



Reserve Club

October, 2016

Since I write both Reserve Clubs in consecutive months, the original and European, it is an interesting juxtaposition of the material I find during my research. While most American winemakers are proud of the place they grow their grapes, often the content is more about the farming and wine making. Europeans by contrast, typically spend lots of time discussing the soil, exposition and unique micro-climate of their vineyard, and then brief notes on the actual winemaking. As I typically pick the wines, then do the research, I am surprised with these selections by how much material each of the featured owner/winemakers spends on their unique place on the planet. So from a unique point-of-view, this quarter the features are as much about place as process. They are also very different wines in their style, so I have nicknamed them Beauty, Power and Grace.

In this quarter the “beauty” is the **2014 Longoria Pinot Noir “Lovely Rita” (\$49)**. While some of you may think of Pinot Noir as producing only lighter, “wimpy” wines, there are some places, and producers, where they have a little more meat on the bone. Those from the Santa Rita Hills, like this one, are typically bigger, meaning a little more structure and mouthfeel, than those from the North Coast AVAs like Carneros and Russian River.

This is not the first Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir I have selected, but the last one was in early 2010, so let me review why this area is unique. Twenty million years ago the soils of the Santa Rita Hills were ocean bottom, lying off the coast off present day Santa Barbara. Over time the Pacific tectonic plate slid over the North American tectonic plate and formed the coastal range of mountains that basically runs the entire west coast of the US. What is really unique about the Santa Rita Hills, is that after the mountains were formed, a portion of the plates shifted again, and rotated a small area in a clockwise direction. This is why the Santa Rita Hills, is the only place on the west coast of North and South America where the coastal valley runs east-west. As a result the weather is much cooler and foggier than other parts of California, except where the tops of the mountains poke through the fog. It is on these “islands in the sky” that the vineyards of the Santa Rita Hills are planted. The soils are also higher in calcium than most areas in California, which contributes higher natural acidity, and structure, than grapes grown in most other areas.

The creator of this wine, Rick Longoria, is one of the early pioneers who recognized the potential of grapes grown in the Santa Rita Hills. The first vines were planted in the area in 1972, at the famous Sanford & Benedict Vineyard. It was not until the mid-1990’s that others, like Rick and Bryan Babcock joined Richard Sanford in filing for their own AVA. When the area was granted status in 2001 that paved the way for what is now 2,100 acres of Pinot Noir vines in the area.

To produce this wine Rick Longoria chooses mostly grapes from this own, Fe Ciega estate vineyard. For 2014 he also augmented with a small amount of grapes, about 9% each, from neighbors the Cloud 9 and Arita Hills vineyards. The grapes from these vineyards are able to hang longer than most areas, because the cool temperatures and constant wind which slow ripening. As result the grapes are smaller, with thicker skins and higher acidity. This lends concentration, more tannin and freshness to the final wines. Rick destemmed all the grapes and fermented them in a combination of open top bins and tanks. Once dry, the wine is racked off the skins, allowed to settle, then moved to French oak barrels, 12% new, where it was aged for 11 months. Rick produced 634 cases of this vintage.

When you open this wine, let it breathe for a half-hour in a decanter before serving. Once you do it offers deep aromas of cherry, cinnamon, molasses, dark chocolate and bay leaf. On the palate it is bright and gripping, with a good sense of tannins and acidity, with a smooth and relatively rich finish. Drink this wine over the next two to three years with tuna steaks served with a red miso/soy glaze.

The “Power” for this set is a Washington State Cabernet Sauvignon, the **2011 Gorman “The Bully” (\$60)**, which by name alone should be obvious. Chris Gorman is one of the young wiz kids of Washington, producing critically acclaimed wines that do not attempt to be subtle. Like the theme music of the video on his website, he is about heavy metal winemaking; power chords, lots of bass and a deep, throaty vocals that put you a little on edge.

At the core of Chris’ wines is extraordinary Red Mountain fruit, which lies in the Yakima Valley of Washington State. This is a pretty well-worn path for us, in 2014 I featured three wines from the same AVA.

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The reason is simple. Red Mountain produces extremely powerful wines with great color and structure. When I am searching for Reserve Club picks, this is like going to the pet store for a puppy. They all are cute and bark out, “take me home.”

What makes Red Mountain such a significant place for grape growing is the poor soils. Like most of eastern Washington State, the region was swept clean of its top soil by the Missoula floods during the ice age. The ensuing 10,000 years have not been enough for this area to develop more, so there is only a thin layer of top soil lying on a thick base of basalt. As we have seen time and time again, poor soils limit the vines productivity, but the sunny, warm climate encourages the vine to produce sugar. That means more sugar in each grape, and the sugar converts to alcohol; which in turn is mouthfeel. The grapes themselves are also smaller, which also contributes to color and tannin. In simple terms, this is a really good place to grow red grapes.

The amplify the character Chris Gorman takes an additional step and partially barrel ferments his red wines. For white wine this is easy but for red it is a much more expensive and time consuming process. You see, to ferment white wine in barrel you press the grapes, then pump the juice through the bung hole, add yeast and let nature do its thing. For red wine, where skin contact is required, you have to remove the head of the barrel (on of the ends), add the grapes, then constantly push the skins back into the wine to extract color. Since barriques only hold the equivalent of 300 bottles, think about how many barrels have to be disassembled, then reassembled so the wine can be aged. A couple of years ago I read an article in Wine Business Monthly (yeah, I’m that geeky) that interviewed three winemakers about the process. They all agree the results are worth the effort, but few go through the hassle due to the time and expense. Gorman is the current wiz kid because he does.

When I tasted the 2011 for the first time, a year ago, I almost made it a Reserve Club feature then. The only reason I did not was because I was also considering another Red Mountain wine, the Tamarack Ciel du Cheval, which had a year more of bottle age and was showing smoother. This time I had the choice of grabbing the newly released 2012, or taking the last remaining 2011. Although the 2012 is slightly more powerful, I like where the 2011 is at this moment. Of course I am usually drawn to cooler vintages.

Pull the cork and give this wine at least a half-hour in the decanter before serving. When you give this wine a swirl it explodes from the glass, with a combination of sassafras, black cherry, strawberry jam, red licorice, bay leaf, orange marmalade and cola syrup. In the mouth there are no surprises, with a big core of dense, powerful fruit, framed by very long and well integrated tannins. Good enough now, this wine will improve nicely for at least five years. Approximately 650 cases of this wine were produced.

My final pick, the “Grace” is a wine that already has a few years in bottle, and is drinking as well as any Cab I have tasted this year. The **2009 Perata Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (\$60)** is the from the Yountville AVA of Napa Valley. As anyone can attest who has ever stayed in Yountville, even on the hottest days of the summer you need a sweater when you leave your hotel room in the morning, and walk down to the Bouchon Bakery for coffee. It is this small amount of cool air that makes the Yountville AVA so different from the hotter parts of the valley, farther north.

The Perata family purchased their property in 1949 and for most of their history have grown and sold grapes to other wineries. Then in 2003, the current and third generation, David Perata, decided to hold back some grapes and make his own wine. He elicited the help of Gary Galleron to make the wine. Gary is not as well known as some Napa winemakers, but after a long stint at Chateau Montelena he became the force behind the holy trinity of Grace Family, Vineyard 29 and Hartwell Vineyards. They recently built their own winery on property and they only produce about 2000 cases of wine per year.

What makes the wines of this area work is a combination of soils and daytime temperatures that are slightly cooler than the rest of the valley. For thousands of years the Napa River has shifted its course, alternately washing away top soil and leaving gravel, as it redeposits it in other areas. At this end of the valley, close to San Pablo Bay, the soils are easily defined. The Perata’s property is a mix of deep, fertile soil and shallow beds of gravel. Each block of their vineyard is a specific clone of Cabernet selected for the vigor of the spot. Since their wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, they build dimension by mixing the grapes from the various growing mediums. Vines planted in rich soils give soft, generous fruit while those from rockier spots yield more structure. The close proximity to the cool San Pablo Bay keeps the morning temperatures lower than farther up the valley, which slows the ripening process and allows the grapes to develop deep, complex flavors. After aging in new French oak barrels for 28 months, the wine is held at the winery an additional four years before release. Only 220 cases of this wine were produced.

When you open this wine, it begins to show its stuff pretty quickly, but let it breathe for a half-hour to develop even more. The nose is a subtle but complex combination of dark chocolate, subtle caramel, maduro cigar wrapper, dried black plums, cherry preserves and dried basil. In the mouth it is very deep, with the broad fruit framed by almost invisible tannins and low acidity. This wine is delicious now and will likely improve for another couple of years, but why wait?

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