



November, 2016
Volume XIX

In the early 20th century, a popular idiom evolved on the fairgrounds of America. Barkers on the midway would lure people to their stalls, then when the fairgoer barely missed the prize, the barker would utter “close, but no cigar.” The cigar, of course, being the prize. This quarter all of my selections come from regions that are very close to, but not in, some of Europe’s top wine areas. So, in the case of these features, close is more than acceptable. In fact, you may come to think of these areas as the real prize!

My first pick is a wine from the isolated Alto Piemonte region of Italy and the historical village of Ghemme. The **2007 Rovelloti Ghemme “Chioso dei Pomi” (\$69)** is a perfect example of the style of wines produced in this zone, which lies an hour-and-a-half drive northeast from the town of Barolo. In fact on driving maps, the village of Ghemme appears to be a suburb of Milan. In reality, this ancient village is a million miles from the hustle of Italy’s second largest city, high in the foothills of the Alps.

Like most old Italian villages, Ghemme was at one time a fortress at the top of a steep hill. If you visit the area, you can still walk into the 10th century *Ricetto*, or walled compound, where inhabitants took refuge in times of war. The vineyards of Ghemme cascade down the hills to the south of the town, divided into four zones. Most of the grapes grown in the area are Nebbiolo, which like the vines in Barolo, requires an extremely long growing season. Although other grapes are grown, they are most often indigenous varieties such as Vespolina and Erbaluce, as well as Uva Rara, which has been identified as Bonarda. The Rovelloti family farm 15 hectares, or about 50 acres, divided across several areas and exclusively prime vineyards.

It is not hard to imagine how this family has come to own most of the best sites in Ghemme. They trace their history in the village to the 15th century, and have been passing down vineyards for so long that they do not even know how many generations. The majority of their holdings lie in the Cru of Baraggiola, which is further sub-divided into four more growing zones. For the majority of the grapes in this wine, their entry level red, they come from Baraggiola Valplazza. They also own the neighboring block of oldest vines in the village, which is used for their Riserva. Since the 1980’s, the Rovelloti family have worked with the University of Milan to eliminate the use of chemicals in their vineyards. Although they are not certified organic, no chemicals have been used on these vines for almost thirty years.

To create their Ghemme “Chioso dei Pomi,” the grapes are hand harvested, as no machine can move up the steep hills. The grapes are fermented in stainless steel tanks with extended skin contact after the fermentation is complete. The wine is then moved to large Slovenian oak tanks for twelve months. After that, the wine is moved to smaller 5000 liter barrels for an additional eighteen months. At that time, the final assembly is made, and 15% Vespolina is added in this case, then the wine is bottled and aged an additional nine months before release.

When you open this wine, you will see why such time is needed to allow the full potential of this wine to blossom. Decant it for at least an hour, but I would even suggest the morning of the day you intend to drink it. The color is not very dark, but do not let that fool you into thinking it is a light wine. The nose offers you a strong scent of sour cherries and bitter, Italian plums with complex layers of grilled lamb fat, cinnamon, allspice, caramel and tarragon. On the palate, it is nicely deep and concentrate with long but obvious tannins and a lot of polish. Although good now, this wine will easily improve for up to decade.

My second selection, the **2013 Mauro Vino de la Tierra de Castilla (\$59)** is produced from a vineyard that lies just outside of the famed Ribera del Duero region of Spain. The grapes for this wine grow in the area of Tudela de Duero, which lies 19 kilometers southwest of the regional capital of Valladolid. When the boundaries of the Ribera del Duero region were drawn, they ignored this small valley that lies on the river due to the presence of some old vine Garnacha. This is despite the fact that the region was so respected that the history of wines date back to 1562, when Felipe II exempted the vineyards from paying taxes due to the high quality of their wines. It is also worth noting that when the Swiss pharmaceutical firm Novartis decided to build a winery and vineyard in the Ribera del Duero, they too selected this valley.

The reason why this wine is worthy of a club selection is not just because it fits a quirky theme. Bodegas Mauro was founded by Marianna Garcia, who for more than thirty years was the head winemaker of Vega Sicilia. If you are not a devotee of Spanish wine, you may not recognize this name, but they are Spain’s greatest and most expensive wines. Garcia was such a believer in the potential of regions outside the Ribera del Duero that he led their expansion into the Toro, and their wine Pintia. In the 1970’s, he found this old vineyard and purchased the land along with partners Luciano Suarez and his cousin, Felix Choque. Suarez is also an architect, who specializes in the restoration of medieval monuments and so the winery, opened in 1980, lies within a 17th century mansion.

Due to the proximity to the river, the 250 acres of vineyards of Bodegas Mauro lie on a complex combination of soils. There is a mix of sand, gravel, limestone and clay, and each is planted with a variety or in a technique that accentuates the best qualities of the grape. Almost all of the vines are Tempranillo, but they also grow Syrah and Grenache which are

sometimes included in their blends. Since inception, the vines have been farmed using organic procedures, although they are not certified.

I visited this area in 2007, and it was not lost on me that the vines had little growth, even in early May. The climate in this area is considered continental. This means that the summers are very warm and winters can be quite cold. My own experience was a day approaching 90 degrees after lunch, and the need for a sweatshirt shortly after sun down. The wide daily temperature swings of the area mean that the grapes ripen quickly, but harvest is delayed due to the cool fall. As a result, the wines have incredible color and concentration, which you will soon see.

Winemaking at Bodegas Mauro is very modern. The grapes are hand harvested and sorted before going into the fermentor. Fermentation is done using indigenous yeast, and the wine is left on the skins for an additional twenty to thirty days. This builds greater color and also polymerizes the tannins to produce a softer and more approachable wine. Aging is done for sixteen months in a combination of 85% French oak barriques (225 liter) and 15% American barrels. Approximately 20% of the barrels in each vintage are new. The final blend for this wine includes 10% Syrah, which is handled the same way as the Tempranillo.

When you decide to drink this wine, make sure to decant it for at least one hour before serving, and two would be better. The nose is extremely forward with notes of black raspberry jam, cooked blueberry, peach skin, vanilla sugar cookie, cola syrup, Luxardo cherries and cedar. In the mouth, it is quite dense and broad with a firm sense of tannins that appear right after the initial big wave of fruit, then soften into the finish. You can drink this wine now but it will improve for five to seven years.

My final pick, the **2012 Vieux Chateau Saint Andre Montagne St. Emilion (\$39)** is known within the wine trade as an “insiders” wine. This is because it is owned and crafted by one of the world’s greatest living winemakers, but is priced for those of us in the trade who cannot afford his most famous bottling.

Vieux Chateau Saint Andre, henceforth known as VCSA, is owned by Jean-Claude Berrouet. While not a household name, Berrouet was, for forty-four vintages, working for all the estates controlled by the Moueix family. Best known for his development of Chateau Petrus into a juggernaut, he also helmed the winemaking at Chateau Trotanoy and Magdelaine. In addition, he established the winemaking at Christian Moueix’s other famous Napa estate, Dominus, where he guided the winemaking from 1982 to 1993.

Berrouet is best known as the world’s top winemaker of Merlot based wines, and often seen as a foil to the “other” famous consultant from Bordeaux, Michel Rolland. I would generally say that Rolland appears to craft the same wine from many different places, but his signature is always apparent. He was the prime target of the movie, *Mundo Vino*, which targets his homogenization of winemaking, regardless of soil or climate. By comparison, Berrouet believes the winemakers job is to coax the character of a site through the wine, without the appearance of being “made.”

The wine region of Montagne Saint Emilion lies an hours drive east of the city of Bordeaux and immediately east of the town of Libourne. It is considered one of the “satellites” of the more famous Saint Emilion wines. These surrounding areas, which lie north of the Dorgogne River, share a similar climate and soil. Historically the area was ignored because of the relatively thin nature of the wines. With prices for Bordeaux escalating into the stratosphere, many chateau owners have purchased land here to create lesser wines. With their arrival comes expertise and investment, which is why now many savvy buyers seek out the wines of these region.

The VCSA property is almost twenty acres of vines and is managed with his son, Jeff. Most of the property is planted to Merlot, which thrives in the humid climate and clay based soils of the area. Throughout the vineyard there are pockets of sand and they plant Cabernet Franc and a little Cabernet Sauvignon in those soils. Although he does not advocate biodynamic farming, Berrouet is quite “spiritual” and is known for his passion for mystic, earth energies. There is a story that he is so attuned to the Earth’s rhythms, that when planting the vineyards of Dominus, he insisted they fly Druids to the site to help focus positive energy on the vines.

The winemaking at VCSA follows the process he laid out at Chateau Petrus. The grapes are hand harvested, then destemmed and fermented using indigenous yeast in large, concrete tanks. After the wine is dry, it is moved to small, French barriques, half new, and aged for sixteen months. The final blend of the 2012 is 80% Merlot and the balance of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, although exact percentages appear to be a big secret.

When you open this wine, allow it breathe for a half hour in the decanter. When you pour your first glass, give it a big swirl and stick your nose deep into the glass. Ahhh... black raspberry, black peppercorns, old leather, cigar box and or maybe more specifically, tobacco store. Do not let the high percentage of Merlot fool you into thinking this is a “soft” wine. The palate is very deep with a serious frame of acidity and tannins, which do resolve themselves as this wine stretches into the long finish. You can certainly drink this wine now, and I may serve it with our Christmas Eve standing rib roast, but it will age nicely for up to fifteen years.