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Last quarter I selected a “second” wine from Chateau Calon-Segur, and it spawned several questions from club members about the purpose of these wines. To my delight, the feedback was in the direction of, “I was surprised it was so good, being a second wine.” This led me to think about the tiers of quality most wineries produce and how important the second wine has become in the modern winemaker’s arsenal. So this quarter, I selected three that are basically second wines, and I will show how they allow a winery to concentrate quality in the flagship bottling, experiment with different components or simply use up left over grapes too good to sell off in bulk.

While common place now, second wines are a relatively modern invention. It seems hard to believe now, but in the 1970s, the mystic of Bordeaux was very different. In those days most chateau, even the First Growths, were relatively primitive wineries. Like many wineries today, they struggled to modernize as their wines sold for very little. The the leading consultant of the time, Emile Peynaud, encouraged wineries to pick grapes later, clean up their winemaking, invest in new, clean barrels, and “declassify” wines that lowered the quality of the chateau’s flagship bottling. His logic was that if the wines were better, people would pay more for them. Instead of selling the lesser wines off in bulk to Bordeaux negotiants who would blend it away, he advocated putting effort even into the second wine and selling it. While they commanded less than their first label, it was more than selling off wine in bulk. His first big success was with Chateau Margaux, and his second Pavillon rouge. With its success other chateau followed suit, and second labels took off.

Now I will admit that up until just a few years ago I generally did not favor second wines. My first mentor in the business was a skeptic, assuming that second wines were made by interns, from lesser grapes and older barrels, rarely offering quality or value. My attitude changed a decade ago when I was hosting a Bordeaux tasting for my customers with Chris Lano, then the owner of the importer/distributor company Stacole, and one of the most knowledgeable people in the world on the subject. He corrected my thinking, explaining that while that was true in the 1970s and 1980s, by the 1990s the price of Bordeaux had risen so dramatically that the second wines offered the chateau serious cash flow as well. For that reason they are no longer relegated to the deepest, darkest corners of the chai (barrel aging facility) and most wineries offer theirs proudly.

For my first selection, the **2009 Pastourelle de Clerc-Milon Pauillac (\$65)**. This wine comes from Chateau Clerc-Milon, a Fifth Growth in the Classification of 1855. The chateau lies in the village of Milon, with their 101 acres of vineyards stretching immediately to the east, with a commanding view of the Gironde River. In 1970, the estate was purchased by Baron Philippe de Rothschild, the owner of Château Mouton Rothschild, for a sum of 1 million francs. At the time, the property was in poor shape and consisted of only 41 acres of vineyards. He purchased several adjacent blocks to build to the current size. The vineyards are some of the oldest in the Haut-Medoc, at an average of 53 years, and are very densely planted, at 10,000 vines per hectare. Vine age and density are big factors in the concentration of the wine and why this is such a rare bottling.

One of the things that makes this wine so unique is that many second wines are composed of a blend that is a mirror image of the first wine. What this means is that in the Haut-Medoc portion of Bordeaux, most chateau have a relatively high percentage of Merlot in the vineyard as an insurance policy, as it ripens early. For their flagship wine they will depend on Cabernet Sauvignon, using the other five legal varieties, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, and Carmenere to build dimension and complexity. In a year where the Cabernet is completely ripe, they will typically base the second wine on Merlot to use up the excess, then craft the blend using the other varieties. For Pastourelle, the winemaking team crafted a blend that is almost an exact breakdown of what is planted in the vineyard, making a wine that is 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 36% Merlot, 11% Cabernet Franc: 11%, 2% Petit Verdot, and 1% Carmenère. All of the components were aged for 16 to 18 months in a French oak barrels, with roughly 40% of them being new.

When you are ready to drink this wine, make sure to decant for up to an hour before serving. Once you do, it displays an almost Napa-esque nose of fresh pitted, black cherries, creme de muré (blackberry), wet concrete, cinnamon and a subtle note of cigar box. On the palate it has a soft and generous sense of fruit, with smooth, polished tannins and relatively low acidity. Drink now to 2022.

The second pick for this quarter, the **2009 CVNE Rioja Reserva “Contino” (\$65)** comes from one of the most historic estates of Spain’s most acclaimed winemaking region. Compañía Vinícola del Norte del España, or CVNE, was founded in 1879 by two brothers, in the city of Haro, Spain. Today, the group is still controlled by descendants of the original founders, but has grown to four separate wineries, all located within the Rioja region. The family believes that to achieve the highest quality, it is best to process the grapes as close to the source as possible.

While Contino is not really a “second” wine, it is sometimes erroneously described as the “second” wine of Imperial. In reality it is the top selection of a CVNE’s stand alone winery in Rioja Alavesa, and Imperial is the top wine made only from grapes grown in their Rioja Alta vineyards. Like the Imperial, it is only made in exceptional years.

When Rioja started to become “a thing” with American consumers a decade or so ago, there was great emphasis on wines made from Rioja Alta. Alta means “high” and high is always best, right? Well... turns out most of the vineyards in Rioja Alavesa, which wraps around Rioja Alta to the east, south, and west, are actually at higher elevations. In this case Rioja Alta refers to how it lies higher to the north on a map. So the wines of Rioja Alavesa typically lie at higher elevations, often over 3,000 feet. As a result the grapes retain a bit more acidity, so they have historically been blended with the wines of Rioja Alta to bring freshness to the blend. It has only been in the last 15-20 years that we have seen estates begin to separate their holdings and produce wines by zone.

The Contino winery occupies a building that was first constructed in the 16th century, making it the oldest “winery” in Rioja. CVNE purchased the building in 1973 and uses it to produce wine from their 400 acres of vineyards in the Rioja Alavesa sub-region. The soils of the Alavesa are very mixed, with the dominant qualities being clay and iron. When I was riding around Rioja Alavesa it struck me how everything has a red-ish hue, not unlike most of Georgia.

To produce Contino, the grapes are harvested into small baskets and destemmed before going into stainless steel fermentors. Tempranillo, which makes up 85% of this wine, is not known for deep pigmentation, so this is only left on the skins for 18-22 days before being racked to barrel. The wine then spends two years in barrel, a combination of 60% American barrels and 40% French, of which about half are new. For the record the remaining components are 10% Graciano, and a 5% mix of Garnacha and Manzanillo (Carignan.)

When you open this wine you will want to decant it for at least an hour before serving. Once you do it offers a brooding nose of dark chocolate, dried black figs, cooked black cherries, caramel, eucalyptus, and rosemary. In the mouth it is quite deep, but with lively acidity that gives it a lot of lift at the finish. Drink this wine from now to 2029.

My final selection comes from one of the jewels of Tuscany, the **2013 Tenuta Argentera Villa Donarico (\$35)**. The sprawling Argentera estate is located roughly 60 miles southeast from Florence, in the DOCG region of Bolgheri. This property covers over 1,800 acres of land, although only 185 are planted to vines. Since the estate sits at the highest elevation in the region, and is the closest to the Mediterranean Sea, it enjoys an unusually cool and sunny climate. The grapes mature slowly here, allowing them to pick later than other Bolgheri estates, with a perfect balance of acidity. Unlike the rest of Tuscany, where Sangiovese reigns supreme, the soils of Bolgheri are better suited to international varieties. At Argentera, they only grow Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Syrah.

Due to the size of the estate, they are capable of producing more than 40,000 cases of wine, which they divide, but not equally, between the flagship wine, Argentera, their second bottling the Villa Donarico, and the everyday wine, Poggio ai Ginepri. In very good years, they will also bottle tiny amounts of wine from exceptional single vineyard sites they refer to as their “crus”. Only a small amount of wine is bottled as Argentera, and the winemaking emphasizes age-ability. Villa Donarico is also relatively small production, only a couple of thousand cases, but it is softer and more approachable in youth. Most of the production is made into the Poggio ai Ginepri, which is the perfect price for restaurant by-the-glass pours and everyday drinking.

Few people realize that it was Bolgheri where the “super-Tuscan” revolution started. In 1968, the Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta released a wine, Sassicaia, that broke all the rules of what we knew for Tuscany. At the time, Bolgheri was not a known wine region, so this wine was produced quite outside the famous zones of Chianti Classico and Montalcino. To make matter worse, after five decades of experimentation the Marchese knew Sangiovese was the wrong variety for the region. Soon, his cousin Piero Antinori would establish Ornellaia, and the category exploded. For American consumers, who were the target market, the wines provide a familiar taste profile as the majority of Bolgheri wines are based on Cabernet Sauvignon as the soils of the region are often compared to the Haut-Medoc of Bordeaux.

The Villa Donarico is named for the nearby village to the Argentera estate. The blend for the 2013 is 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Cabernet Franc, 20% Merlot, and 5% Petit Verdot. All of the grapes are hand-picked and fermented in stainless steel tanks. It is then transferred to small, French oak barriques, where it is aged for fourteen months. Once it was bottled they also held it for an additional nine months before release.

When you decide to serve this wine, decant it for at least a half hour before serving. If you do this, when you pour your first glass you will be greeted with a deep nose of dried cherries, figs, milk chocolate, cigar box, and a bit of cola syrup. On the palate, this wine is very muscular and broad, showing a strong sense of fruit with a savory edge, and long, smooth tannins. Drink this wine between now and 2022.