



July, 2016



This month, I am thrilled to bring you two selections from one of the most legendary properties in California, Chalone Vineyards. If you are relatively new to fine wine from within in the past decade, then it is possible you have never seen, or heard, of this storied estate. After eleven years lost on the balance sheet of the world's largest liquor company, the wines are back. While it is too soon to say if they are better than ever, they are certainly good, and it is a thrill to bring them to you.

The story of Chalone begins in 1919, when a Frenchman named Charles Tam searched across California for soils similar to his native Burgundy. Charles was looking for limestone, which is common across France but very rare in the Golden State. He found it in Monterey County, high in the Gavilan Mountain range, that lies on the east side of the Salinas Valley. Tam planted Chenin Blanc, which is not a native Burgundy variety, but had to sell the grapes to make sacramental wine during prohibition. His story is lost to time, but we do know that in 1946 the vineyard was expanded by Wil Silvear, who added Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to the mix.

Silvear expanded the vineyard considerably and sold the grapes to Wente and Beaulieu Vineyard while also making his own wine. He died in 1955, and the vineyard was sold again. In 1960, the very first wine bottled under the Chalone label was made by none other than Philip Togni, now of Napa fame. That wine was produced in a chicken brooding shed, so it is hard to imagine what it must have tasted like.

In 1964, a young man named Dick Graff discovered the estate and fell in love with its views of the Salinas Valley, and its potential for world class wine. Graff himself had no winemaker training but was a former naval officer and graduate of Harvard with a degree in music. He enrolled at UC Davis in their oenology school. Then in 1965, convinced his mother to help him buy the property which was on the brink of bankruptcy.

While Graff is best for developing Chalone into a world class winery, he is also the pioneer who instituted many of the winemaking techniques we take for granted today. He was the first winemaker to import French oak barrels into the United States and introduce malolactic fermentation to white wine. Graff was one of the first American winemakers to espouse minimal handling of the wine, preferring natural clarification in barrel rather than filtration. While not mentioned in the movie *Bottle Shocked*, his 1974 Chardonnay placed third in the Judgement of Paris tasting, behind Chateau Montelena and Roulot's Meursault Charmes. (He actually received the same number of first place votes as Jim Barrett's Montelena bottling.)

While Graff was visionary in the wine cellar, it was his business partnership with Philip Woodward that propelled Chalone to a winery powerhouse. Woodward was a business consultant and former partner with Touche, Ross & Company, who fell in love with wine in the late 1960's. He left Detroit for California intending to consult for small startup businesses and landed in the wine business by accident. Before joining Chalone, he assisted Robert Mondavi, who provided working capital for his fledgling winery, in buying out Rainier Brewing and assisted Inglenook Cellars. While drinking a 1969 Pinot Blanc produced by Chalone, he was driven to seek out Graff to learn more about the winery. Eventually, he signed on as vice-president of finance, in a barter arrangement receiving wine and stock for his work.

With his guidance by 1981, they expanded to create another vineyard in Monterey named Edna Valley, purchased Acacia Vineyards in Carneros, and established Carmenet Vineyards in Sonoma County. By 1984, the company was growing fast but short on working capital, when Woodward led them to yet another industry innovation. Chalone became the first publicly traded, premium wine company in America, raising \$5 million dollars with their IPO. Flush with cash, they purchased the land that became Canoe Ridge in Washington State and acquired 24% of Chateau Duhart-Milon in Bordeaux. Tragedy struck the company in 1998 when Dick Graff was killed when his single engine Cessna crashed. Woodward recruited a top Kendall-Jackson executive, Thomas Selfridge, as president and the company continued to expand.

During these years, the Chalone Group, as they were then called, became a juggernaut, with many well-known brands. For that reason in 2005, the company was purchased by Diageo, the largest liquor and drinks company in the world. Most of the vineyards and many of the labels were sold off. Those they kept, except Chalone, they cut costs and greatly reduced the quality of the wines. Eventually the directors of Diageo realized they did not know how to sell wine and liquidated their wine related assets. Most were purchased by Treasury, who also owns Beringer and Penfolds. Thankfully, as many of the wineries were dismantled, somehow Chalone avoided the guillotine. Bill Foley purchased the thousand acre estate which includes 250 acres of vineyards and the winery, along with their second label, Gavilan.

The longtime Chalone winemaker, Robert Cook, is fond of saying that, "Chalone isn't a label; it's a place on earth." The 250 acres of vines struggle on a high plateau, 1800 feet above sea level, on soils so poor that weeds barely survive. It is the combination of limestone soils and their difficult climate that makes Chalone wines so unique. Limestone gives the wines a structure of minerality that is common in European wines, but rare in those from America. The cool and windy

climate of their vineyards also has the two fold effect of slowing the ripening process, and forcing them to crop the vines with fewer grapes. This accentuates the concentration, so the wines have power but also freshness.

When we tasted the current inventory, there were three vintages of Pinot Noir in stock at the local distributor. I selected the **2011 Chalone Pinot Noir (\$30)** because it is the closest to drinking in the zone of the three. I find myself drawn to the remaining 2011s in the market, because the cool nature of this year has yielded wines with great freshness on the palate. While the 2012 and 2013 both have more power, it is in a brooding way that will need time to resolve. You will want to decant this wine for a half hour to allow the bouquet to develop. Once you do, it offers a savory nose of dried cherry, green tea with hibiscus, dried blood orange peel, notes of dried brush and porcini mushroom. In the mouth, it is full and long with more earth driven notes than overt fruit and soft tannins that still need a little time to integrate. Drink this wine over the next two to four years with braised pork shoulder or smoked sockeye salmon.

There is a bit of mystery surrounding this wine. As far as any Foley people can tell, the **2012 Chalone Syrah “Limited Release” (\$30)** is the only time this wine has been made. There is speculation it was created as an exclusive label for a large hotel chain and it only exists in Florida and a couple of other states. It is made from their 18 acres of Syrah planted in three different vineyard blocks. The fruit is hand harvested, sorted by hand, cold soaked for several days then finished for 14 months in French oak barrels. It is a magnificent example of American Syrah, displaying the power of New World wine with the aromatic complexity and structure of the French versions. The color is almost opaque purple, and the nose is a heady combination of fresh black cherries, cooked blackberries, rosemary, black olives, and sassafras. In the mouth it has a deep sense of fruit and great concentration with a fine edge of tannin and minerality. Although sizable, there is an elegance and freshness to this wine that so few American versions possess. Drink this wine over the next three to ten years with lamb shish kabobs or soy sauce, garlic and hoisin marinated skirt steak.

Lamb Shish-Kabobs

One of my earliest food memories is traveling with my family on weekend nights, from our home in Butler, Pa. to the town of New Castle for “lamb on the rod.” In the early 1970’s there were a lot of unregulated “restaurants” in New Castle, where Lebanese families would sell skewers of lamb cooked on their outside grill. As “customers” we would pay a couple of bucks per “rod” or skewer, and eat them off paper plates on picnic tables set up in the front yard. (Call these the precursor to food trucks, except they served the food a lot faster and cheaper.) This recipe replicates the magic of the dish and works great with both wine selections.

MARINADE

½ cup packed fresh cilantro leaves

3 medium cloves garlic, peeled

¼ cup dark raisins

½ teaspoon garam masala

1 ½ tablespoons lemon juice

½ cup olive oil

1 teaspoon table salt

⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper

SHISH KEBAB

2 ¼pounds boneless lamb leg (shank end), trimmed of fat and silver skin and cut into 1-inch pieces

3 bell peppers, 1 red, 1 yellow, and 1 orange (about 1 ½ pounds), each cut into twenty-four 1-inch pieces

1 large red onion (about 12 ounces), cut into thirty-six ¾-inch pieces

lemon or lime wedges for serving (optional)

1. For the Marinade: Process all ingredients in work bowl of food processor fitted with steel blade until smooth, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape sides of work bowl with rubber spatula as needed.

2. For the Shish Kebab: Toss marinade and lamb in gallon-sized zipper-lock plastic bag or large, nonreactive bowl; seal bag, pressing out as much air as possible, or cover bowl and refrigerate until fully seasoned, at least 2 hours and up to 24 hours.

3. Ignite about 6 quarts (1 large chimney, or about 6 pounds) charcoal briquettes and burn until covered with thin coating of light gray ash, 20 to 30 minutes. Spread coals evenly over grill bottom, then spread additional 6 quarts unlit briquettes over lit coals. Position grill rack over coals and heat until very hot, about 15 minutes (you can hold your hand 5 inches above grill surface no longer than 2 seconds).

4. Meanwhile, starting and ending with meat, thread 4 pieces meat, 3 pieces onion (three 3-layer stacks), and 6 pieces pepper in mixed order on 12 metal skewers.

5. Grill kebabs, uncovered, until meat is well browned all over, grill-marked, and cooked to medium-rare, about 7 minutes (or 8 minutes for medium), turning each kebab one-quarter turn every 1 ¾ minutes to brown all sides. Transfer kebabs to serving platter, squeeze lemon or lime wedges over kebabs if desired, and serve immediately.