



Last month I presented 2015 La Condamine Paulignan Minervois, produced in the Languedoc region of France. I found it during an extended tasting of the wines from Chateau La Négly, one of the most dynamic forces in the Languedoc and an estate which is garnering huge ratings with critics for wines that are often very inexpensive. This led me to dive deeper into their portfolio, and as I was contemplating selections for the Thanksgiving table, dive deeper into this impressive collection of wines.

2016 Les Terrasses de la Négly Blanc (\$15)

As with most old estates in southern France, there is a record of production from this estate that dates back to 178 AD, when the area where it lies was called Nerly. Jumping ahead almost 2000 years the Chateau la Négly was constructed in 1773, although at that time it was known as d'Anceley. It was given its current name in 1807. The estate changed hands many times although no record of wine being made at the property exists. Grapes grown on the property were likely sold to the local cooperative, which would have been extremely common during that time. Then in 1992 it was purchased by Jean Paux-Rosset, who recognized the exceptional potential of the property. Along with winemaker Cyril Chamontin, and consulting oenologist Claude Gros, they were instrumental in championing the establishment of the La Clape appellation and putting la Négly at the top of the quality pyramid.

The La Clape appellation d'origine protégée (AOP) is a very unique place even by French standards. The entire appellation exists on what was during Roman times an island in the Mediterranean. For thousands of years the Aude River deposited silt into an estuary that slowly connected the island to the continent. Today La Clape is an appellation known for its soaring limestone cliffs and close proximity to the Mediterranean. The combination of location and the unique growing conditions this creates are what make the wines so special.

Situated roughly twenty miles south of Narbonne, the entire appellation lies within a wind gap of the Tremontane. This is a howling wind that originates each afternoon of the summer, from high in the Pyrenees Mountains as cold air shifts to lower elevation. While the temperatures of many Languedoc vineyards can reach 100 degrees during days in July and August, the Tremontane quickly cools them off in the evening. Being on the coast of the Mediterranean, the daytime temperatures of La Clape are slightly cooler, but the vineyards benefit from the Tremontane nonetheless. As the grapes cool, they retain a higher concentration of acidity, which gives the wines of La Clape an uncommon freshness when compared with many other areas of the Languedoc. This is also why they are able to produce such amazing white wines as well as some of the best Rosé in the Languedoc.

The Les Terrasses de la Négly Blanc was the first wine I tasted from la Négly and it is certainly an eye opener. Produced using Sauvignon Blanc and small amounts of Muscat Petite Grains and Muscat d'Alexander, this dry white wine has a very exotic bouquet that will work exceptionally well with the wide range of flavors found on the Thanksgiving table. The grapes for this wine are grown, as the name implies, on the terraced hillside vineyards that climb the steep elevations of La Clape. The soils are primarily limestone rich sand, which is the perfect medium to produce wines of uncommon concentration. The grapes are harvested then chilled for four days before being destemmed and pressed to stainless steel tank. Each variety is fermented separately, then the blend is made before bottling.

Although this wine is roughly 20% Muscat varieties, it is in no way sweet. When you open it, consider decanting it into a carafe or pitcher and the bouquet will explode. The bouquet is Sauvignon Blanc-driven combination of fresh cut grass, and dried straw, made complex with exotic Muscat aromas of grilled pineapple, peach preserves and night-blooming jasmine. While you may expect, based on the bouquet, for this wine to have some sweetness it does not. The palate is surprisingly high tension, with a sheer edge of acidity and subtle minerality that stretches to the finish. Serve this wine with turkey or ham, and it is a stunner when paired with any asparagus dish or Brussel sprouts.

2013 Chateau Bouisset La Clape "Cuvee Eugenie" (\$16)

While not owned by Jean Paux-Rosset, the Chateau Bouisset is a neighboring estate to Chateau la Négly and marketed under the same umbrella. This fifty acre property also has a long history of grape growing, but it was not until the 1990's that owner Christophe Barbier left his job at Château Capendu to produce his own wines, full time.

What make this red wine so unusual in comparison to most Languedoc appellation wines is that it is 80% Syrah, with the balance being Grenache. Most areas of the Languedoc are too warm to produce high quality Syrah, as the grapes can lose too much acidity in such conditions. Typically the wines of the Languedoc are based on Carignan and Grenache, which both thrive in the hot climate and retain higher acidity than Syrah. As described above, in La Clape the vast change between the daytime and nighttime temperatures means that Syrah retains more acid, producing fresher tasting wines. In addition, the high limestone content of the soil introduces a lot of minerality into the wine, which accentuates the feeling of "lift" on the palate.

With the guidance of oenologist Claude Gros, who is the elite wine scientist of the region, Barbier utilizes a lot of modern techniques to produce his impressive wines. All of the grapes are harvested by hand, then destemmed before going into the fermentation tanks. Christophe utilizes a couple of practices to extract color and flavor from the grapes, including hand-punch downs of the skins in small, open top vats; as well as pump-overs of the juice in taller tanks. The goal is to extract as much color and flavor as possible from the skins, without also getting too much harsh tannins. Some of the vessels are allowed to stay in contact for up to twenty-one days before the wine is racked to small French barrels,

called barriques, where it undergoes malolactic fermentation and aging. This wine spent twenty-four months in barrel before bottling.

Many years ago my first boss encouraged me to try an older, French Syrah with Thanksgiving dinner, and the idea has stuck with me all these years. This example is ideal because flavor-wise the Syrah drives the bus, the Grenache is for additional lift and texture. Decant this wine for up to an hour before serving and you will be rewarded with a complex nose of fresh, plump, blueberries and blackberries, cooked plums, bacon fat, grilled fennel bulb, bay leaf, rosemary and a little caramel. On the palate it is quite dense, with a big sense of fruit framed by moderate tannins and acids. Drink this wine over the next three to five years with smoked turkey, slow cooked pork belly with an Asian glaze or seared duck breast with figs and olives.

Brussel Sprouts with Pecorino

Cruciferous vegetables, such as Brussel sprouts, and those rich in chlorophyll like asparagus, are particularly hard to pair with wine. This recipe combines a little lemon juice and sharp Pecorino cheese, so the combination marries well with the subtle Muscat notes of the Les Terrasses de la Négly Blanc. I also think the faintly grassy quality of the Sauvignon Blanc helps a lot.

**1 pound small (1 to 1 1/2 inches in diameter)
Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved
5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon lemon juice
Salt and pepper
1/4 cup shredded Pecorino Romano cheese**

Arrange Brussels sprouts in single layer, cut sides down, in 12-inch nonstick skillet. Drizzle oil evenly over sprouts. Cover skillet, place over medium-high heat, and cook until sprouts are bright green and cut sides have started to brown, about 5 minutes.

Uncover and continue to cook until cut sides of sprouts are deeply and evenly browned and paring knife slides in with little to no resistance, 2 to 3 minutes longer, adjusting heat and moving sprouts as necessary to prevent them from overbrowning. While sprouts cook, combine lemon juice and 1/4

teaspoon salt in small bowl.

Off heat, add lemon juice mixture to skillet and stir to evenly coat sprouts. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer sprouts to large plate, sprinkle with Pecorino, and serve.

Easy Mushroom Dressing

I found this recipe in the latest issue of Christopher Kimball's Milk Street, and it is an interesting approach to making dressing. While the obvious application is for Thanksgiving, I find it a delicious side dish with pork and stands alone as well. Follow the technique closely because it is quite different from the normal dressing making process. This is an amazing complement to the Bouisset La Clape, as the intense mushroom flavor pulls an extra dimension from the wine.

**1 lb portobello mushroom caps, gills removed,
halved and sliced thin
1 lb Shitake mushrooms, stemmed, sliced thin
1/2 cup olive oil
Salt and pepper
1 cup celery, finely chopped
1 tbsp poultry seasoning
16 tbsp melted butter, divided
8 oz shallots, peeled and diced
1/2 cup fresh sage leaves
3 tbsp of fresh thyme leaves
2 tbsp soy sauce
1 tsp black pepper
2 lbs sturdy white sandwich bread, cut in 3/4
inch cubes.
3 cups chicken broth, low sodium
1 cup flat parsley, chopped**

Heat the oven to 500°F with the racks in the upper- and lower-middle positions. In a large bowl, toss both mushrooms, the olive oil and 1/2 teaspoon salt. Spread the mushrooms on a rimmed baking sheet. Roast on the upper rack until they have released their moisture, the moisture evaporates and the mushrooms begin to brown, about 20 minutes, stirring once halfway through. Set aside.

Lower the oven to 325°F. In a bowl, toss the celery and poultry seasoning with 1 tablespoon of the melted butter; set aside. In a food processor, combine the shallots, sage, thyme, soy sauce, pepper and 7 tablespoons of the melted butter.

In a large bowl, combine the bread cubes and the shallot-herb paste; toss gently. Fold in the celery mixture, then divide between 2 rimmed baking sheets. Bake until the bread is dry and deep golden brown, about 1 hour, stirring the bread and switching and rotating the pans halfway through. Let cool slightly. Increase the oven to 400°F.

Transfer the bread mixture to a large bowl, scraping any browned bits off the baking sheets. Add the broth, parsley and the remaining mushrooms; fold gently to distribute the mushrooms. Let sit for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until no liquid remains at the bottom of the bowl. Meanwhile,

grease a 13-by-9-inch baking dish with 2 tablespoons of the melted butter.

Transfer stuffing to the prepared baking dish; spread in an even layer. Brush the surface with the remaining 6 tablespoons melted butter. Bake on the upper rack until well browned, 40 to 45 minutes, rotating the dish halfway through. Let sit for 20 minutes before serving.