



Reserve Club

Summer/July 2017

Issue X.III

When I talk with customers about visiting Napa Valley, most want to focus their attention on the wineries located along highway 29 and Silverado Trail. While this is certainly an entertaining way to see the valley, I always encourage them to arrange at least one tour of a mountain winery to see the dramatic difference between the two areas. A prime example is the **2013 Priest Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon (\$50)** that comes from the sprawling, 660 acre Somerston Estate. This historic property lies in the Vaca Mountains, due east of the town of Rutherford, at an elevation between 800 and 1500 feet. Several years ago, our franchise trip to Napa included a visit to Chappellet, which involves a white knuckle drive along Sage Canyon Road. Growing up in western Pennsylvania, I am used to driving up steep hills with the blind turns and switchbacks, but a few in the party were noticeably concerned. The Somerston Estate lies twenty minutes east of Chappellet on the same road, but only a scant six miles as the crow flies.

For years, many wineries farmed vineyards in the high valleys of the Vaca Mountains as the secret ingredient to provide power and structure to wines produced in their valley floor vineyards. Then the wines of the Prichard Hill, produced by Colgin, Schrader, and Chappellet, all well over \$200 a bottle, brought the spotlight on this area. The recent sale of the Stagecoach Vineyard to the Gallo family, and Schrader Cellars to Constellation, both for eye-popping amounts, confirm that this area is very popular for the high quality of their fruit.

Like the Mayacamus Mountains which create the western boundary of the Napa Valley, the Vacas were formed between 35 and 65 million years ago, as the Pacific and North American tectonic plates collided. One of the reasons the Napa Valley is so special as a wine growing region is that the two mountain ranges provide an unusual combination of climatic effects. The Mayacamus range protects the valley from the cooling effects of the Pacific Ocean, while the Vacas shield the valley from the intense heat of the California's central valley. Together, they foster a Goldilocks environment where the temperature is neither too hot nor too cold for grape vines. *It is worth noting that there are a few Napa wineries now buying vineyard land in the Suisun Valley to the east of Napa, beyond the protection of the Vaca range.*

The original land grant for this property was issued to the Priest family in 1869 and they owned the estate for 100 years. It was purchased by the current owner, Allan Chapman, in 2004, who then acquired the neighboring property, called Elder Valley, in 2006. He joined the two properties, 1628 acres in all, and renamed them the Somerston estate. This rugged property boasts three ridge lines, two valleys, and a change in elevation of over 1600 feet, with the peak at 2400 feet above sea level. Due to the rugged terrain, there are only 220 acres planted to grape vines, divided into 100 different parcels. They grown 17 different varieties from which they produce 12,000 cases of wine, divided among three brands, Highflyer, Priest Ranch, and Somerston Estate.

To produce this Cabernet Sauvignon, winemaker and general manager Craig Becker selects grapes from 24 different vineyard blocks on the estate. Due to the idyllic harvest conditions of 2013, it took over a month to harvest the grapes, allowing each unique site to reach full ripeness without stress. The wine was fermented in tank then aged for 20 months in a combination of 35% new French oak, and the remaining neutral barrels. There are 3300 cases of this wine produced.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for at least one hour before serving, and take it down to cellar temperature if possible. Once you do, it explodes from the glass with a decadent combination of blackberry and blueberry jam, sassafras, tangerine peel, Maduro cigar wrapper, and black peppercorns. On the palate, it is quite powerful, with decidedly firm tannins framing the ample fruit. There is decent acidity and a subtle burn of alcohol on the finish, but I think a little time in bottle will resolve that nicely. Drink from now to 2025.

My second selection for this quarter is the **2013 August Briggs Charbono (\$55)**, the third time I have featured this grape variety in this club. Old timers may remember the Shypoke Charbono that I selected way back in 2011. More recently the Zuccardi Bonada "Emma" graced these pages in 2015. Although Argentina uses the name Bonarda, the grapes are genetically similar. This selection came about due to a meeting with August Briggs co-owner Matt Gacso, who offered us this small production wine because of my fascination with this variety. It is not a wine they release to many accounts, as most of the 221 cases are sold to their mailing list.

The Charbono variety fascinates me because the history of how it came to California is lost to time. The most common belief is that Italian settlers brought it to California during and shortly after the gold rush, believing it to be

Buy six bottles of the Reserve Club features and receive a 20% discount off the listed prices

the Barbera variety. Modern DNA testing confirms it is not related to Barbera, but it is identical to a variety called Corbeau from the Savoie region of present day France. This area was part of Italy until 1860. There are only a little more than 100 acres of this grape planted world wide, if you ignore the 46,000 acres planted in Argentina. Until the early 2000s, it was their most popular variety but has since been supplanted by Malbec. There are roughly 90 acres of Charbono planted in California, with more than half in the Calistoga area of Napa Valley. This is a variety that loves warm growing conditions, which makes it a ideal for the climate of northern end of the valley. For decades, the standard bearer of quality Charbono was Inglenook, who produced wine from this grape from 1862 to 1998. Sadly, Francis Ford Coppola had their old vine block adjacent to the winery pulled out in favor of Cabernet Sauvignon shortly after purchasing the estate.

The biggest reason you do not see more Charbono planted in California is that it does best in the same growing conditions as Cabernet Sauvignon, but commands a fraction of the price per ton. Logically, very few growers will plant it when the payday for Cab is so much better. It is also very slow to ripen, and can yield a relatively small amount of grapes per vine. This makes it a risky variety to grow as the crop could be ruined by late season rain or frost. Luckily in Calistoga there are a few growers who still have it planted, and the folks at August Briggs use two vineyards as their source. A portion comes from Frediani Vineyard, from their block planted around 1920. The remaining portion is from the Meyer Vineyard, which boasts vines more than 50 years old.

Winemaker Jesse Inman, who is the nephew of founder Joe Briggs, works hard to mitigate the harsh tannins that Charbono can display. The grapes are hand-harvested, then de-stemmed into open-top fermentors. They employ twice daily punch downs to extract color until the wine is dry, when it is racked to American oak barrels. It is aged for sixteen months in barrel, with roughly a quarter of them being new.

When you are ready to enjoy this wine, be sure to decant it for up to an hour. The nose is an exotic combination of dried red plums, lingonberry, fresh blueberries, ras-el-hanout seasoning, cloves, and bitter chocolate. On the palate, this wine has a lot of power, but is balanced by long, smooth tannins and a prickle of bright acidity at the finish. This wine is drinkable now but will age well, until at least 2025.

My final pick for this quarter comes to us from an old friend in Washington State, Leo Kirk, formerly of the Kestrel Vineyard. He has a new gig as the director of sales for Basel Cellars, a small producer in Walla Walla. Leo and I have worked closely on several projects through the years, and I am excited that he has brought us his latest project.

Basel Cellars was founded in 2002 by grape grower Greg Basel, who purchased the existing Double River Ranch vineyards and manor house. Greg recognized the potential for great wines from the site, which boasts rich alluvial soils created by the Walla Walla river and Yellowhawk Creek, as well as underground cellars for winemaking. The estate vineyard is 85 acres but he also began the tradition of seeking out exceptional grapes from other areas in the Columbia Valley in order to build greater dimension in his wines. In 2004, he invited friends Steve and Jo Marie Hansen to join him, and in 2011 they purchased the estate outright.

While doing my research for the **2013 Basel Cellars Merriment (\$59)**, I was surprised to learn that much of the grapes for their flagship wine do not come from their estate vineyards in Walla Walla, but rather the Double Canyon and Phinny Hill vineyards in the Horse Heaven Hills. The Horse Heaven Hills, which I will abbreviate as HHH for space, is a relatively large growing area that lies south of the city of Yakima, and north of the Columbia River. It is classic high desert, with little rainfall and steady winds that blow across the barren landscape. The region is famous for self-rooted vines, meaning those not planted on rootstock, as the poor soils and arid conditions prevent most pests and fungus from thriving. Elevation in HHH runs from 300 to 1800 feet above sea level, and during the growing season they receive a staggering 17 hours of sunlight per day. The grapes that grow in the area are known for having very thick skins due to the wind and sun, as well as deep concentration. Many wineries buy grapes from this area to add color and power to their wines from vines growing in less severe conditions.

The 2013 vintage of Merriment was produced by the former winemaker of Basel Cellars, Ned Morris who departed in 2015. Starting with the 2015 harvest, Dirk Brink will direct the winemaking and Leo says big things are coming. Nevertheless, the 2013 Merriment is a massive wine, produced from 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot, and 17% Cabernet Franc. Morris used components from their estate, Double River Ranch, as well as grapes from Double Canyon and old vines from Phinny Hill in the final blend. The wine was aged in 100% new French oak barrels for 20 months, and 224 cases of this vintage were bottled.

When I tasted this wine for the first time, to me it displayed the qualities I associate with the desert vineyards of eastern Washington State. There are exotic notes of fresh sawn cedar, dried black figs, caraway seeds, cooked blackberries, and herbal/floral notes of rosemary and violets. On the palate, it has a broad sense of fruit, with surprisingly smooth tannins and good balance. Drink this wine over the next seven to ten years.

Buy six bottles of the Reserve Club features and receive a 20% discount off the listed prices