



June, 2017



This month, both selections are from wineries that have produced NWR features before. Both deserve more attention than we give them, but with only 24 picks each year, and so many deserving wines, it takes time to circle back even to our faves.

The first selection, **2015 Writer's Block Cabernet Franc (\$17)**, is produced by the Steele winery in Lake County, California. We featured their Zinfandel in January 2015, and it was a huge hit. During a recent tasting of new releases, the standout to me was their Cabernet Franc, which is a variety I wish could be featured more often. Sadly this variety is not terribly prolific in the vineyard, so the wines are often too expensive to land in our price range. Luckily, the prices for wines from Lake county, California are lower than those of Napa and Sonoma, so their example is perfect.

Founder and owner Jed Steele, along with his son Quincy, produce dozens of different wines each year under several labels. Writer's Block is named by Quincy for his friends, many of whom are frustrated authors, and each back label includes some original prose by one of them. For all the Writer's Block wines, Jed uses only grapes grown in Lake county, which lies directly north of Napa county. Jed was born and raised in the area and famously champions the vineyards of Lake county. Lost in the annals of the wine business is that Jed was the first winemaker for Kendall-Jackson, and those early wines were made from Jess Jackson's 80 acre Lake county vineyard. When Jed left Jackson there was a famous lawsuit over the "KJ formula",

which turned out to be nothing more than a healthy dose of late-harvest Riesling added to their wildly popular Chardonnay. Jackson went on to build an empire, focusing on grapes far from Lake county, while Jed stayed closer to home.

As wine growing regions go, Lake county is quite different from the more famous neighbors to the south and west. There are 7 American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in the county and all but one of them surround the picturesque Clear Lake. Unlike Napa, where the majority of the vineyards lie in the lower elevations of the valley created by the Mayacamus and Vaca mountain ranges, the majority of vineyards in Lake county are at high elevation. The region is dominated by the northern Mayacamus mountain range, with most vineyards lying between 1100 and 2100 foot elevation. Lake county vineyards also do not benefit from the cooling effects of the Pacific Ocean, like those in Sonoma and Mendocino counties, so daytime temperatures run warmer than the surrounding areas. Despite this, there is a cooling effect created by the expansive Clear Lake, which means evening and night temperatures are often fifty degrees cooler than summer days. Also, at higher elevation the effect of more intense UV light on the grapes means that the skins are thicker and the color is deeper on red varieties. For a grape like Cabernet Franc this means more power and texture than normal.

The Cabernet Franc grapes for this wine come from the Shannon Ridge Vineyard, from their vineyards in the High Valley AVA. Because of the drier conditions and 1900 foot elevation, they are able to farm this vineyard using sustainable practices. This including grazing sheep among the vines, which controls excessive leaf canopy and, well, a lot of natural fertilizer. The Steele's really like this site for Cabernet Franc and have produced one for several years. Their version is picked relatively late, in mid-October, and fermented using indigenous yeast for fourteen days. This extended time on the skins helps to build deeper color in the wine. It is then aged for 15 months in a "hybrid" barrel, which is one that is made of both French and American oak staves. They produce roughly 1000 cases each year.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for up to an hour before serving. While it is pretty dramatic right out of the bottle, there are a lot of subtle notes that develop with oxygen. Once you give this one a little air it offers an inviting combination of cinnamon sticks, cracked black peppercorns, cedar, Maduro cigar wrapper dried cherry and black plum, and a smoky quality similar to black cardamom. In the mouth, this wine is very dense, with the signature Cabernet Franc quality of sinewy tannins and moderately high acidity, that wrap the fruit up into a long finish. Serve this wine with a true shepherds pie made with lamb or steak chimmicurri.

Our second selection this month is a new vintage of an old favorite, the **2014 Jax Y3 Taureau (\$25)** which was featured with the 2008 vintage way back in 2011. Like I said, sometimes it takes us a while to get back to the favorites. Jax is not named for Jacksonville, although coincidentally Jed Steele lives there part-time each year. Jax is for David Jackson and his family, who purchased their vineyard near Calistoga in 1990 as an investment property. What drew him to the 14 acre site was the age of the vines, then 26 years old, and that they are not irrigated, which is called dry farmed. At first, the vineyard was just an investment and they sold the grapes to their neighbor, Chateau Montelena. Shortly after buying the site, David's son Trent caught the wine bug, and decided to try his hand at home winemaking. Encouraged by the quality of their fruit, they hired Kirk Venge as a

consultant, and he quickly put what was then called the Jackson Ridge Winery on the map. Unfortunately that opened up another can of worms.

Success brought them to the attention of another Jackson; Jess, who jealously guards his Kendall-Jackson brand. Being a lawyer he quickly ordered them to cease and desist using the Jackson name, for fear of creating confusion with his own brand. At this point they renamed the winery Jax, and established the Y3 brand as well. The name Y3 is for the cattle brand used by their grandparents on a sprawling ranch outside Brisbane, Australia, called Yarrane3. The big difference between Jax and Y3 is vineyard source. The Jax wines are made only from their estate fruit, while Y3 is supplemented with purchased grapes. Taureau is the Y3 red blend, named for the family's award winning bull from the Australian ranch.

In the opinion of the Jackson's, any wine named for their famed bull must be both big and spirited. For that reason, the base of Taureau is 45% Merlot from their estate vineyard in Calistoga, with 25% Cabernet Sauvignon and 20% Syrah from lower part of Napa valley from vineyards in the Oak Knoll AVA. There is also 10% Zinfandel from Biale vineyards, grown just outside of the city of Napa, which adds a sense of spice and ripe fruit aromas. The components are vinified separately, then aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels before blending, right before bottling.

When you open this wine, you want to make sure and decant it for at least a half-hour before serving, which will help the complex bouquet develop and the tannins to soften. Once you do, it reveals a deep nose of cassis, cherries jubilee, vanilla wafers, black licorice, star anise, and milk chocolate. In the mouth, it is very dense, with the ripe core of fruit framed by moderately dry tannins and low acidity. Drink this wine over the next three to five years with smoked brisket, pot roast, or grilled tuna steaks dusted with wild mushroom powder.

Pasta with Mushrooms and Thyme

I often have a recipe in mind for wines of a certain style, and this month the pairing simply did not work. After several months of protein-centered recipes I wanted to feature a vegetarian recipe and I thought it would be possible with the wine selections for this month. Then I made the dish I had in mind, a mushroom and Gruyere Crostada, and it simply was not substantial enough for these wines. Luckily I had a backup in mind, which also happens to be an easy, mid-week meal with ingredients that you likely have on hand. Although any pasta will work for this recipe, seek out a shape that clings to the sauce, such as the floral looking campanelle, as the results will be better.

table salt

1 pound farfalle pasta, or campanelle

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

3–4 large shallots, chopped fine (about 1 cup)

3 medium cloves garlic, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon)

10 ounces shiitake mushrooms, stems discarded, caps wiped clean and sliced 1/4 inch thick

10 ounces cremini mushrooms, wiped clean and sliced 1/4 inch thick

1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme leaves, plus 1 additional teaspoon

1 1/4 cups low-sodium chicken broth

1/2 cup heavy cream

1 tablespoon lemon juice from 1 lemon

Ground black pepper

2 ounces grated Parmesan cheese (1 cup)

2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley leaves

1. Bring 4 quarts water to rolling boil, covered, in stockpot; add 1 tablespoon salt and pasta, stir to separate, and cook until just shy of al dente. Drain and return pasta to stockpot.

2. Meanwhile, heat butter and oil over medium heat in 12-inch skillet until foaming; add shallots and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 4 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Increase heat to medium-high; add shiitakes and cook, stirring occasionally, for 2 minutes. Add cremini mushrooms and 1/2 teaspoon salt; cook, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, about 8 minutes. Stir in thyme and cook 30 seconds. Transfer mushrooms to bowl. Add broth to skillet and bring to boil, scraping up browned bits; off heat, stir in cream, lemon juice, and salt and pepper to taste.

3. Add mushrooms, broth mixture, cheese, and parsley to pasta in stockpot. Toss over medium-low heat until pasta absorbs most of liquid, about 2 minutes; serve immediately.