



September , 2017



With regards to club features, I am often hampered by the vagaries of interstate commerce, and our first selection is a prime example. In August, my intention was to feature two different Rhone-inspired wines from Paso Robles for our features, but alas, the trucking company had different plans. Luckily the Basel Cellars Merlot was available, even though it was planned for a September feature on Washington State. Is this too much of a peek behind the curtain? Just think of me as the metaphorical swan of the wine business. As far as everyone can see it is all smooth sailing, but below the surface I am paddling like mad.

The **2013 Vinum Red Dirt Red (\$23)** is a repeat offender as a NWR club selection. In 2014, I selected the last vintage and their new bottling which, from the heralded 2013 harvest, is stunning. Through the years I have featured several of the Vinum wines in the clubs and this bottling was too good to ignore.

The story of Vinum Cellars begins at UC Davis when Chris Condros and Richard Bruno met while earning their degrees in oenology. They became good friends who shared, among other things, a dedication to the not-very-popular varieties. After graduation, they each entered the wine business, Chris working at Pine Ridge and Richard at Bonny Doon. Shortly after they made their first wine together, a Chenin Blanc called Pointe Blanc which was the genesis of Vinum Cellars. Since then, they both have become big-time consultants who are well-known in California. Chris now oversees production at Kathryn Kennedy Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains as well as the one he shares with his wife Suzanne called Horse and Plow. Richard is best known to most of you as the former director of winemaking for Michael Pozzan, including Annabella, Matthew Joseph and Dante as well as consultant for Niebaum-Coppola. Although Vinum is a “moonlighting” job for both the wines do not reflect any part-time commitment.

The main reason that the wines of Vinum Cellars are so stunning is the vineyards sources from where the dynamic duo buy their grapes. Over the years the two have developed a great network of growers, from Napa to Paso Robles and as far east as El Dorado county in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Each vineyard is selected for the specific character of it's grapes and with these two, the more unusual the better.

Winemaking at Vinum is also something in which they take great pride. All of the white wines are fermented in old, neutral French oak barrels with extended lees contact. All of their red wines are fermented in small, open top fermentors where the cap of skins is hand punched down. They also believe in long post-fermentation maceration on the skins to soften the wines and develop deep color. These techniques are time consuming and more expensive but the results are evident in all their wines, from the stunning values of the V-Series (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Chenin Blanc and Petite Sirah) through to their more expensive wines.

Their 2013 Red Dirt Red pays tribute to the wines of Chateaufeuf-du-Pape. The grapes for this wine are grown in Paso Robles where the warm daytime temperatures allow them to achieve complete ripeness but cool nights help them to retain acidity. All of the grapes for this wine are hand-harvested and fermented as mentioned above. The wine is then aged in small French oak barrels of which 10% were new and the remaining 90% were one-year old. The final blend of grapes for the 2013 is 51% Syrah, 32% Mourvedre, and 17% Grenache. There are 1,600 cases made of this vintage.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for a half-hour before serving. Given the appropriate amount of time for aeration, this wine shows an enticing nose of red cherry jam, muddled blackberries, wet clay, rosemary stems and eucalyptus. On the palate it has good weight, with smooth, moderate tannins and a refreshing sense of acidity that keeps this wine light on its feet. Serve with sausages, smoked pork loin or tuna poke bowl.

My second selection for this quarter is a new discovery from Washington State, the **2014 Grapesmith and Crusher Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20.)** With prices for California Cab starting to shoot up like gasoline pump prices before a hurricane, it is a good thing that Washington state is not in the same position. Increasing supply and moderate growth in demand means that prices are stable for the time being.

This wine comes from an importer/distributor in the New York area called Communal Brands. Led by the passionate Melissa Saunders, they pursue wines made from grapes farmed in sustainable ways, by people who put quality ahead of quantity. For this wine they were looking for a varietally correct, well priced Cabernet Sauvignon and found it easier in Washington State than the Golden State. Their source for most of the grapes is Milbrandt Vineyards, who not only make wine under their own label, but are also one of the most important growers in the Columbia River Valley sub-AVA of Wahluke Slope.

The Wahluke Slope, which has been the source for a few other NWR picks, is the area east of the city of Yakima, between the Saddle Mountains and the Columbia River. This area has been described as a 13 mile gravel bar, created

by the Missoula floods at the end of the last ice age. Unlike some areas in the Columbia River Valley where the massive rush of water deposited rocks that had tumbled from farther east, here the flood create the Corfu slide. This happened as the rushing water undercut a significant piece of the Saddle Mountains, and the part of the mountains collapsed, creating a very deep bed of gravel. This poor soil medium is ideal for grape growing and the southern exposure means they receive plenty of sunshine for ripeness.

For the remaining grapes, Communal Brands looked to Slide Mountain, at the far western edge of the Columbia Valley AVA. Unlike most vineyards in the state, Slide Mountain sites are well above the plains affected by the Missoula floods. Here the vines are planted in ancient, weathered basalt at elevations of 1300 to 1500 feet above sea level. Lying close to the Cascades the vineyards receive very little rain, so grape yields are naturally low. In early August, when I was in Oregon, one of the wineries I visited, Lady Hill, bragged about the incredible quality of grapes they receive from their Slide Mountain source. There are not many vineyards there so they are probably one in the same.

To make the wine the grapes were fermented in stainless steel, then pressed to French oak barrels, 40% being new. When you are ready to drink the wine, allow it to breathe for up to an hour and it will reveal deep notes of cooked blackberries, blueberries, milk chocolate, Kenya AA coffee beans and a lifting hint of hibiscus flowers in syrup. On the palate it is fairly plump, with the dark fruit notes framed by a fine grain of acidity and moderate tannins. Drink over the next three to five years with grilled lamb chops or braised beef.

Beef Short Rib Ragù

Growing up we often spent Sunday afternoons at my grandparents, where my grandma would cook an extensive Italian meal. Her two staples were the most amazing meat filled ravioli, and a tomato sauce that included chicken, pork, beef and occasionally veal. For years I have tried to replicate it but with no success. The magic ingredients, Grandma's love and Grandpa's home-grown Western PA tomatoes, I simply do not possess.

A few weeks ago I stumbled upon this recipe, which is nothing like Grandma's, but it is still quite good. I would encourage you to make this the day before, then after step 4, leaving the meat to cool in the braising liquid in the refrigerator overnight. The next day, de-fat the liquid then shred the meat according to directions. I enjoy this sauce over wide pasta noodles and polenta. (Don't skip the anchovies, they add incredible depth to the sauce and it does not taste fishy in any way).

1 ½ cups beef broth
½ ounce dried porcini mushrooms, rinsed
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
1 onion, chopped fine
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon tomato paste
3 anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
½ teaspoon five-spice powder
½ cup dry red wine
1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained with juice reserved, chopped fine
2 pounds boneless beef short ribs, trimmed
Salt and pepper

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Microwave 1/2 cup broth and mushrooms in covered bowl until steaming, about 1 minute. Let sit until softened, about 5 minutes. Drain mushrooms in fine-mesh strainer lined with coffee filter, pressing to extract all liquid; reserve liquid and chop mushrooms fine.

2. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add tomato paste, anchovies, and five-spice powder and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture has darkened and fond forms on pot bottom, 3 to 4 minutes. Add wine, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer, scraping up any browned bits. Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until wine is reduced and pot is almost dry, 2 to 4 minutes. Add tomatoes and reserved juice, remaining 1 cup broth, reserved mushroom soaking liquid, and mushrooms and bring to simmer.

3. Toss beef with ¾ teaspoon salt and season with pepper. Add beef to pot, cover, and transfer to oven. Cook for 1 hour.

4. Uncover and continue to cook until beef is tender, 1 to 1 1/4 hours longer.

5. Remove pot from oven; using slotted spoon, transfer beef to cutting board and let cool for 5 minutes. Using 2 forks, shred beef into bite-size pieces, discarding any large pieces of fat or connective tissue. Using large spoon, skim off any excess fat that has risen to surface of sauce. Return beef to sauce and season with salt and pepper to taste. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 days or frozen for up to 2 months.)