscious growers, or simply paying mass producers to rip the vine out. There were a few stalwarts who saw the value in old vine Carignan, and today they produce some of the regions most dramatic wines. When Jean-Marc and Elaine purchased this estate he did so because of the old vines and today produces this stunning example.

When you open this wine, please decant it for at least a half hour before serving, and don’t be afraid to give it a light chill. Once you do it gives you a thick nose of strawberry jam, dried dark cherries, red licorice, rose petals and a bit of dried thyme and lavender. In the mouth this wine has a big sense of fruit, framed by moderate tannins and relatively low acidity. Close your eyes when you take a sip and you may see the subtle nail-head quality that I associate with schist soils. Drink this wine over the next two to three years with seared pork tenderloin with an orange/sage pan sauce or these killer chili meatballs.

### Rice Salad with Peas and Mushrooms

Although this is really a side dish, the combination of flavors is really dynamite with the De Wetshof Chardonnay. Just serve this with a seared chicken breast or piece salmon to complete the pairing.

#### Salt

- 1 cup long-grain rice**
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil**
- 4 ounces shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and sliced thin**
- 1 cup frozen peas**
- 3 ounces snow peas (about 1 cup), trimmed and halved**
- 2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger**
- 1 clove garlic, minced**
- 3 tablespoons rice vinegar**
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil**
- 1 tablespoon honey**

Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add 2 1/2 teaspoons salt and rice to boiling water and cook, uncovered, until tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Drain rice and spread on rimmed baking sheet to cool completely.

2. Heat vegetable oil in large skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Cook mushrooms, covered, until softened, about 2 minutes. Remove lid, add peas, and cook until peas are bright green, about 2 minutes. Add ginger and garlic and cook about 30 seconds. Off heat, stir in vinegar, sesame oil, and honey. Pour mushroom mixture over cooled rice and toss until combined. Season with salt. Serve. (Salad can be refrigerated for 1 day. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

- 1 tablespoon cumin**
- 1 teaspoon each: ancho chili powder, ground coriander, sweet paprika**
- 1/4 teaspoon each: chipotle powder, hot smoked paprika**
- 4 cloves garlic coarsely chopped**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil**
- 1 pound ground beef**
- flour as needed for dredging**  
(optional, but flour helps to make satisfying crust)
- vegetable oil as needed for pan frying**

### Michael Ruhlman’s Chili Meatballs

I am a big fan of Michael Ruhlman, a food writer who has penned several good books including **The Soul of a Chef: The Pursuit of Perfection** and **Charcuterie: The Craft of Salting, Smoking and Curing by Michael Ruhlman and Brian Polcyn**. He also writes a very interesting blog, [ruhlman.com](http://ruhlman.com), where he posts recipes, often of spontaneous dishes he creates. I found this one a few weeks ago and it has quickly become a favorite. He serves these with buttered pasta, avocado and broccoli but I like them by themselves, and with black beans and rice.

1. Combine everything but the meat and vegetable oil in a small sauté pan over high heat, stirring. When the spice-oil is bubbling, the spices are mixed, and the garlic is tender, remove from the

heat. Put the bottom of the pan in cold water to cool the spices. Add the mixture to the meat and mix by hand till the spices are thoroughly combined. Then shape the meat into 16 balls, more or less as you wish.

2. Put about a cup of flour into a plastic ziploc bag, if you’re doing this step. Put the meatballs in the bag, seal the bag and turn the balls over until they’re coated with flour.

3. Heat a quarter inch of oil in a saute pan, medium high heat should do. When the oil is hot, add the meatballs and cook till they’re medium-rare to medium, three to five minutes depending on their size. Drain on paper towel.

4. Serve on pasta tossed with garlic and oil, top with avocado if using, along with cooked buttered broccoli. If making these to serve on their own, put out a bowl of harissa and/our sour cream; for more color garnish with thinly sliced scallion. Serves 4, but the recipe is easily doubled.