



Reserve Club

Winter/January 2017

I recently had a customer ask me where I get the information for sourcing new wines for the clubs, weekly features and regular inventory. When I started rattling off all the things I read in the course of a day, he asked how I have time for anything else. The reality is, I find inspiration in many places, some in books and magazines, others online in blogs, e-zines and yes, social media. Of course, being in Orlando I am also blessed to meet many great wine personalities first hand, and get the information right from the source. Frankly I am excited I am no longer limited to a couple of wine publications for information, and early tips on great wines can be found in many places. This is no more apparent than in the selections this quarter, which come from a number of unusual sources.

The wines of Yannick Rousseau first came to my attention as they kept popping up on the feeds of people I follow on Instagram. (For the record, if you want to see what I drink and eat on a regular basis, you can follow me @timswinemarket.) First there was a posting of a Tannat Rosé, then of an old vine Colombard, the finally a regular Tannat, but all from California grapes. Coincidentally, a few weeks later one of my reps asked if I had time for an appointment with a new winemaker they were carrying, Yannick Rousseau. Although it was early November, and past the point where I usually take appointments, I eagerly accepted. The meeting was amazing, one of the rare times when I bought every wine tasted.

During our meeting, I asked Yannick my normal interview questions; where else have you worked? from who else do you find inspiring wines? It became apparent that we share a six degrees of separation in the wine world, and we hit it off even more. At the end of our meeting he offered to send me a couple of smaller production wines, as potential items for the Reserve Club. The care package included this Merlot, as well as his Tannat Reserve, but as the wildcard selection for this quarter was already made, I jumped on the Merlot. Before you pass judgment, taste the wine; this baby is bigger than most Cabs.

Yannick grew up in Gascogne, the famous Cognac region of Southwest France. Surprisingly his family were not winemakers, but butchers, which is the inspiration for his entry level wine, Son of a Butcher (SOB). His grandfather did make a few barrels of wine each year for family consumption, and his favorite grape was Merlot. Yannick grew up drinking his grandfather's wine, who was named Pèpè, and when he discovered the Cavedale vineyard he knew the Merlot they grow would be perfect for a reserve level wine made in his honor.

When Yannick first came to the US, he did so as the assistant winemaker at Newton Vineyards, working under Luc Morley. After Luc left to take the helm at Peter Michael, Yannick continued the famous "unfiltered" program, making the wines for several vintages. Next came an eight year stint at Chateau Potelle, on Mount Veeder. It was here that he developed his love for mountain-grown fruit, especially Cabernet Sauvignon. It was also during this time that he discovered the Cavedale Vineyard, located in what is now the Moon Mountain AVA. This new AVA, as of 2013, is located on the western slopes of Mount Veeder on the Sonoma County side. Although a new AVA, the quality of wines from this area has been famous for over a century, as it includes the famous Monte Rosso Vineyard of Louis Martini, now owned by Gallo, as well as Hanna's Bismark Ranch.

It does not take an expert to see the potential for the vineyards of Moon Mountain. Most of the vines are planted more than 2000 feet above sea level, and above the fog line. The soils of the region are primarily volcanic, which are poor in nutrient content and drain quickly. Most vineyards, like Cavedale, lie on slopes that face southwest, which receive considerable sunlight during the day. The combination of poor soils, elevation, slope and exposure combine to make the grapes from this AVA very sought after for their power and concentration. Like his grandfather, Yannick only produces six barrels of this wine, or 150 cases. The wine was aged for 18 months in French oak barrels, of which half were new.

When you open the **2013 Y. Rousseau Merlot "Pèpè" (\$65)**, make sure to decant it for at least forty-five minutes before serving. When you pour the first glass, give it swirl and breathe in the high mountain character of this wine. There are notes of baked blueberries and blackberries, grilled black figs, freshly toasted and crushed fennel seeds and a rich robe of vanilla/oak. In the mouth this wine shows impressive concentration and power, with the rich fruit framed by obvious, but very smooth tannins. Good now, this wine will improve for up to decade. During a recent trip to Linda's La Cantina, I found it worked beautifully with a T-bone steak.

I first learned of the wines of the Martinborough region of New Zealand almost twenty years ago, during a discussion with Steve Smith, M.W, who was then the winemaker at Villa Maria. Although the focus of our meeting was on the up-and-coming wines of Marlborough, he spent a good bit of time talking about the potential for wines from the north island of New Zealand as well, particularly Hawke's Bay and Martinborough. In his opinion the Pinot Noirs of Martinborough would eventually rival those of the US, and even Burgundy. Now, almost two decades later, it is not a supposition any longer.

The Martinborough region lies on the southern tip of the north island of New Zealand, across the Cook Strait from Marlborough. Although they are geographically close, the two regions share little in common. The vineyards of Marlborough lie in the flat plains which are open to the Pacific Ocean, which means the climate is cooler, the perfect environment for early ripening Sauvignon Blanc. By comparison, Martinborough is shielded to the east and north by

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tall hills, so the climate is warmer. Although the amount of vineyard acreage is only a fraction of that in Marlborough, this has become known as New Zealand's home for world class Pinot Noir. The **2008 Voss Estate Pinot Noir (\$45)** is an excellent opportunity to show you the potential of the wines, with an example that is perfect to drink right now.

The Voss Estate was founded in 1986 by Gary and Annette Voss, who both came to the wine business through the scientific side, both being former marine scientists. Gary eventually studied winemaking at the prestigious George Sturt University in Australia, then worked for a couple of New Zealand wineries, before founding their brand.

What drew them to Martinborough is the rare combination of soil and climate that is ideal for Pinot Noir. The Martinborough region is very unique in that the weather is relatively cool for red varieties, but with a high number of sunlight hours during the growing season. As a result the Pinot Noir grapes ripen extremely slowly, achieving plenty of sugar accumulation but retaining surprising acidity. The aforementioned hills to the north and east also create a bit of a rain shadow, so there is little rain to cause damage to the thin skinned Pinot grapes. About the only weather issues the vines face is early season frost, which when it occurs at the wrong time, can kill the tender new shoots and delay the growing season. The soils of this region are generally too rich for quality grape production and most of the economy is based on farming and wheat. There are a few ribbons of rocky soil, to the east and north of the town of Martinborough, created by the shifting path of the Dry River. For 30,000 years this river has moved course, carving out paths and exposing a deep layer of mineral rich rock, while depositing rocks and sand. It is this soil that is perfect for Pinot Noir and gives the roots access to minerals in the soil that would otherwise be buried.

What drew me to this wine as a Reserve club selection is its power and balance, as well as maturity. The wines of Martinborough remind me of the wines of the Santa Rita Hills in California as they are "bigger" examples of this grape. You will only need to decant this wine for a half-hour before serving, as it is fully mature and ready to drink. The nose gives you a complex blend of pomegranate syrup, strawberry preserves, bourbon barrel aged soy sauce, milk chocolate covered almonds and there is a subtle whisp of menthol. On the palate this wine is surprisingly full for Pinot Noir, with very smooth, soft, integrated tannins and a long finish. Serve this wine with seared duck breasts, brushed with a pomegranate syrup dusted with 5 spice powder.

The first time I heard about Anthony Bell was during a tour of the Beaulieu Vineyards (BV) in the Rutherford area of Napa, in 2007. I was attending a Master of Wine seminar and the discussion was on clonal variation of Cabernet Sauvignon. At the time, the conventional wisdom was that unlike Pinot Noir, the subtle mutations of Cabernet Sauvignon were not radically different. That seminar and tour was of a vineyard planted entirely to what is now known as Clone 6, which many growers now feel is the superior strain of this variety. It was Anthony Bell who is credited with identifying this clone, and showing its superiority to the more common UC Davis varieties. The Clone 6 has become the standard for many growers in the Rutherford AVA of Napa, dominating the plantings of such vineyards as Tokalon and the neighbors who lie on the benchland.

A few months after that tasting I had the chance to meet Anthony, who left BV in 1998 to launch Bell Cellars. Although he is not known to many wine consumers, I consider him a rock star and jumped at the chance to meet. Our first tasting was superb, with him taking over an hour to show me only four wines. Through the years we have met several times, and in the fall his broker arranged for me to receive a couple of wines Anthony thought would work well for our Reserve club. Both were excellent, but the **2014 Bell Cellars Claret (\$59)** is the standout that best fit the set this quarter.

Despite being mostly Cabernet, Anthony chooses to use the name "Claret" for this wine due to the addition of a small amount of Syrah. The complete blend, for those keeping score is 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Syrah, 3% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot, 2% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc. For those who are used to the idea of a Bordeaux style blend called "Meritage" the addition of Syrah may seem a bit sacrilegious, but is actually a time honored tradition. The term "Claret" is an English term, which originates in the 14th century, which is used to describe the wines of Bordeaux. In lighter vintages, in a tradition that lasted well into the 19th century, it was not uncommon for the chateau of Bordeaux to augment their wines with a little Northern Rhone. The Syrah they would add typically came from Hermitage, and added color and body to their lighter wines. As an interesting side note, this practice was officially ended with the creation of the AOC system of France in the early 1900's. Today, the Third Growth Chateau Palmer makes a wine called "Alter Ego", which celebrates the tradition by openly blending Rhone Valley Syrah in the wine. As it violates the rules of the AOC, the wine is bottled without vintage or regional designation. It is not inexpensive but worth trying if you ever want to taste a little bit of history.

For the Bell Cellars Claret, Anthony selects the blend based on drinkability. His style leans toward the elegant side, but his wines typically display a bit of a stiff backbone so they age gracefully for a decade or more. For the Claret he is crafting a wine to drink in the near term, but show the power and concentration of Napa Valley. It helps that this wine is from the 2014 vintage, when ripeness was achieved in the valley at lower levels of alcohol than has been normal for past few years. This wine was aged in a combination of French oak barrels, 72%, and American, 28%, with 38% of the total being new.

When you are ready to serve this wine give it an hour in the decanter, to allow the bouquet to develop and the tannins to virtually disappear. Immediately upon pouring the first glass this wine gives you an intoxicating combination of creme de cassis, boysenberry preserves, black strap molasses, juniper berries, dried lavender and saffras. On the palate it is incredibly concentrated and deep, with smooth but obvious tannins which frame the fruit into the long finish. Drink this wine with stronger flavored dishes, such as braised lamb shanks, grilled hanger steak or pot roast.

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