



As I was doing my research for the selections this quarter, a theme developed that is really quite interesting. All of the selections for this quarter emphasize the feminine traits of wine. One is made by a female winemaker, one is from a region where the wines are often described as “feminine,” and the last is a second label of a famous Bordeaux chateau, sometimes described as the “queen” of the property, where the first wine is the king. While the selections may follow a feminine theme, these are not delicate wines. As someone who was raised by a strong-willed single mother, I can attest that feminine in no way means weak, and I think you will agree.

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My first selection, the **2012 Domaine de Marcoux Chateauneuf-du-Pape (\$69)** is produced by two sisters, Catherine and Sophie Armenier. You only need to visit the rocky, barren vineyards that surround the city of Avignon to understand why the wines of this area are not typically described as “feminine.” This is a hard, inhospitable place for any agriculture except grape vines. Yet somehow, the sisters manage to show an elegant side to their Chateauneuf-du-Pape, an uncommon trait for an area known for wines of sheer power.

The Domaine de Marcoux is not old by Chateauneuf standards, as it was established in 1989. That does not make the Armenier sisters Johnny-come-lately’s, as they can trace their family history in the region back to the initial charter for the town of Chateauneuf, in 1344. Even on their mother’s side, there is documentation showing land ownership in the region starting as early as 1691. Their Grandfather, Emile Armenier, was a contemporary of Baron Le Roy, who championed to have the wines of Chateauneuf-du-Pape recognized as the first Appellation d’Origine Controlee (AOC) in France, in 1933.

They own 45 acres in the appellation of Chateauneuf divided among 13 different vineyard sites, with an average vine age of 50 years, scattered across the appellation. Each vineyard parcel lies on a slightly different soil combination and due to the geographic dispersion, ripen at different times. Starting in 1991, the sisters began farming the property using biodynamic practices and today are certified by Ecocert. The legal limit for grape production in this area is only 35 hectoliters per hectare, which is slightly lower than the Grand Cru vineyards of Burgundy. Their yields are often well below the legal limit due to their biodynamic farming, since without man-made pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and fertilizers, the vines naturally produce less fruit. Conditions are even more extreme due to the unique growing environment created by the Rhone River.

Roughly 40,000 years ago, as ice age era glaciers melted off what is now the European continent, several large rivers were carved out by the massive amount of rushing water. In modern day France, this is the origin of the Gironde River which is at the center of Bordeaux, the Loire River, and the Rhone River. For hundreds, or potentially even thousands of years, as the water rushed from higher elevation to low, it carved out valleys and deposited silt, sand, and rock in the area. In the case of the Rhone River, its banks shifted frequently and left a swale of round, bowling ball sized rocks, called *cailloux*. The path of these rocks is quite wide, up to 20 miles in some places, creating a vast sea of the round, tumbled rocks lying on beds of sand and limestone. The poor soil this creates is a difficult medium for anything to grow, except grape vines, and is the demarcating feature of Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

For their Chateauneuf-du-Pape, winemaker Sophie Armenier picks each of the vineyard sites when the grapes are at peak maturity. The grapes are chilled before fermentation and the wine is left on the skins for two to three weeks. Once the wine goes through malolactic fermentation, it is moved to mostly concrete tanks, although they do use a small amount of 350L French oak casks. After the wine is aged for 18 months it is bottled without filtration. Most years, they produce between 800 and 1600 cases.

When you open this wine, allow it to breathe for an hour before serving. Once you do, it graces you with a complex blend of dried black cherries, blackberry puree, black licorice, porcini mushroom, bay leaf, rosemary, sage, and crushed black peppercorns. In the mouth it is quite deep, with a rich sense of fruit framed by firm tannins and a hint of minerality. While this wine is big by the standards of many French reds, it is surprisingly elegant for the Chateauneuf-du-Pape appellation. Drink over the next ten years with braised lamb shanks, cassoulet, or grilled swordfish with black olive tapenade and lemon/olive oil.

For my second selection, the **2012 Socre Barbaresco (\$69)**, you will experience a wine that breaks the “feminine” description for the wines of the region. It is made by a relative newcomer Marco Piacentino, who has exploded onto the scene in the Piedmont region of Italy, with an incredible showing with critics and in wine competitions. While I am not a fan of critical scores, it is hard to not be impressed with the incredible numbers this guy is racking up.

This is my second selection featuring a wine made from the Nebbiolo grape, the last being two quarters ago, the Ghemme produced by Rovelotti. That wine showed the leaner, more tannic side of this variety, as it was grown in the high elevation, sub-Alpine vineyards of the northern Piedmont region. Although this wine also grows at a relatively high elevation, the climate of Barbaresco is warmer, so the wines are softer and more approachable young.

Nebbiolo is one of the most challenging grape varieties to grow, and does not proliferate outside of this little corner of Italy. The name of the grape is thought to come from the fine fog that lays over the valleys of this area, which the Italian's also call *nebbia*. There are also some who say it comes from the word *Nobile*, which means "noble," and Barolo's reputation as the "wine of kings, the king of wines." Whatever the reason, Nebbiolo is a difficult grape to grow. It is one of the first varieties to bud break in the spring, but also ripens much later than most grapes. This leaves it susceptible to spring and fall frosts, as well as late season rains. Growers find it so unreliable that it currently only makes up 6% of the total plantings of the Piedmont, with most preferring to grow the much more reliable, and earlier ripening, Dolcetto and Barbera. Even though it is challenging, there are very few grapes which produce wines that are as age-worthy, aromatically interesting, and as food friendly as those based on Nebbiolo. Perhaps it, not Pinot Noir, should be called the "heart break" grape?

While Marco Piancentino, is a relative new comer to winemaking, his family has owned their vineyards since 1870. The family traditionally sold their grapes, but Marco has been tending these vines since 1962, when he was a young child. When Marco retired from being a well-respected architect he shifted his attention to making wine. Their vineyard borders Angelo Gaja's Sori Tildin, in the microclimate of Barbaresco known as Roncaglie. This vineyard area, which lies at nearly 900 foot elevation, enjoys a perfect southwest exposure for maximum daytime sunlight. This is important because, as you already know, Nebbiolo takes a long time to ripen. Anything less than a perfect vineyard exposure can cause problems at harvest. All of the fruit is hand-harvested, and fermentation takes place over almost two weeks in stainless steel tanks. Once the wine is dry, it is moved to small, French barriques where it ages for two years.

When you are ready to serve this wine, please make sure to decant it for at least two hours, but you could even start in the morning. Once you pour a glass, it practically explodes with an exotic combination of rose petals, violets, dried cherries, cinnamon bark, fennel seed, and oyster mushrooms. On the palate, it has a good concentration of fruit, framed by firm tannins which clamp down considerably on this wine at the finish. Although drinkable now, you would be best served to hold this wine for at least five years, and up to a decade. Serve with wild mushroom risotto or slow smoked pork belly over braised greens.

My final selection, the **2011 Le Marquis de Calon-Segur St. Estephe (\$50)** is the second label of one of the most famous estates in Bordeaux, the Third Growth Chateau Calon-Segur. Second label wines are often referred to as the "queen" of the estate, behind a property's premier bottling. There was a time, until around the 1990 vintage, when second label wines could be hit-or-miss with regard to quality. They were often made as an afterthought, with little attention to detail and often with very old oak barrels. After the 1990 vintage, when prices for Bordeaux began to skyrocket, many estates began to look at them as providing considerable extra cash flow, and therefore justify more attention in the cellar. Now they are often an excellent opportunity to understand a chateau's style, but at a fraction of the price of the primary label.

The Chateau Calon-Segur is thought to be one of the oldest in the Medoc, with a history of growing grapes back to the 12th century. There is little doubt that grapes have been grown here for much longer, as Bordeaux was a major winemaking and trading port in Roman times. The name Calon is believed to come from the word, *calones*, which were the shallow-draft boats used by the Romans to navigate the nearby Gironde River. The property came to significant prominence in the 18th century, under the ownership of Nicolas-Alexandre the Marquis de Ségur. At that time, the Marquis also owned Chateaus Latour, Lafite and Mouton, but he always claimed his heart was in Calon-Segur. A century later, recognizing the Marquis' passion for the estate, the owners began using a heart on their label, which has made it a Valentine's Day favorite ever since.

What makes Calon-Segur so unique is the large, 136-acre vineyard that is both contiguous, and completely enclosed by a stone wall, or *clos*. While common in Burgundy, a walled vineyard is very unusual in Bordeaux. Even more uncommon, the property has remained unchanged, and intact, since the Classification of 1855 when it was declared a Third Growth. Space does not allow me to explain the importance of this classification, but Wikipedia does a good job. Their vineyard lies upon a bed of roughly sixteen inches of gravel, formed by the same ice age water flow as the Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape. The gravel sits on top of a layer of clay, which has great water retention. The combination of these soils layers allows the vines produce gorgeously ripe fruit with great power and tannin.

When second label wines were first developed, in the 1970's by the preeminent oenologist Emile Peyraud, their purpose was to concentrate the quality of the estate's first wine, or Grand Vin. At Calon-Segur, the percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon in the vineyard is very high, at 53%. Merlot makes up most of the balance, at 38%, along with 7% Cabernet Franc and 2% Petit Verdot. The winemaker, Vincent Millet, along with super-star consultant Eric Boissenot, want to emphasize the power of Calon-Segur in the Grand Vin but also make a wine that is balanced and polished. In good vintages like 2011, when Cabernet ripens completely, the blend of the first wine may be as high as 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, although it is typically close to 70%. In cooler years, when Cabernet Sauvignon will struggle to ripen, the blend will be considerably higher in the earlier ripening Merlot. By contrast, the majority of the Merlot is used for this, the second wine. As such, it is softer and more approachable young, while still showing the character of soil. For the 2011 the blend is 70% Merlot and 30% Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine was aged for 18 months in French oak, with roughly a third of them being new.

I would encourage you to allow this wine to breathe in a decanter for up to an hour before serving. Once you do, it reveals a beautiful nose of baked cherries, coffee grounds, candied strawberries, new ball-mitt leather, claro cigar wrapper, and bit of fresh cut ivy. It has a smooth and balanced feel in the mouth, with polished tannins and nicely persistent finish. Of the three selections this one is showing the best now, and should improve for up to five years.