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The story of my first pick, the **2010 Paul Jaboulet Crozes-Hermitage “Domaine de Thalabert” (\$59)** is one of redemption for a legendary wine virtually unknown to modern wine drinkers. It is also one for which I have had a career-long fascination, and bringing you the 2010 is deeply satisfying. While at Dexter’s in the early 1990’s I bought and sold the impressive 1990 and 1991 vintages of Thalabert. After that the wine seemed to take a turn and it has been more than twenty years since I tasted anything even close to those heralded vintages. To my surprise, the 2010 is not only back to form but it may be the best example of any Crozes I have ever tasted, and for that it deserves a European club selection.

The historic firm of Paul Jaboulet was established in 1834 by Antoine Jaboulet, when he purchased the Domaine de Thalabert. For almost 180 years the family passed from one generation to the next, always pushing quality standards and farming with a great respect for the land. In the 1970’s the dynamic and tireless Gérard Jaboulet guided the company, pushing quality and production levels even higher. By the time I started selling wine in 1989 Jaboulet was considered the most important brand in the northern Rhone Valley and their Hermitage “La Chapelle” listed alongside the 1st Growths of Bordeaux in overall quality. Tragically Gérard passed away in 1997, at the age of 57. Leadership was assumed by other family members who pushed volume over quality, and the wines suffered. Then in 2006 the firm was acquired by Swiss land developer Jean-Jacques Frey, who previously restored the Haut-Medoc estate Chateau La Lagune. Frey also has an equity stake in Billecart-Salmon and I believe this is the reason for their recent growth as well. Frey’s daughter Caroline is a trained oenologist and is now guiding the winemaking at Jaboulet and is determined to raise their quality to that of Guigal and Chave, the regions other luminaries.

For most collectors the northern Rhone Valley has two well known appellations, Cote Rotie and Hermitage. They lie at opposite ends of the region, separated by almost ninety miles and on different sides of the river. Many are surprised when they first see the hill of Hermitage that it is only a single granite edifice, not terribly unlike Stone Mountain in Georgia, except covered with vines. Less well known is the rolling plateau that makes up Crozes-Hermitage, which covers eleven different villages and is the largest appellation by acreage in the northern Rhone. The majority of the vineyards lie on flat ground where production levels are high. There are however, many steep sites, often planted with old vines, which produce wines of distinction. Currently there is a whole generation of northern Rhone winemakers scouring these sites and making some amazing wines but the holy grail is the Domaine de Thalabert vineyard.

Not only is the Thalabert vineyard the most revered of the Croze-Hermitage appellation, it is also the oldest. It was the first acquisition of Antoine Jaboulet in 1834 and the wines were said to rival those of Hermitage. Each step is composed of crushed granite soils that absorb heat during the day and radiate it back at the vines at night. There is also little organic material, so the vines naturally produce very few clusters of grapes due to the lack of nutrients. When Caroline Frey assumed control she began a biodynamic farming regime, to nurture the old vines, sixty to eighty years, which further reduces yields.

All of the grapes for this wine are hand harvested and sorted twice before going into the fermentor. In a spectacular vintage like 2010 the fermentation went smoothly and the wine was then racked to small barriques once dry. Caroline has been dialing down the oak on this wine, with the 2010 resting in 20% new barrels for almost two years before bottling. They also hold the wine back for two additional years in bottle before release.

When you are ready to serve this wine, please decant it for at least two hours before serving. With time this deeply colored wine immediately offers an explosive nose of hickory smoked bacon, fresh blackberries, oil cured black olives, soy sauce, black licorice, rosemary and creme brulee topping. In the mouth it shows firm tannins right away, which are tempered by richly concentrated fruit and moderate acidity. Allow this wine to rest in your cellar for five years then drink until 2040.

My second pick is a wine I have been wanting to feature for some time and the stars have finally aligned, meaning there are enough bottles! The **2012 Giuseppe Lonardi Privilegia (\$49)** comes from a tiny family winery within the boundaries of Valpolicella Classico Superiore. Giuseppe “Bepi” Lonardi is the fourth generation to produce wine from his family estate. Along with his wife Marilena they also run a small bistro and their daughter Silvia runs the family inn called Corte Lonardi. From this tiny empire he is able to produce between 3000 and 4000 cases per year, of which their top wines are limited to only a few hundred cases. For this vintage Lonardi only produced a little over 100 cases of Privilegia, which he considers his flagship wine.

For most producers in the Valpolicella region they consider their top wine to be their Amarone della Valpolicella, and Lonardi does produce an excellent example. The rules for Amarone production limit the grapes that may be used, demanding a high percentage of indigenous varieties, Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara. Lonardi feels the best wine he

can produce falls outside of the legal definition and hence this is his own little “Super Veronese.” This is a pretty common movement that looks similar to the Super Tuscan revolution of three decades ago. So for Privilegia, Giuseppe uses an equal blend of Corvina, the regions best indigenous grape, and Cabernet Franc.

The production of the Corvina used in this wine is the same as that of Amarone. Each cluster is cut from the vine and the grapes are not immediately destemmed. The Corvina are left intact and dried on straw mats for four months, a process called *appassimento*. As you can imagine they loose a lot of their liquid, becoming plump raisins. When Giuseppe feels they are dry enough, he moves them to a stainless steel tank where they are fermented on the skins for fifteen days. The Cabernet Franc grapes are treated the same as all table wines, with fermentation on the skins for seven days then racking to tank to await the Corvina. Once they are both fermented dry the two parts are combined and moved to 100% new French oak barrels, where it ages for 22 months. Lonardi then bottles the wine and holds it for an additional six months before release.

To serve this wine, decant it for an hour before serving. Unlike the Crozes-Hermitage which has big tannins to resolve, this wine just needs oxygen to awaken the bouquet. When you swirl this wine it shows some initial notes similar to Amarone; dried figs, sultanas and dried orange peel. Then the Cabernet Franc component follows with complex hints of raspberry jam, white sage and a subtle note of crushed parsley. Finally the whole wine is wrapped up in a veil of dark chocolate, caramel and cigar box components, thanks to the new oak barrels. Where this wine excels over an Amarone is on the palate, where it shows a good sense of acidity and tannins that I do not find quite so ponderous. This wine also weighs in at only 14.5% alcohol, which means you can actually finish a bottle without feeling like death the next day. 2012 is an excellent year in the Veneto and I believe this wine will age until 2027, although it is hard to resist now.

Each quarter I try to find one selection that is approaching, or is ready to drink. My final selection for this offering is an orphan I found in a warehouse outside of New York city, and like Annie, this one really sings. A bottle of the **2008 Canonica a Cerreto Chianti Classico Riserva (\$49)** was sent to me by their former importer, who represented the wine a few years ago. Apparently they took on the brand but then something happened, and they quickly lost it. As a result they have stored a couple of dozen cases of this wine in a temperature controlled warehouse for almost five years, and it is now perfect for drinking. What amazes me is that the winery is virtually invisible online, yet has such an amazing story.

The cellars of Canonica a Cerreto were constructed over a thousand years ago by the monks of the Cathedral of Siena, who fled the city each summer to escape the heat, and of course the plague. They planted vineyards on this estate in the southern zone of Chianti Classico, called Castelnuovo Berardenga, and produced wine for three hundred years. Eventually the winery fell into disrepair, but the original cellar survived, and in 2003 was restored by the current owners.

Prior to modernizing the winery, in 1998, they also planted the estate with forty-three acres of vineyards. The makeup of the vineyard is 85% is Sangiovese, 10% is Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Merlot. Not by accident that is also the exact blend of this wine. A vineyard with that much Cabernet Sauvignon is unusual in Chianti Classico, as most of the zone lies at too high of an elevation for the late ripening variety. Castelnuovo Berardenga is the southern-most, and lowest elevation, of the Classico zones, so in their climate the growers of the area can get the variety to ripen. The vineyards of Canonica a Cerreto lie at a 1000 feet above sea level, on soils that are a mix of limestone rich clay, and shale. This is the sweet spot of growing conditions for Cabernet Sauvignon, which ripens just enough to provide structure and color to the final blend, without dominating the wine. 2008 was also an exceptional year, so ripeness was no issue and the wine does not display any of the weedy, herbaceous notes of underripe Cabernet Sauvignon.

Production at Canonica a Cerreto has a distinctly modern touch, guided by the regions top oenologist, Franco Bernabei. The vineyard is densely planted, with up to 8000 vines per hectare, to create competition among the vines for nutrients. All of the work in the vineyard is done by hand and they aggressively remove unripe clusters at verasion, the point in the growing season when the color of the grapes change. At harvest only the best clusters are selected and harvested by hand. Each grape variety is picked and fermented individually. Once dry the final blend is made and the wine is aged in French barriques for 18 months before bottling.

You will want to decant this wine for a half-hour before serving, and make sure it is between 65 and 70 degrees. The color is similar to iodine with a slightly amber rim, showing the wine is now approaching maturity. The swirl reveals a cornucopia of tertiary aromas; black truffle, baked potato skin and well-worn ball mitt, all swirling around a core of tart dried cherry and raspberry fruit leather. The feel in the mouth is moderately rich, with the smooth, almost velvety edges that are only revealed with time in the bottle. I find this wine has lovely persistence for a Chianti Classico, lingering for almost a full minute in the mouth before fading away. Drink between 2017 and 2020.