



No need to clean your glasses, you are seeing correctly. For the first time since August, 2012, you have two Explorer Club selections from California. A few club members in Orlando have hinted that I hold a bias against wines from the Golden State, but that is not true. When I make selections for the Explorer Club, I feel the first mandate is to expose you to wines outside of the normal comfort zone. For example, my first boss used to prohibit me from drinking California wine, claiming they were too intuitive. He meant that just being a wine drinker would expose me to the wines, no need to “study” them. But then, there are lessons to be learned. This month we will examine the reason why it is time to consider California Merlot again. As this grape has been virtually ignored by customers for a decade, we are going to *explore*, why I believe that for less than \$20 a bottle it is a more important category than California Cabernet Sauvignon. (Gasp!)

2010 Opolo Merlot (\$18)

I am just going to say it, the state of value-priced American Cabernet Sauvignon is abominable. The change has been gradual so most consumers have not noticed, but for someone who tastes 4000+ wines per year, it is really obvious. Over the past two years, my impression of this category, which is wines under \$20 a bottle, has gone from “not very interesting” to “is it even wine?” Let’s jump in the “way back” machine for a moment and examine how we ended up in this dark place.

Most consumers do not remember, but back in the 1990’s Merlot was almost as popular as Cab. In fact, for a period in the early 2000’s it may have been more popular, but then vineyard owners got greedy. They started planting Merlot everywhere, in the wrong climates, and soils, erroneously believing it is as versatile as Cabernet when it comes to its growing environment. The problem is, it is not. Due to a high ratio of skins to juice, Cabernet cropped at high yields, and in very fertile soils, will ripen enough and produce a wine with decent concentration. The thinner skinned Merlot cropped at high yields will unfortunately produce thin, flavorless and often green tasting wines. For this reason, around 2003, we started seeing Merlot sales fall. I like to think that the examples we were selling were not the problem, but they were painted with the same brush as the terrible quality, Merlot by-the-glass offerings of the time. The high yield, mass production stuff killed the category. By the time Paul Giamatti’s character, Miles, in the movie *Sideways*, uttered his now infamous, but justified, line about Merlot in 2004, “I’m not drinking any f-ing Merlot,” the category was already dead.

About that time demand for Cabernet started to grow, and supply met demand, so quality and prices were stable. Then came the “challenging vintages” of 2008 through 2011. Drought, and less-than-perfect weather, lowered crop yields each year, at a time when demand was slightly rising. There was also the recession, which put pressure on winemakers to keep prices low. Since there is nothing illegal in California about using additives, their only option was to “improve” the wines by using coloring agents, as well as techniques to artificially concentrate flavor. Winemakers started to build Cabernets like Frankenstein’s monster, in a lab. The winemakers, or really food scientists, carefully crafted them to have the right balance of acidity, residual sugar and soluble solids, using all the tricks in the bag. It really shatters the image of the winemaker, working with what nature gives them, to craft the best expression of vineyard and grape variety, doesn’t it? If you think I am wrong, then why do all the big wine companies, like Gallo and Constellation, who dominate grocery store shelves, fight like grim death at any suggestion of putting a list of ingredients on their labels? The big problem is that success breeds contempt, or envy, and other winemakers follow suit. Now the majority of value priced Cabernet Sauvignon, and Pinot Noir for that matter, is homogenous and not in an interesting way.

Fast forward to 2017 and now we have another problem. With the recession over, demand is at an all-time high, with successively smaller crops, again due to drought, in 2014 and ’15. To maintain production levels, the big players in Napa, all those well known names you know and love, need to seek out grapes from other areas. This is legal as long as 80% of the final blend is from their appellation. So they head to Lodi, or Paso Robles, to buy good, if not exceptional quality grapes, to bolster their \$50+ wines. The problem is this is where most of your \$20 and under producers work, so it is sucking up the fruit they use, which now forces them to look elsewhere. The winemaker looking to make decent \$10-15 wine has to buy grapes from high yield vineyards in the Central Valley, where vines grow next to celery and artichokes. I have even heard some less expensive wines are using a portion of *table and raisin* grapes in their blend. As a result they do not have much to work with, so here come the additives and color agents, to, as my Dad used to say, “put some lipstick on the pig.”

The irony is that Merlot is now waiting in the wings. This segment has been so dead, for so long, that only those who really want to make the wines still do. Time and time again, in my tastings, the inexpensive Merlot outshines the Cabernet from the same winery. In fact, going over my notes for the past two years, there is not a single example of where the Merlot was not clearly the superior wine. Such is the case with the 2010 Opolo Merlot from Paso Robles.

The story of the Opolo winery begins in 1996, almost three hours south of Paso Robles, in Camarillo, California. Neighbors Rick Quinn and Dave Nichols started talking one afternoon when Rick mentioned he just planted a vineyard on land he owns in Paso Robles. Dave was a home winemaker and the prospect of owning his own vineyard appealed to him. Especially since his source for grapes, Fratelli Perata, told him they did not have enough Merlot grapes to supply him in the 1994 harvest. Systematically the two started buying land and planting vineyards so today they own 280 acres of vineyards in Paso Robles.

Although their primary business was, and still is, selling grapes, in 1999 they crushed their first commercial harvest. All of their wines are made from estate grown grapes, from 80 acres on the cooler west side of the appellation, and 200 acres

located on the warmer east side. Their Merlot comes from the west side, Summit Creek vineyard. This site enjoys the cool ocean breeze of the morning and evening, while the vines bask in the sun and heat of the mid-day through late afternoon. As a result ripeness is no issue, even in the cool 2010 vintage, while acid balance is maintained due to the cool nights.

When you open this wine, let it breathe about fifteen minutes in a decanter and give it a brief chill to 65 degrees. Once you do it offers an inviting combination of crushed blackberries, dried black figs, candied orange peel and a graphite/mineral quality on the nose. The palate is satisfyingly deep and broad, with a good sense of acidity and tannin that frames the ample fruit into a long finish. Wimpy Merlot? Not here, this wine will stand up to, and surpass, any Cab in the price range. Serve with robust red meat dishes like grilled tri-tip or carnitas.

2013 Stephen Vincent Cabernet Sauvignon (\$15)

Longtime Orlando customers may remember when this was our “go-to” \$10 Cabernet Sauvignon. Back in the early 2000’s the Orange Avenue store was selling over a hundred cases of this wine a year, as well as their Chardonnay. Then the price jumped and we moved off the wines. For the past few years Stephen Vincent has been sold exclusively to the Orlando Country Club as their by-the-glass pour, so to protect the price the distributor was prohibited from selling it to us. Recently their management decided to change the program and the supplier brought it to me. After a brief moment of *deja vu*, I jumped on the wine because it is the best under \$20 Cab I have tasted in 2017.

As inexpensive wines go, this one has great pedigree, being produced by Bob Goyette, one of the founders of La Crema winery. After Bob and his partners sold their Russian River winery to Jess Jackson, way back in 1986, he started consulting and landed with the group who have produced this wine ever since.

After my long diatribe above, space does not allow me to go deep into the details of this wine, but I found two telling points in the technical data of it’s production. The first is that all of the other Stephen Vincent wines, Chardonnay, Merlot and Pinot Noir, carry a more specific appellation than “California,” most being Sonoma. The second is in the technical notes from the winery. *“In this case our winemaker, Robert Goyette, pulled together the best wines he could find, from Paso Robles, Lake County and Sonoma County.”* Not exactly a ringing endorsement for the quality available. To their credit, the wine is sourced entirely from good areas, 65% from Paso Robles, 22% from Lake County and the remaining 13% from Sonoma. They even aged the wine in oak barrels, 15% being new American wood, and the remainder a mix of French and domestic. For this price that is unusual. Most of the time they only receive oak in the form of chips in stainless steel tanks. The final blend of this wine is also 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc.

When you open this wine, decant it and give it a slight chill, but it is ready to go pretty quick. The nose begins with rich combination of a cherry pie filling, dark chocolate, *creme de cassis* and toasted marshmallows. In the mouth this wine pops with fruit, then the oak frames it up and slightly dominates the finish. Notice this wine is not quite as long and concentrated as the Merlot? Keep in mind this is the best Cab I have tasted this year for the price. Drink over the next year or two with everything from pizza to hamburgers.

Slow Cooker Carnitas

Ok, my little soap box speech cost me space for one recipe this month. In my defense, I have edited that part 50 times and made it as concise as possible. I am writing this having just returned from our family vacation to Austin and San Antonio, Texas. Everywhere I went I found the brisket disappointing, but what knocked me out was the carnitas served at the various food trucks around Austin. If you have not been, almost 1/3rd of the top “restaurants” in that city are on four wheels. As luck would have it, this recipe works with either wine, and is incredibly easy. Don’t skimp on the fat and over-trim the pork butt. Serve with the best corn tortillas you can find, along with quick-pickled, red onions and diced cilantro.

1 (3- to 3 1/2-pound) boneless pork butt roast, lightly trimmed and cut into 2-inch chunks

1 small onion, peeled and halved

3 (2-inch) strips orange zest plus 1/2 cup juice

3 (2-inch) strips lime zest plus 2 tablespoons juice

5 garlic cloves, minced

1 tablespoon ground cumin

1 tablespoon dried oregano

Salt and pepper

2 bay leaves

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1. Combine pork, onion, orange zest and juice, lime zest and juice, garlic, cumin, oregano, 2 1/2 teaspoons salt, 1 1/2 teaspoons pepper, and bay leaves in slow cooker. Cover and cook until fork slips easily in and out of pork, 5 to 7 hours on high or 8 to 10 hours on low.

2. Using slotted spoon, transfer pork from slow cooker to large bowl. Using potato masher, smash pork until coarsely shredded. Strain cooking liquid from slow cooker through fine-mesh strainer set over separate bowl and discard solids.

3. Heat oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add pork to skillet. Whisk cooking liquid to recombine, then add 1 cup to skillet with pork. Cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid has evaporated and pork is evenly browned and crispy in spots, 10 to 15 minutes.

4. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer pork to serving platter and moisten with 1/4 cup remaining cooking liquid, or more as needed. Serve.