



September, 2016



By now a good number of you have probably traveled to Napa. Traveling in the valley is quite easy, as most wineries are located between the only two north-south roads, Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail. Traveling north out of the town of Napa, into the actual valley, there are only a half-dozen or so cross-roads, so understanding which winery is where, is pretty easy. But remember that what formed the valley is a collision of tectonic plates, creating ripples of mountains that are actually more than one valley. Much like a split English muffin, there are many nooks-and-crannies where vines can grow. Some are in Napa, but lie in out-of-the-way places tucked high in the mountains, such as Pope Valley, the origin of our first feature. Others lie in parallel valleys near Napa, like our second feature from Suisun Valley. As you will learn this month, there are a lot of great wines being made in and around Napa, some right under your nose.

The first selection, the **2014 Slingshot Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20)** is made by Stewart Cellars, one of the elite names in Napa Valley. In a story that is pretty common in Napa, Michael Stewart sold his technology company he founded in Texas, and his love of wine led him west. He and his wife Anne started in 1999 by buying a majority interest in the Juliana vineyard, a 300 acre parcel in the Pope Valley of Napa. From this holding they launched Stewart Cellars in 2000 and produce their first Napa Cab.

Like most, he enlisted the help of a top-flight winemaker, in this case Paul Hobbs. Because of his relationship with Hobbs, now the Stewart Cellar wines are made primarily from purchased grapes, grown in hallowed vineyards, Las Piedras and Stagecoach in Napa, and Ross Station in Sonoma. This allows them to produce a wider range of wines, from Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Sonoma. Their reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, called Nomad, is a perennial big-score wine and sells for a paltry \$175 per bottle. Luckily for us, they also recognize the value of cashflow, and produce Slingshot for a wine that is in the market year-round.

Slingshot wines are the project of Michael and Anne's kids, son James and daughter Caroline. James is the president of both companies and one of the up-and-coming leaders of younger Napa generation. His sister Caroline spent several years traveling the world, making wine in many different places, to now come home and take over the cellar. She is also working closely with Paul Hobbs, who is not technically consulting for this wine, but his finger prints are apparent.

The produce Slingshot from their holding in the Juliana vineyard, located in the Pope Valley of Napa. Located east of Napa, and separated by Howell Mountain, Pope Valley lies at high elevation and is shielded from the weather effects of San Pablo Bay. As a result the valley is hotter in the summer, colder in the winter, and the soils are less fertile. Most of the vineyards in Pope Valley are planted to red varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. While there are very few wineries located in the valley, many of the big names own vineyards there; Heitz, Flora Springs, Hess Collection and Frog's Leap just to name a few.

Fruit from Pope valley tends to have quite a bit of structure, in the form of tannins and acid. As a result many wineries use the grapes grown there to add balance to their final products. For the Slingshot wines, Caroline Stewart manages to craft a wine with a big, plump sense of fruit, with well integrated, balanced tannins.

When you open this wine, give it a half hour in the decanter to open up. Once you do it offers the classic Napa aromas of cola syrup, cooked cherries and black raspberries, milk chocolate and dried black figs. On the palate it is pretty dense, with good concentration and long but firm tannins. You will want to serve this wine with some protein with a little char, such as a grilled ribeye steak.

My second pick, the **2013 Blacksmith Charbono (\$29)** comes from Mike Smith, who crafts small quantities of many different wines. I have wanted to feature something from Mike for a couple of years, but he makes most of his wines in such small quantities that securing the 40 cases I need for this club has proved difficult. Thankfully I got in line early for this one and bring you one of his most exotic, and interesting wines.

Mike started in the wine business as a lab tech at Beaulieu vineyards. That stoked a passion for winemaking that led him to the oenology program at Fresno state, where he graduated with the top honor. Although he had many job offers, he chose to work two positions simultaneously, as the assistant winemaker under Mike Dashe (Dashe Cellars) and the oenologist for Jeff Cohn (JC Cellars.) At the time both rented space from Kent Rosenblum, where Jeff was also head winemaker. Those who remember the old Rosenblum Cellars, before Kent sold, know that he never met a grape he did not like, and so he crafted dozens of different wines each vintage. This spurred Mike Smith's interest in the exotic and different varieties, which is how we get to this rare and unusual variety (sort of) called Charbono.

Charbono, or Douce Noir, is a very old variety that is thought to have been propagated by the Etruscan's over 3000 years ago. Although it is often attributed to be many modern varieties in Italy, DNA evidence has yet to prove it still exists there. It did, however, end up in the neighboring Savoie region of France, where today there are 7 acres of the vine

planted. In the late 1800's it was carried to the US, and today there are around 80 acres planted in California, most in Napa Valley. Before you plan on building a vault for this rare bottle, know that Charbono has been identified as a synonym for Bonarda, of which there are 47,000 acres growing in Argentina. While obscure, it is certainly not rare, in the world-wide sense of the word.

The grapes for this wine grow in Suisun Valley, which lies east, over the Vaca Mountains, which create the border between Napa and Solano counties. Although vineyards started popping up in the Suisun Valley in the late-1800's, few survived prohibition. Because of the shielding of the Vaca mountains to the west, Suisun Valley is warmer than Napa and perfect for late ripening varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Charbono. In fact, the Wagner family who own Caymus Vineyards, are building a winery in the Suisun Valley, and Gallo recently purchased two existing facilities. Although not in the Napa AVA, the county does lie in the North Coast AVA, which is becoming a popular designation for affordable wines from Napa producers. Wines that carry this AVA can be made up of grapes grown in Solano, Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties.

When you plan to serve this wine, make sure to allow for at least an hour of time in the decanter. This is a big wine that needs to stretch out a bit before serving. Once you do this it offers a heady combination of deep, cooked blackberries and blueberries, dried dates, black licorice and fresh baked pie shell. On the palate it is very plump and broad, with a fine frame of tannin rising in the middle, but not much acidity. Drink this wine over the next three to five years with your favorite Texas chili recipe or a fatty, braised cut like oxtails.

Chili con Carne (Texas Chili)

In the mid-1980's I was a daytime guest service host at the former Church Street Station. My job was to walk the complex, and engage the daytime visitors and answer their questions. Of course, I also took the opportunity, during my lunch breaks, to test all the downtown restaurants. The one that is locked into my memory is the Lone Star diner, which was a small building that sat in the parking lot behind Rosie O'Grady's, in a parking lot that became the Bumby Arcade.

To call the Lone Star a "diner" was a stretch. As I remember it, there were only a handful of stools inside, facing the grill and stove. Most patrons, like myself, would step inside the cramped space and take their food to go. I have a fond memory of their cheesesteaks, but on Friday people lined up for their Chili con Carne, which to this day I hold as the standard. This recipe is as close as I have come, and while it has a few non-classic ingredients (including beans), the finished product is amazing. Try this wine with either wine, but it works particularly well with the Charbono.

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
3 medium onions, minced
8 medium cloves garlic, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 8 teaspoons)
1/4 cup chili powder
1/4 cup tomato paste
2 tablespoons ground cumin
Salt
1 can (28 ounces) tomato puree
5 pound chuck-eye roast, trimmed, and cut into 1 1/2-inch chunks
2 (15.5 ounces each) cans pinto beans or kidney beans, drained and rinsed
2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
1/4 cup Minute Tapioca
2-4 tablespoons minced chipotle chile in adobo
3 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons dark brown sugar, plus more to taste
1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano leaves, or 1 teaspoon dried
Ground black pepper

Just a couple of things to keep in mind when making this recipe. Chuck-eye roasts are notoriously fatty, so don't be surprised if you trim off 1 to 1 1/2 pounds of fat. Avoid pre-cut beef labeled "beef for stew" it could be beef round or boneless shoulder roast, which will turn out dry and tough. For a milder chili, use the lower amount of chipotle; for a spicy chili, use the upper amount of chipotle. Serve with chopped fresh cilantro, minced onion, diced avocado, shredded cheddar or jack cheese, and sour cream.

1. Heat the oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering but not smoking. Add the onions, garlic, chili powder, tomato paste, cumin, and 1/4 teaspoon salt, and cook until the onions are softened and lightly browned, 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the tomato puree, scraping up any browned bits.
2. Transfer the onion and tomato mixture to the slow cooker insert, and stir in the beef, beans, broth, tapioca, chipotles, soy sauce, 2 tablespoons of the sugar, and oregano until evenly combined. Cover and cook on low until the meat is tender, 9 to 11 hours. (Alternatively, cover and cook on high for 5 to 7 hours.)
3. Gently tilt the slow cooker insert and degrease as much fat as possible off the surface of the chili using a large, flat spoon. Season with salt, pepper, and brown sugar to taste, and serve.