



Reserve Club

Fall/October 2017

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The first pick for this quarter is a wine that almost baffles me how it has not been featured before, the **2012 Vine Cliff Cabernet Sauvignon “Napa” (\$59)**. There was a time, several years ago, when Vine Cliff was a favorite here at the Orlando store and we sold an ocean of both the Chardonnay and the Cabernet Sauvignon. Then, as is often the case, one of their wines received a big rating in a year when not much was produced, and it quickly went out of stock at the distributor. Out of sight, out of mind, and we moved on to other wines. But a couple of months ago I tasted their current releases, and it was like sliding on a pair of my favorite old KEENs.

Although not well known as a historic winery, Vine Cliff has a long history of wine production in the Napa Valley. The land was part of the original holdings of George Yount, for whom Yountville was named. In 1870, five years after Yount's death, the land was purchased by George Burrage and Thomas Tucker, who founded the original Vine Cliff winery. They built an extensive winery, although there are no records of vineyards on the property. Speculation is that they planned on buying grapes from Yount's estate, as they had a vineyard near the property that is now under what is the present day Rector Reservoir. Before they ever saw completion of the extensive cellars and estate, they both died, and the property was purchased by John Fry. Fry was a wealthy San Franciscan who invested heavily in the winery and land, creating one of the premier estates in the valley by the early 1890s. For almost a decade Vine Cliff was considered a show-piece of the up-and-coming Napa Valley. Then, in early 1900, the vineyards were wiped out by phylloxera, followed by Fry's death in 1901. Within a few years the original winery disappeared, with only the original caves and stone first floor remaining.

In 1985, the property was purchased by Chuck and Nell Sweeney, who, along with their son Rob, literally raised this estate from the ashes. They began rebuilding on top of the original foundation and opened their barrel aging facility in the old caves in 1991. Soon after, in 1995, they completed the gravity flow winery that is still one of the premier facilities in Napa Valley.

During this time they also began planting the property to vineyards. The estate is located above the Silverado Trail on the east side of the valley. Like their neighbors Dalla Valle, Harlan, and Colgin, the vineyards are planted on the hard scrub soils of the Vaca Mountains. In order to carefully control the growth of the vines, all of their irrigation is turned on via manual valves, which often means a ride across the property on hot days using four-wheelers. Their twenty acres of vines on the estate, as well as the twelve acres in Carneros, are farmed using sustainable practices, which they began in 1990.

For their Napa bottling, the Sweeney's chose to augment their Oakville estate fruit with a small amount of grapes purchased from the expansive Round Pond estate in Rutherford. For this vintage, twelve percent of the grapes come from the valley floor, which they feel adds an element of flesh and texture to the final wine. The make-up of grapes is 83% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Malbec, 5% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Petit Verdot, which were vinified separately and aged in 65% new French oak barrels for twenty-two months. Due to the extended time in barrel, the wine is bottled without filtration or fining.

When you are preparing to serve this wine, make sure to decant for at least an hour. The nose shows the chapparral qualities of the Vaca Mountains, with notes of wild sage, claro cigar wrapper, black pepper, Luxado cherry, dark chocolate, and caramel. On the palate it also shows the more dusty nature of the east side of Napa, with fruit that is big and held in check by firm, slightly dusty tannins. You will want to drink this wine over the next five years.

The second pick for this quarter, the **2014 Ayoub Pinot Noir “Overlook Vineyard” (\$59)** is my first from the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Mo Ayoub is the type of winemaker/owner that I developed the Reserve Club to promote. Unlike so many winery owners, who amass their wealth in business and then buy their vineyard, Mo is building his winery slowly as funds allow. He only recently quit his “day job” as a Silicon Valley engineer, after years of commuting back and forth from his Willamette Valley home. It is Mo's passion for food and wine that led him to the Dundee Hills, and what he is producing in his tiny winery is gaining a lot of attention with private clients, critics and other winemakers.

The first vintage of Ayoub Pinot Noir was 2004, made under the watchful eye of Josh Bergstrom. For the first few years, Mo only utilized grapes from his densely planted, 4-acre estate vineyard in the Dundee Hills. Making

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only 400 cases of wine, it is fermented in small lots with great attention to detail. In 2010, with the completion of the tiny winery attached to his house, he now has enough room to add to the production. For several years, there has been a small amount of Chardonnay sourced from a neighboring vineyard. Now he also produces bottlings from purchased grapes, including those from nearby Archery Summit, as well as some purchased from his current winemaker Robert Brittan's vineyards in the McMinville AVA. Through Brittan, he also met the owner of the Overlook Vineyard, and in a grapes-for-space arrangement, is producing a tiny amount of wine from this up-and-coming site.

The Overlook Vineyard also lies in the volcanic Jory soils of the Dundee Hills, with vines planted ten years ago. The site has a perfect east-southeast exposure, which allows for the mix of Dijon, Pommard, and heirloom clones of Pinot Noir to ripen completely. Yields are kept at below two tons of grapes per acre, which further adds to the wines concentration and depth. The wine is fermented in open-top bins with hand punch-downs, then aged in French oak barrels for a year, with about a quarter being new.

When you open this wine to serve it, decant for a half-hour to allow the bouquet to develop and the structure to resolve. When you swirl this wine around the glass, it definitely shows the more assertive side of the Dundee Hills, with focused notes of black rhubarb, brown sugar, fresh sour cherries, red currants, sage, and dried parsley. On the palate it has a good sense of red fruits, but is also surprisingly broad and textured into the long finish. Drink between now and 2022.

For my final selection I want to spotlight a new vintage of a wine that has been featured before, marking the progress of someone I feel is one of California's great, unsung winemakers. The **2014 Halter Ranch Ancestor (\$50)** has been featured twice before. I originally selected the 2008 bottling in 2013, a wine made before the arrival of winemaker Kevin Sass to Halter Ranch. When I made that pick I already intended to show a newer year, by then having visited Sass in Paso Robles and seeing the majestic wines in the pipeline. The feature last year of the 2012 Ancestor showed Kevin's change in style, and became one of our best selling Reserve Club picks of all time. Having recently tasted the incredible 2014, I felt that I could once more show off what amazing work is happening at this winery.

For those of you who do not remember his name, Kevin is one of the most awarded winemakers in Paso Robles, from where this wine originates. For 9 years, he was at the helm of Justin Winery, producing their world renowned Isosceles and Paso Cab. When the Baldwins sold the winery in 2010 to Stewart Resnick and Fiji Water, the owner of Halter Ranch, Hansjörg Wyss, approached Kevin to make the move. He was already extremely familiar with the vineyards at Halter Ranch, as they had been the grape source for most of the top-end wines made by Justin.

If you ever visit Halter Ranch, you will see why it is easy to fall in love with the wines. The property is over a thousand acres on Adelaida Road on the west side of the appellation. There are over 260 acres of vines planted on the rolling hills and steeper hillsides, some at elevations over 1700 feet above sea level. The vineyards are divided into 77 unique blocks, planted to 19 different grape varieties. About 60% of the vines are Bordeaux varieties, and the balance are Rhone grapes with the exception of some Tempranillo as well. If that is not enough to get a cork-dork's mouth watering, the winery is also one of the most impressive, state-of-the-art facilities I have ever visited. All of this creates the pallet from which Kevin gets to paint his masterpiece, the Ancestor wine.

The Ancestor is named for one of the largest and oldest Coastal Oaks in California that lives among the vines in what the Halter folks call Block 11. It is a massive tree, similar to a great old Southern Oak with swooping branches that reach out at least fifty feet from the trunk. To craft the Ancestor wine, Kevin produces what he feels is the best example of what the vineyard gives him each year. In 2014, the blend is 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Malbec, and 18% Petite Verdot from 7 different blocks on the estate. All of the grapes for this wine were destemmed and fermented in closed top stainless steel fermentors. In order to extract the most color and flavor, the wine was pumped over the cap of skins up to 3 times a day during the sixteen day fermentation. The 2008, which was made by the previous winemaker, was fermented for twenty-one days with twice daily pump-overs. This wine was then aged in French oak barrels, of which 60% were new, for eighteen months.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for an hour before serving. Giving this wine a swirl around the glass releases a rich bouquet of cooked blueberries, blackberry jam, eucalyptus, cocoa powder, clove, and allspice. On the palate it offers a big, dense sense of fruit, framed by very fine grained tannins and low acidity. Drink this wine over the next 6 to ten years.

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