



The theme for this month is modern blends from ancient lands. We will look at two wines that show that just because a region has thousands of years of winemaking history, some producers prefer to live “in the now.” Both selections feature what we would call “international” varieties, mixed with the classic grapes of their respective regions.

2015 Sanguineti Nessum Dorma (\$20)

Nessum Dorma is the “super Tuscan” wine produced by Antonio Sanguineti. He is a larger-than-life character who we are lucky to host every few years for a wine tasting. Antonio grew up in Montalcino and studied winemaking, planning to take over his family estate. To his surprise, his father sold the estate while he was in school, so Antonio had to begin his business from scratch. An eternal optimist, Antonio began sourcing grapes from many different areas of Tuscany, not just the area around Montalcino. Now he produces wines from the coastal zone of Maremma all the way to Montepulciano, with each bottling showing a superb sense of place.

The inspiration for this wine comes from the aria Nessum Dorma, which is in the final act of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot*. This piece is one of the most famous for tenors to perform, which Antonio does while speeding through the hills of Tuscany in his yellow sports car. Locals refer to him as the “banana rapido” which further adds to his reputation as something of a character. Many also call him “the Maestro” for his ability to blend all of the components of his wines together. This is particularly obvious in this bottling.

The beauty of Nessum Dorma lies in Antonio's ability to use the best grapes from the various zones of Tuscany. The base is 50% Sangiovese, which comes from a vineyard near the town of Montalbano. Montalbano lies east of Florence, at high elevation on a finger of the Apennine mountains. Sangiovese grown in this area is higher in acidity, which contributes a freshness to the final blend. Thirty percent of this wine is Merlot that grows in Gavorrano, which is in the district of Grosseto. This is one of the original areas where the “super Tuscan” movement began. The soils in the area are too rich to produce good Sangiovese, but most producers found the Bordeaux varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot excelled. Merlot from this area adds tremendous richness and texture to Sangiovese, which to me is why Nessum Dorma is such an amazing wine. The last part of the wine is 20% Syrah from Suvereto, in the Livorno district. Like Grosseto, which is to the south, this area is best for international varieties, and the Syrah from the zone gives this wine great color and structure in the form of tannins. The Maestro told me he ferments the Syrah and Merlot components in open-top French tonneaux (500L barrels), then caps them for aging. The Sangiovese is fermented and aged in stainless steel to preserve the fresh quality of the fruit. When blending the finished wine, they achieve a product with great weight and concentration that still displays a sense of lift on the palate.

Pour a little of this wine and swirl it around the glass. Notice how the color clings to the legs? That is the influence of Syrah not only in color but, as you will see, in the texture too. The nose is a complex blend of dried porcini mushroom, ripe cherries, raspberries, black currants and fresh-cut granite. In the mouth, this wine displays a dense and muscular structure, with a deep core of fruit veiled by relatively stiff tannins. This wine needs to breathe in a decanter for an hour or so, then serve it with braised lamb shanks or a grilled porterhouse rubbed with garlic and olive oil. Drink from 2017 to 2023.

2012 Pagos Chozas Carrascal las Ocho (\$20)

I'll be honest and tell you that the region where this wine comes from is so obscure that I needed to look it up after tasting the sample. It comes from the Spanish wine region of Utiel-Requena. This obscure region lies in the hills that form the boundary between the high plateau of central Spain, called La Mancha, and the lower elevation coastal plain west of the city of Valencia. It is a very extreme climate for farming, with intensely hot summers, bitter cold winters and receives only about 17 inches of rain per year. However there is a cool, coastal breeze that blows each summer, called the Solano, which allows for grape vines to thrive in this difficult environment.

Archeologists have discovered evidence of winemaking in the region dating back to the 7th century BC. After the fall of Carthage, the Romans introduced better grape growing and winemaking techniques. The quality of the wines from this area was considered so good that winemaking was even tolerated during the Moorish occupation. Even phylloxera, which devastated most of the vineyards of Europe in early 20th century had little effect on this region. Locals claim the root louse has little effect on the local variety, Bobal, but I suspect it has more to do with the poor soils. This did not stop the region from falling into relative obscurity after the Spanish civil war and it is only now that commercially-made wines are making a comeback.

Our feature comes from a modern winery, Pagos Chozas Carrascal, owned by husband and wife, Julián López and María José Peidro. Their vineyard lays 40 miles from the ocean at roughly 2100 feet above sea level, so the warm days are mitigated by the cool ocean breeze as well as elevation. They grow 11 different grape varieties in the vineyards, with the dominant one being Bobal, an indigenous grape of the region.

Until just a few years ago, Bobal was the dominant red grape grown in Spain, but in the past two decades has lost ground to both Garnacha and Tempranillo. It is still the top grape of the Utiel-Requena region, representing between 75-90% of all the grapes grown, depending on the source. It is a vine that is quite prolific, and is most often trained so the canes lay against to grow like a fountain of leaves coming out of the trunk. This serves the dual purpose of shading the grapes from the unrelenting sun, and keeping the ground cool, which reduces evaporation. The wine made from Bobal is surprisingly aromatic and shows a good balance of acidity and tannin.

To make the Las Ocho, the winery uses a blend of 19% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Syrah, 18% Merlot, 16% Tempranillo, 9% Bobal, 8% Mourvedre, 6% Garnacha and 5% Cabernet Franc. Each variety was vinified and aged separately in French oak barrels for 14 months before blending and bottling. When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for at least a half-hour before serving, but up to an hour is best. On the nose, this wine shows a rich combination of cooked blueberries, black raspberry jam, caramel and toasted almonds. On the palate it is quite big and firm, with nicely dense fruit framed by smooth tannins. You can drink this wine now or hold for up to 10 years.

Steak Quesadillas with Boursin Cheese

I stumbled upon this recipe a few months ago and started playing with it serving a number of different wines. I found it works very nicely with medium-weight European reds where the dry nature of the wine plays well with the creamy, herbal quality of the Boursin and the sharper edge of the cheddar. If making for a crowd, which I now do often, keep in a warm, 200 degree oven until you are ready to serve.

2 strip steaks, about 1 inch thick
Salt and pepper
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 (5.2-ounce) package Boursin cheese, garlic and fine herb
1 1/2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
4 (12-inch) flour tortillas
1/2 cup jarred roasted red pepper, drained, patted dry with paper towels, and sliced thin
4 scallions, sliced thin

1. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook steaks until well browned, 3 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer to plate and let rest 5 minutes, then slice thin against grain. Wipe out skillet.
2. While steaks rest, combine Boursin, cheddar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper in bowl. Divide cheese mixture evenly over one half of each tortilla, leaving 1/2-inch border around edge. Top with peppers, scallions, and sliced steak. Fold tortillas over filling and press down firmly.
3. Add 2 quesadillas to empty skillet and cook over medium-high heat until golden and crisp, 1 to 2 minutes. Using spatula, flip quesadillas and cook until golden brown and cheese is melted, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to cutting board and repeat with remaining quesadillas. Cut into wedges and serve.

Chicken Cacciatore

Although this is a white meat dish, I find it only works well with red wine. The richness of chicken thighs and earthiness of mushrooms demand a relatively robust wine, and both of the features for this month fit the bill.

8 bone in chicken thighs (about 3 pounds), trimmed of excess fat
Salt and ground black pepper
1 teaspoon olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped
6 ounces portobello mushroom caps (about 3 medium), wiped clean and cut into 3/4-inch cubes
4 medium cloves garlic, minced
1 1/2 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups dry red wine
1/2 cup chicken stock or low-sodium canned chicken broth
1 can (14 1/2 ounces) diced tomatoes, drained
2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme leaves
1 piece Parmesan cheese rind (2 inches, about 1 ounce), optional
2 teaspoons minced fresh sage leaves

1. Season chicken with salt and pepper. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering but not smoking, about 2 minutes. Add four chicken thighs, skin-side down, and cook, not moving them until skin is crisp and well browned, about 5 minutes; using tongs, flip chicken and brown on second side, about 5 minutes longer. Transfer browned chicken to large plate; brown remaining chicken thighs, transfer to plate, and set aside.
2. Drain off all but 1 tablespoon fat from pot. Add onion, mushrooms, and 1/2 teaspoon salt; sauté over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until moisture evaporates and vegetables begin to brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Meanwhile, remove and discard skin from browned chicken thighs. Add garlic to pot and sauté until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in flour and cook, stirring constantly, about 1 minute. Add wine, scraping pot bottom with wooden spoon to loosen brown bits. Stir in stock, tomatoes, thyme, cheese rind (if using), 1/2 teaspoon salt (omit salt if using cheese rind), and pepper to taste. Submerge chicken pieces in liquid and bring to boil; cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer until chicken is tender and cooked through, about 45 minutes, turning chicken pieces with tongs halfway through cooking. Discard cheese rind, stir in sage, adjust seasonings with salt and pepper, and serve.