



When I first started selling wine in the 1980s, California was not yet “a thing,” and most of my discriminating consumers drank Bordeaux or Cotes du Rhone for everyday red wine. By 1990, the production in the new world started to grow at a time when Bordeaux had become very popular due to the high quality of the 1989 and 1990 vintages. Prices began to climb and many of those customers began looking to the new world for better value. It is funny to look back now at those times. To put it into perspective, in those days we were selling many vintages of First Growth Bordeaux for less than \$50 a bottle. Today, those same wines sell for at least \$700 a bottle for the current releases. By comparison, the “expensive” Cabs from California, like Caymus, were \$12.99.

With continued pressure on pricing of California wines, and now the fires in Napa and Sonoma wreaking havoc on the last of the harvest, I again turn back to Europe for value wines. This month we will examine two amazing bottles that are priced for everyday consumption, but are anything but ordinary.

### 2014 Neipperberg Bordeaux Collection (\$15)

This is a new wine produced by the estates of Stephan von Neipperg. He is the current generation of a great European family who trace their wine-making origins to the Holy Roman Empire. In the 12th century, the first Count von Neipperg was given land that encompassed 30 villages, centered near Schwaigern in the Württemberg Valley, in what is now Germany. For centuries, they have produced wine in that region, with the estate run today by Stephan’s brother. In 1991, their grandfather made the first purchase of an estate in Bordeaux, the first of many investments outside of Germany. Since their initial foray into the region, they now have ownership in more than a half-dozen estates in the region as well as other parts of the world. These include Le Mondotte and Chateau Canon La Gaffelière, both St. Emilion Premier Grand Cru Classe estates. This wine represents an opportunity to show their modern style at a price that is easy to enjoy every day.

One thing that differentiates old world European wines from those made in the new world is the inconsistency of vintages. While some years in the Americas are better than others, the lesser years are still pretty good compared with how dismal they can be in Europe. 2014 was a very unusual growing season for Bordeaux that surprised many veterans of the region by harvest. The spring was warm and dry, launching the growth cycle of the vines faster than most years. By early June, the vines were flowering and many producers predicted a very early harvest. Then the summer turned cold and wet, with many vigneron leaving for August vacations wondering if the grapes would ever ripen at all. Thankfully September saw unusually warm weather, which allowed the grapes to reach maturity for harvest late in the month and into early October. It is a year where quality is good, but to make the best wines many producers had to make severe decisions about what grapes would be used for their best wines. My guess, although it is not mentioned on their website, is that the grapes for this wine, and probably many barrels too, were those deemed not good enough for the first wine of the von Neipperg estates.

The reason I think this may be the case is that the average age of the vines used to produce this wine are 30 to 40 years old. That is generally older than most used to produce generic Bordeaux produced from the Entre-deux-Mers, the source of most inexpensive wines of the region. To make this wine, the grapes were fermented in stainless steel tanks, then moved to barrel for malolactic fermentation. This is a longer and more expensive step than is typical of Bordeaux in this price range, but consistent with higher end production. Then 30% to 40% of this wine was left in barrel for aging. The final blend is 80% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for up to an hour before serving. As soon as you pour the first glass, the bouquet of freshly muddled blackberries, black currant jam, grilled bread, vanilla wafers and a touch of potting soil (yes it is a good thing) tell you this is Bordeaux. There is a lovely plumpness to the wine on the palate, with the soft fruit framed by a gentle frame of tannins and acidity that stretches into the finish. Although good now, this wine will improve for a couple of years and drink nicely until 2025. Serve with roast beef, meatloaf or steak au poivre.

### 2015 La Condamine Paulignan Minervois (\$18)

Until the early 1990s, the wine regions of the south of France, outside of Provence, were basically a wasteland for quality wine. Most of the production was cheap “plonk” sold in the grocery stores of France in jugs labeled simply “rouge” or “blanc.” The exception were the two sprawling appellations at the western edge of the region where quality was significantly better, the twin titans of Corbieres and Minervois. You may remember that last year, I featured the amazing Corbieres from Domaine de Font Sainte, one of my favorite red wines on the planet. This year, I found a stunning example of Minervois, made in a modern style that will please fans of new and old world wines alike.

Today, the area of France between the Rhone River and Spain that hugs the Mediterranean Sea is now known as the Languedoc/Roussillon. Since the European Union began regulating the quality of the wines in the area, demanding better quality it has become a hotbed for high-quality wines. This is because young winemakers, unable to afford vineyards in the more established regions such as Bordeaux and Burgundy, have flocked to the area and bought up many old vine, hillside vineyards. Applying solid winemaking knowledge and better viticultural techniques, today there are dozens of high-quality estates in the region, although the wines are no longer the incredibly cheap bargains they once were.

The sprawling region of Minervois lies north of the Canal du Midi and the city of Carcassonne, stretching to the base of the Montagne Noire, encompassing over 30,000 acres of vines. As the first Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) in the Languedoc, established in 1985, yield restrictions were put into place so that the lower elevation, flat vineyards produce

too many grapes to be considered for classification. So most of the AOC quality wines come from the terraced vineyards with southern exposure, where the vines struggle and produce more intensely flavored grapes. This area can be quite hot and humid in the summer, so the dominant varieties are the heat-loving Carignan, Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre varieties. Luckily this area benefits from a cooling wind that rolls out of the Pyrenees Mountains each afternoon, called the Tremontagne, so the wines retain good freshness.

This wine is made under the auspices of Claude Gros, an international consultant born in the region, who understands how to give consumers what they want. For this wine, the estate starts with a base of very old vine Grenache, Cinsault and Carignan, and adds younger vine Syrah. All of the grapes are de-stemmed, then fermented and aged in concrete tanks. They do significant post-fermentation skin contact and you will see when you pour a glass that this is a real teeth stainer.

When you are ready to serve this wine, make sure to decant it for up to an hour before serving. Give it a good swirl in the glass and make note of the deep violet tears that run down the glass. This is a far cry from the Minervois of the 1980's in both body and color. The nose is a bold combination of dried black cherries, fresh blackberries, tobacco barn, fennel seed, graphite and rose petals. On the palate this wine has a big sense of fruit but surprisingly moderate tannins and relatively low acidity. The finish is quite long and concentrated, almost new world-like. Serve this wine over the next two to three years with braised or grilled meats or a classic cassoulet.

### **“Quick Cassoulet”**

If you have ever made a true cassoulet, the almost eponymous dish of the south of France, it is a laborious process. Although by no means a short recipe, this version from Cook's Illustrated greatly reduces the ingredients and the steps, and the results are fantastic. This dish will easily feed 6-8 people and works wonderfully with both wines.

#### **Chicken**

**1 cup kosher salt or 1/2 cup table salt**  
**1 cup granulated sugar**  
**10 bone in chicken thighs (about 3 1/2 pounds), skin and excess fat removed**

#### **Topping**

**6 slices high-quality sandwich bread slice, cut into 1/2-inch dice (about 3 cups)**  
**3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted**

#### **Beans**

**1 pound dried flageolet beans or Great Northern beans, picked over and rinsed**  
**1 medium onion, peeled and left whole**  
**1 medium head garlic, outer papery skin removed and top 1/2 inch sliced off**  
**1 teaspoon table salt**  
**1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper**  
**6 slices bacon (about 6 ounces), chopped medium**  
**1 pound boneless pork loin roast (blade-end), trimmed of excess fat and silver skin and cut into 1-inch pieces**  
**1 small onion, chopped fine**  
**2 medium cloves garlic, minced or pressed through garlic press**  
**1 can (14 1/2 ounces) diced tomatoes, drained**  
**1 tablespoon tomato paste**  
**1 sprig fresh thyme**  
**1 bay leaf**  
**1/4 teaspoon ground cloves**  
**Ground black pepper**  
**3 1/2 cups chicken stock or canned low-sodium chicken broth**  
**1 1/2 cup dry white wine**  
**1/2 pound kielbasa sausage, halved lengthwise and cut into 1/4-inch slices**

1. Brining the Chicken: In gallon-sized zipper-lock plastic bag, dissolve salt and sugar in 1 quart cold water. Add chicken, pressing out as much air as possible; seal and refrigerate until fully seasoned, about 1 hour. Remove chicken from brine, rinse thoroughly under cold water, and pat dry with paper towels. Refrigerate until ready to use.

2. Preparing the Topping: While chicken is brining, adjust oven rack to upper-middle position; heat oven to 400 degrees. Mix bread crumbs and butter in small baking dish. Bake, tossing occasionally, until light golden brown and crisp, 8 to 12 minutes. Cool to room temperature; set aside.

3. Bring the beans, whole onion, garlic head, salt, pepper and 8 cups water to a boil in a stockpot or Dutch oven over high heat. Cover, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer until the beans are almost fully tender, 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 hours. Drain the beans and discard the onion and garlic.

4. While the beans are cooking, fry the bacon in a Dutch oven over medium heat until just beginning to crisp and most of the fat has rendered, 5 to 6 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, add half of the bacon to the pot with the beans; transfer the remaining bacon to a paper towel-lined plate and set aside. Increase the heat to medium-high; when the bacon fat is shimmering, add half of the chicken thighs, fleshy-side down; cook until lightly browned, 4 to 5 minutes. Using tongs, turn chicken pieces and cook until lightly browned on second side, 2 to 3 minutes longer. Transfer chicken to large plate; repeat with remaining thighs and set aside. Drain off all but 2 tablespoons fat from pot. Return pot to medium heat; add pork pieces and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add chopped onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Add minced garlic, tomatoes, tomato paste, thyme, bay leaf, cloves, and pepper to taste; cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in chicken broth and wine, scraping up browned bits off bottom of pot with wooden spoon. Submerge the chicken in the pot, adding any accumulated juices. Increase the heat to high and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer about 40 minutes. Remove the cover and continue to simmer until the chicken and pork are fully tender, 20 to 30 minutes more.

5. Gently stir the kielbasa, drained beans and reserved bacon into the pot with the chicken and pork; remove and discard the thyme and bay leaf and adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the croutons evenly over the surface and bake at 425, uncovered, until the flavors have melded and the croutons are deep golden brown, about 15 minutes. Let stand 10 minutes and serve.