



May, 2017



This month I have selected two wines that are from categories that are often ignored, not just by consumers, but me too. In my opinion, these categories are going to become more important as California Cab prices are climbing, and quality is not keeping pace. There are lots of factors why this is happening, but they are too lengthy for this write-up. Suffice to say that if you love serious, well-crafted red wines under \$25, California Cabernet may be off the table for a year or so while producers adjust for the small harvest of 2015. Never fear, there are outstanding Cabernets from other parts of the New World and additional varieties worthy of consideration. For the selections this month I present two alternatives for those craving “big” reds.

The first pick, the **2014 Renwood Zinfandel “Premier Old Vine” (\$20)** comes from a winery that was a big part of our first two years in business. Back in 1996, Renwood produced a less expensive tier of wines called the “Sierra Series,” and we sold a bunch of their Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Zinfandel. They were \$10 wines that really over-delivered for the price. By 1997 or 1998, they decided to pursue selling the wines to grocery stores, so they bought cheaper grapes to increase their production and the quality suffered. We dropped the wines, and they failed to make inroads in the big box stores, so the brand faded away. For a few years in the mid-2000s, the company had incredible legal issues, described on one website as “worthy of a Grisham novel” before being forced into chapter 11 bankruptcy. In 2011, the winery was purchased by Argentinian billionaire Alejandro Pedro Bulgheroni, who along with his business partner Carlos Pulento, have revitalized this long suffering brand.

Looking back at almost seven years of NWR features, I do not believe I have ever selected a wine from Amador County. It lies on the east side of Sacramento, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Amador is one of the smallest counties in California, but wine production is very important to the local economy. It is home to the Shenandoah Valley, which was the most important viticultural area in California before prohibition. Most of the vineyards were planted by immigrants during and shortly after the gold rush in the region, which began at nearby Sutter’s Mill in 1848. Like most of the people who made money on the gold rush, it was not the miners but those who provided goods and services who really got rich. Vineyards in this area were the primary source of wine in California until the gold mines began to close in the late 1800s and prohibition started in 1920. At that point, many wineries closed and the region fell into obscurity until the rise of California wine in the mid-1980s. By then, many producers, in search of old vine Zinfandel discovered the nearly lost vineyards of the region and began buying grapes. Eventually, a number of wineries opened around these vineyards, including Renwood in 1993.

The conditions for growing grapes in Amador county are a near perfect combination sun, soil, and climate, especially for the fickle and late ripening Zinfandel variety. Being located in the eastern half of the state, the conditions are drier than those closer to the coast. The motto “Golden State” is an observation of the appearance of the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which turn gold every summer as the vegetation dries. Elevation is also important, with most of the vineyards lying between 250 and 2000 feet above sea level. Each day, the temperature rises and the region can get very hot in the afternoon, but by evening the cold air flows down the mountains and temperatures drop dramatically. It is an interesting phenomenon that while the region is hotter than Napa most summer days, their aggregate daily temperature is actually lower. This means the grapes retain higher acidity due to the vast diurnal temperature swing.

To produce this wine, they use over 30 different vineyard blocks, with vines ranging from 50 to 103 years of age. Zinfandel is notorious for ripening unevenly, with portions of the grape cluster ripe while some berries remain green. By splitting the vineyard into so many different blocks they can harvest more of the fruit at optimum ripeness. The grapes are then picked into small crates, de-stemmed, and hand sorted. The wine is fermented in stainless steel tanks, then aged in French oak barrels, a combination of 30% new and 70% older barrels. Once the wine has aged for 21 months, the final blend is made and bottled. In 2014 the components are 85% Zinfandel, 6% Petite Sirah, 5% Barbera, and 4% Syrah.

When you are ready to serve this wine, make sure to decant for thirty minutes before drinking, and try to chill below 70 degrees. Once you do, this wine offers a rich nose of strawberry and blackberry preserves, cocoa powder, cola syrup, cracked star anise, and grilled beef fat. In the mouth, this wine has impressive richness and texture, with smooth, silky tannins and prickle of acidity at the finish. Drink this wine over the next 3 to 5 years with smoked brisket, baby back ribs, or braised lamb shanks.

My second pick is the **2013 Nugan Estate “Scruffy’s Shiraz” (\$22)** and with it I am planting the flag in the ground and declaring it is time to come back to Shiraz. The Australian versions of Syrah enjoyed a fantastic run in the early 2000s, but in the middle of the decade consumer tastes changed, and ever since this variety has been as unpopular as polio. After about a decade of being caste to the outer fringes of wine consumption, I believe it is time to start looking at this variety again, which you will see, or more accurately taste, when you try this example.

This wine comes from the sprawling Riverina wine district in the Australian state of New South Wales. Like the central valley of California, this is considered “Australia’s vegetable garden,” with rich soils, ample water, and a very warm climate, it is a perfect environment for growing anything. This is home to over 50,000 acres of vines and is responsible for a quarter of all the wine produced in Australia.

The Nugan family settled in the region in 1940 when Alfredo Nugan emigrated from Spain and established a small fruit packing company. He was succeeded by his son, Ken, in 1965 and he launched into a rapid expansion of growing specialty fruits and processing them. Tragically, he died of cancer in 1986, at a time when consumer tastes for the family’s products was changing. Undaunted, his wife Michelle steered the company into exotic juice processing, and they are now the largest of their industry in the southern hemisphere. As part of their growth, the family invested in large vineyard parcels, selling the grapes to other wineries. In 2000, they built their own winery and began producing Nugan wines.

Scruffy’s Shiraz is named for the vineyard manager, who guides the work to keep yields low in the vineyard. Everything about the production of this wine is difficult, which is surprising when you taste the polish of the finished wine. The grapes are hand-harvested and sorted in the vineyard, then de-stemmed and sorted again, to remove less than perfect examples. Each lot within the vineyard is fermented separately in dozens of small stainless steel tanks. Since each one is hand-punched to submerge the cap of skins, the process takes a long time. Once the wines are all dry, the components are aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels, of which 25% are new. At that point, winemaker Darren Owers crafts the final blend, saying “it takes forever, (as) there are so many variables.” Once complete, the final wine is returned to barrel for a few months to meld.

When you open this wine, give it half an hour in the decanter and a slight chill before serving. When you pour a glass, the nose is so enticing it will be hard not to want to gulp it. The deep violet color harkens a rich bouquet of menthol tobacco, milk chocolate, black cherry preserves, and dried black figs. On the palate this wine is nicely deep, with a nice frame of acidity and modest tannins. Drink this wine over the next two years with grilled steaks, pot roast, or peppers cooked in tomato sauce with peppers and onions.

Braised Beef Brisket, Oaxacan Style

The slightly spicy quality of this dish is perfect with both of the wine selections this month. Although the process is a bit fussy, the results are amazing. You can find Pasilla peppers at any Latin market, usually in prepackaged bags, in the spice aisle.

- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns**
- 2 teaspoons cumin seed**
- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds**
- 1 tablespoon chili powder**
- 1 beef brisket (about 5 pounds), surface fat retained**
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- 3-5 cups low-sodium chicken broth**
- 1 can diced tomatoes (28 ounces)**
- 2 ounces dried chile peppers (preferably Pasilla), seeded**
- kosher salt**
- 2 teaspoons dried thyme**
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano**
- 3 medium onions, quartered**
- 1 head garlic, halved crosswise**
- fresh parsley leaves, for garnish**

1. Heat oven to 500 degrees. Crush spices or grind them coarsely; press them into brisket and set aside
2. Using two burners if necessary, heat oil in large, heavy roasting pan long and wide enough to hold brisket and at least 2 inches deep. Add brisket; cook over medium-high heat, turning once with tongs, until brown on both sides, about 10 minutes. Remove brisket and set aside. Add 1 cup broth, tomatoes, and chiles; bring to boil, scraping bottom of pan with wooden spoon to loosen brown bits; reduce by half. Remove pan from heat. Season brisket lightly with thyme, oregano and salt, and return to roasting pan. Scatter onions and garlic around brisket.
3. Put roasting pan in oven and cook, stirring vegetables occasionally to avoid burning, until thickest part of brisket reaches an internal temperature of around 130 degrees, about 20 minutes.
4. Remove pan from oven; reduce oven temperature to 250 degrees. Do not return brisket to oven until temperature drops to 250 degrees. Add enough chicken broth to pan so that liquid comes about halfway up side of meat (2 to 4 more cups), baste brisket, and return to oven. Braise brisket, basting and turning every 1/2 hour or so, until meat just gives when pierced with meat thermometer and brisket’s internal temperature registers around 175 degrees, 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours.

5. Remove brisket from braising liquid and wrap in foil. Strain braising liquid into large mixing bowl. Reserve vegetables, squeezing garlic cloves from heads. Transfer braising liquid to tall, narrow container, and let stand until fat rises. Skim and discard fat. Puree vegetables, including garlic, with 1/2 cup braising liquid in food processor or blender. Add pureed vegetables and braising liquid to a sauté pan and simmer until reduced to thin sauce consistency.

6. Meanwhile, cut brisket across the grain into thin slices (about 1/8-inch thick). Arrange slices of meat on warm plates; generously ladle sauce over meat. Garnish with parsley, and serve immediately.