



April, 2017



Last month, we examined wines from two properties that began as row crop farmers and added grapes to their repertoire. This month, the selections are from men who established themselves in high profile businesses, and transitioned to become gentleman farmers making wine.

My first selection for this month, and a fantastic selection for traditional Easter fare, is the **2015 Ron Rubin Pinot Noir "Russian River" (\$25)**. For Ron, his love affair with wine goes back four decades, when he took winemaking classes at UC Davis while earning his college degree in finance from that institution. Then came working for his family's business, Central Wholesale Liquor Co. in Illinois for 22 years. In 1994 he changed course and purchased a 2 year-old company from Mel and Patricia Ziegler, also the founders of Banana Republic clothing, called The Republic of Tea.

From the beginning, Ron looked at the tea business from a different angle. At that time his competitors were big tea companies such as Lipton, and their packaging and product quality were not very exciting. By raising the quality, and offering his tea in dramatic packages with great back stories, Republic of Tea carved out a niche in the 11.5 billion dollar US market. Still, his love for wine never faded and in 2011 he purchased the River Road winery in the Russian River of Sonoma County.

The winery lies in a sub-AVA of the Russian River, called Green Valley. The sub-AVA lies on the eastern edge of the Russian River AVA, between the towns of Occidental, Sebastapol and Forestville. Green River is very unusual because it is the coolest and foggiest climate in the Russian River. It is also home to one of the most unusual soil series, Goldridge. This unique, gold-hued soil was formed three to five million years ago when the Green Valley was a shallow inland sea. Thanks to the shifting of the tectonic plates, the area slowly tilted and drained into the ocean. It left behind a nearly perfect combination of decomposed sand stone and clay, the perfect medium for grapevines. Due to the regions cooler climate, the dominant grapes of Green Valley are Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

When Rubin purchased the property it was already home to the River Road winery. Many years ago we used to buy the wines direct from the Mills family, who owned the estate since the late 1970s. The River Road wines are now made from purchased grapes while the Ron Rubin wines are primarily estate grown. With the acquisition, Ron also retained winemaker Joe Freeman. Coincidentally, Freeman got his first assistant winemaker gig at Taft Street winery, a customer crush facility that produced the early River Road wines. In the early part of my career I worked for a store that also bought the Taft Street wines direct.

For those of you who do not live and breathe the harvest reports of California, 2015 is another in an excellent string of vintages. The only difference between 2015 and the high quality years from 2012-2016 is that during the flowering period there was some rain. The precipitation damaged some of the flowers and as a result the crop, while very good quality, is exceptionally small. This is consistent with all the varieties in 2015, and one of the reasons for the severe shortage of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in this vintage.

To make this wine, the fruit comes from their estate vineyards as well as those purchased from neighboring sites. Freeman de-stems the grapes and does a pre-ferment cold soak for five days. During this time, they also punch down the cap of grape skins to extract as much color as possible. Once the fermentation is complete the wine is pressed to French oak barrels, where it is aged for 8 months, with 15% of the barrels being new.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for half an hour before serving. Because it is bottled under screw cap it is a bit restrained when first opened. Once you do, it delivers a bright nose of fresh cut strawberries, raspberries, Thai basil, candied orange peel, and a little black tea. On the palate, it is quite bright and charming, with a good sense of fruit, firm acidity, moderate tannins and plenty of length. Serve this wine with grilled pork tenderloins, ham, or grilled salmon.

My second selection, the **2015 B.R. Cohn Cabernet Sauvignon "Silver Label" (\$22)** comes from one of the more famous celebrity-owned wineries in Sonoma County. Bruce Cohn was born in Chicago, Illinois, but his family moved to the Bay area of California in 1956. In the 1970s, while going to school to earn a degree in broadcasting and communications, Bruce managed a rehearsal studio by day and did television production by night. During this period, he met the Doobie Brothers and became their manager. As their success grew, Bruce looked for a way to maintain normalcy with his family and in 1974 he purchased an old dairy in Glen Ellen, California. In addition to the dairy, the farm had several acres of grape vines as well as a grove of 145 year old olive trees. Bruce renamed the property Olive Hill, and under the tutelage of Charlie Wagner, of Caymus, began to rejuvenate the vineyards. For several years they sold grapes to the up-and-coming wineries of the area, then in 1984 Bruce founded the B.R. Cohn winery.

The winery is located in an area called the Valley of the Moon, between Sonoma Mountain and the Mayacamus Mountains. The Olive Hill estate is blessed by natural underground hot springs and watered by an artesian well. The

vineyard boasts warm soils and a naturally frost-free environment. Sonoma Mountain buffers Olive Hill from coastal fog, resulting in greater sun exposure for the grapes and daytime temperatures seven to nine degrees warmer than other parts of Sonoma Valley, ensuring the estate's grapes ripen fully. The site's dramatic diurnal fluctuations in temperature, coupled with its volcanic, gravelly loam soils (virtually identical to those found in Napa Valley's famed Rutherford Bench), account for the tremendous flavor intensity and complexity that distinguish B.R. Cohn's wines. Of Olive Hill Estate's 61 acres of vines, 54 are planted to cabernet sauvignon, with the balance devoted to small plots of zinfandel, petite sirah, and the Bordeaux cultivars Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec.

In the summer of 2015, with debts mounting, Bruce was forced to sell his winery to Vintage Wine Estates, owned by Pat Roney. After building their portfolio with niche market brands and the direct-to-consumer juggernaut Windsor Vineyards, VWE has been purchasing many early generation wineries, including Swanson, Clos Pegase, and Cosentino. While it is always sad to see a family owned winery swallowed up under those circumstances, the reality is the wines are now far better. For many years the Cohn's operated on a shoe string, and that sometimes means the wines suffered. Since their acquisition by VWE I find the quality is very good across the entire brand.

For their Silver Label Cabernet Sauvignon, winemaker Marco DiGiulio uses grapes from the Olive Hill Estate, along with vineyards in Mendocino County and other parts of Sonoma. The blend is an unusual combination of 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Zinfandel, and 10% Petite Sirah. Each variety was harvested and fermented separately, then aged in French oak barrels for 10 months. After the blend is made and the wine is bottled.

When you open this wine, decant it for at least half an hour before serving. As soon as you pour a glass, you will smell the exotic nature of this Cabernet, with deep notes of black raspberry and blackberry jam, very subtle crushed parsley, cedar, and pipe tobacco. In the mouth it has a strong sense of fruit, with very long polished tannins and bright acidity. Drink this wine over the next two years to three years with skirt steak fajitas or hanger steak.

Slow Roasted Fresh Ham

With Easter in just a couple of weeks, I started thinking about alternatives to the traditional ham luncheon. This is nothing against classic ham, which I adore, but an opportunity to shake things up a bit. For this you will need a shank end fresh ham. Try to avoid a sirloin end, sometimes called a picnic ham, as the bone makes them harder to carve. With a little work, you will find this is an excellent alternative and it works nicely with both the Pinot Noir and the Cabernet selections this month.

1 (8- to 10-pound) bone-in, shank-end fresh ham
1/3 cup packed brown sugar
1/3 cup kosher salt
3 tablespoons minced fresh rosemary
1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme
1 large oven bag
2 tablespoons maple syrup
2 tablespoons molasses
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon pepper

1. Place ham flat side down on cutting board. Using sharp knife, remove skin, leaving 1/2- to 1/4-inch layer of fat intact. Cut 1-inch diagonal crosshatch pattern in fat, being careful not to cut into meat. Place ham on its side. Cut one 4-inch horizontal pocket about 2 inches deep in center of flat side of ham, being careful not to poke through opposite side.

2. Combine sugar, salt, rosemary, and thyme in bowl. Rub half of sugar mixture in ham pocket. Tie 1 piece of kitchen twine tightly around base of ham. Rub exterior of ham with remaining sugar mixture. Wrap ham tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 12 hours or up to 24 hours.

3. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Set V-rack in large roasting pan. Unwrap ham and place in oven bag flat side down. Tie top of oven bag closed with kitchen twine. Place ham, flat side down, on V-rack and cut 1/2-

inch slit in top of oven bag. Roast until thermometer inserted in center of ham, close to but not touching bone, registers 160 degrees, 3 1/2 to 5 hours. Remove ham from oven and let rest in oven bag on V-rack for 1 hour. Heat oven to 450 degrees.

4. Whisk maple syrup, molasses, soy sauce, mustard, and pepper together in bowl. Cut off top of oven bag and push down with tongs, allowing accumulated juices to spill into roasting pan; discard oven bag. Leave ham sitting flat side down on V-rack.

5. Brush ham with half of glaze and roast for 10 minutes. Brush ham with remaining glaze, rotate pan, and roast until deep amber color, about 10 minutes longer. Move ham to carving board, flat side down, and let rest for 20 minutes. Pour pan juices into fat separator. Carve ham into 1/4-inch-thick slices, arrange on platter, and moisten lightly with defatted pan juices. Serve, passing remaining pan juices separately.