



August, 2017



For the first time in NWR club history, I have chosen a wine for the third time. The **2014 Wine Trees Auctor (\$20)** is also the last vintage of this wine that will be made, so the streak ends now. I am happy to say that winemaker Douglas Danielak performed a walk-off home run with this bottling, producing the best of the five vintages.

The first time I tasted the 2014, I had my doubts about this bottling. In September, 2016 I sampled this wine for the first time and it was very dense and earthy. I used descriptors like "simple," "blocky," and "dull." To my surprise this wine blossomed a few months later, and in February of 2017 it showed beautifully. All I can figure is the grape blend, which is 62% Mourvedre and 28% Grenache, took a while to evolve. This combination is a radical departure from the previous bottlings, which sometimes included as many as eight different varieties.

The one thing this wine has in common with all the previous Auctor is source, which is the Paso Robles AVA in central California. For longtime club members, this is familiar territory and the area has a reputation for making really big wines. While it is true that much of Paso Robles is hot and flat, there is a portion called "the westside," which is closer to the ocean, higher elevation and consequently much cooler. The vines used to produce this wine grow on the westside, in a vineyard only six miles from the Pacific ocean. In this area, it is not uncommon for temperatures to reach close to 100 degrees during the summer days, but then drop down into the 50s at night. The grapes ripen without a problem, but also retain great natural acidity, which is apparent in this wine.

The other factor that contributes to this wine's freshness is the soil in which the vines grow. Paso Robles lies on the eastern slopes of the Santa Lucia Range of the coastal mountain ranges of California. Formed when the Gorda Plate collided into the American Plate, this range of mountains is a complex mix of ancient sea bottom mixed with decomposed volcanic rocks. Rhone varieties, from which this wine is made, thrive in poor soils and the conditions help for the grapes to retain acidity.

Winemaking for the Auctor is done with the intention of keeping this wine light on its feet. The grapes are hand-harvested and kept separate, then destemmed into stainless steel fermentors. Once dry, the components are placed in barrel with only a small percentage of new oak for fifteen months. Then Danielak and owner, Bruce Cunningham, create the final blend and return the finished wine to barrel for an additional three months. The wine is bottled without filtration.

When you drink this wine, pay attention to complex, yin-yang contrast of black and red fruit flavors. Mourvedre is a variety that produces wines with heavy notes of fresh blueberries and blackberries, which pop as soon as you pour a glass. Behind those come notes of cherry liqueur and dried red plums, compliments of the Grenache. Intertwined in the fruit is a lovely thread of jasmine and cinnamon, which to my palate makes this the most interesting of all the Auctor bottlings. There is also a dense concentration of fruit in the mouth, lifted by bright acidity and a vein of minerality too. You will want to drink this wine over the next two years with soy marinated beef kabobs, grilled sausages or smoked pork chops.

My second pick, the **2012 Basel Cellars Merlot (\$26)** comes from a new winery for us, located in Walla Walla, Washington. Although the winery is recent discovery, the source of the wines is not. They were sent to me by Leo Kirk, our old friend from Kestrel Cellars. During his tenure at Kestrel several of the wines became club selections not only for NWR but also our Reserve Club. During our first tasting of the Basel wines in May, there were several wines with club potential, but I chose the Merlot because I believe this is currently the variety that offers the most value in American red wine.

It is hard to believe now, but way back in the early 2000s Merlot was as popular as Cabernet Sauvignon. It was so popular that grape growers began planting it everywhere to keep up with demand. The problem is that Merlot is a fickle grape to grow compared with Cabernet, and quality dropped fast. About the same time Pinot Noir exploded in popularity, capturing the fancy of consumers looking for lower acid, less tannic wines than Cab. The recession helped to keep demand down during years when production levels were low, 2008 through 2011. Then as the economy improved so did the vintages in California, fueling a serious shortage of California Cabernet Sauvignon. Now prices are climbing fast and to make matters worse, wineries are starting to use a lot of tricks in the cellar to make inferior grapes into acceptable wines. This is obvious by the overtly ripe, jammy fruit tones and faintly sweet finish of so many under \$25 Cabernets (and more than a few above \$25 too). It is worth mentioning that many producers in Washington State have long believed that Merlot is their best grape, often producing darker and more powerful wines than their Cabernet. During our tasting of Basel Cellars wines this was completely evident.

Although the Basel Cellars winery is located in Walla Walla, even their estate wines are a mix of Columbia Valley regions. The winery sits on their first vineyard, an 85 acres parcel called Double River Ranch. This vineyard sits between two tributaries of the Columbia River, and has very deep, gravelly soils, perfect for grape vines. The grapes that come from this vineyard have very thick skins and high levels of ripeness, producing powerful and long lived wines.

Winemaker Dirk Brink also buys grapes from two locations in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA as well. While not technically Basel Cellars vineyards since they do not own the land, he still considers them estate since the farming is done to his specifications. The Horse Heaven Hills, which I will abbreviate as HHH for space, is a relatively large growing area that lies west of Walla Walla, south of the city of Yakima, and north of the Columbia River. It is classic high desert, with little rainfall and steady winds that blow across the barren landscape. Elevation in HHH runs from 300 to 1800 feet above sea level, and during the growing season they receive a staggering 17 hours of sunlight per day. The grapes that grow in the area are known for having very thick skins due to the wind and sun, as well as deep concentration. Many wineries buy grapes from this area to add color and power to their wines from vines growing in less severe conditions.

Knowing that Merlot is a hard sell, Brink produces a wine that will leave little doubt about the power of the finished product. He selects the best lots from each of three vineyards then ages the wine for 22 months in French oak barrels, with a high percentage being new. Before you are ready to serve this wine, make sure to decant for at least half an hour before serving, although up to an hour will be better. The bouquet is a complex combination of cassia buds, cooked red cherry pie filling, fresh blueberries, caramel, tapenade, and cold black tea. When you take a sip, you will immediately see how dense and broad this wine is, with a big sense of fruit framed by firm tannins but moderate acidity. Drink this wine over the next three to five years with steaks, roast or this killer pork tenderloin recipe.

### **Sun Dried Tomato and Olive Stuffed Pork Tenderloin**

Since my early days learning to cook I have always liked pork tenderloin. It is a versatile cut of meat that can be grilled or roasted whole, cut into filets and sautéed, pounded into cutlets and fried or like this, butterflied and stuffed. We found that the rich tomato and olive flavors work beautifully with both of the feature wines this month. You can also omit the anchovies if you wish but the dish will lack the savory, umami qualities those little devils bring to the stuffing (and it won't taste fishy).

#### **Stuffing**

- ½ cup pitted kalamata olives**
- ½ cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, rinsed and chopped coarse**
- 4 anchovy fillets**
- 2 garlic cloves, minced**
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme**
- 1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest**
  
- 4 teaspoons packed dark brown sugar**
- 2 ¼ teaspoons kosher salt**
- 1 ¼ teaspoons pepper**
- 2 (1 ¼ to 1 ½-pound) pork tenderloins, trimmed**
- 1 cup baby spinach**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil**

Place all the stuffing ingredients in the bowl of a food processor and pulse 5-10 times until they are finely chopped but not quite a paste.

Combine sugar, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper in bowl. Cut each tenderloin in half horizontally, stopping 1/2 inch away from edge so halves remain attached. Open up tenderloins, cover with plastic wrap, and pound to 1/4-inch thickness. Trim any ragged edges to create rough rectangle about 10 inches by 6 inches. Sprinkle interior of each tenderloin with 1/8 teaspoon salt and 1/8 teaspoon pepper.

With long side of pork facing you, spread half of stuffing mixture over bottom half of one tenderloin followed by 1/2 cup spinach. Roll away from you into a tight cylinder, taking care not to squeeze stuffing out ends. Position tenderloin seam side down, evenly space 5 pieces twine underneath, and tie. Repeat with remaining tenderloin, stuffing, and spinach.

**FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL:** Light large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (6 quarts). When top

coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

**FOR A GAS GRILL:** Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave primary burner on high and turn off other burner(s).

Clean and oil cooking grate. Coat pork with oil, then rub entire surface with brown sugar mixture. Place pork on cooler side of grill, cover, and cook until center of stuffing registers 140 degrees, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating pork once halfway through cooking.

Transfer pork to carving board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 5 to 10 minutes. Remove twine, slice pork into 1/2-inch-thick slices, and serve.