



**November, 2017**  
**Volume XIII**

The news is making a big deal about the potential for a wine shortage after the smaller-than-normal global grape harvest, but the selections for this quarter show there is no impending danger. Yes, production is lower, but for most regions it is something of a statistical anomaly. 2017 may be small, but for many wine regions their cellars are full with large crops from 2015 and 2016. My guess is that there are some small, Napa Cabernet producers who will have to cut allocations for this vintage, but I doubt many of us will hardly notice.

For this quarter, I have made selections that will drink beautifully in the near future, in case you want to share them during the holidays. The first selection is the **2009 Il Palazzone Brunello di Montalcino (\$69)**, a wonderful wine that is ready to be consumed now or in the next couple of years. I tasted this wine with a vendor who had little knowledge of the estate, so when I started doing my research I discovered why this wine is so good. Give any winemaker an unlimited budget and the king's resources and the wines are bound to succeed. In this case, "the king" is Richard "Dick" Parsons, an American who also happens to be the former Chairman of the Board of Time-Warner and Citigroup. Parsons is a passionate fan of the wines of Montalcino, and when this estate came up for sale in 2000, he dove in head first.

As you might expect of someone with Parsons pedigree, his decision to buy this estate was not hasty. On an African safari with his wife to celebrate his 50th birthday, he was inspired by the beauty of the savannah. This was after his tenure with Time-Warner and he was looking to begin the next chapter of his life. Thinking about his passion for wine and desire to be outdoors enjoying nature, a winery was the logical path. After a year of travel, he and his wife settled on Tuscany for their endeavor. They established a home base in Florence, and during frequent visits he would travel the countryside of Tuscany scouting potential sites with the help of a local expert. Then, in the early 2000s, he decided on Montalcino and found an estate for sale, Terrasole, owned by the dynamic Mario Bollag. With excellent vineyard sites but an aging winery, Parsons made the deal and began planning on renovations and upgrades. Today, the new winery sports all the bells and whistles, including 50-hectoliter oak fermentors.

The hidden gem of this estate is their three outstanding vineyards. The first, Due Porte, lies almost 1800 feet above sea level, one of the highest in the region, where the grapes ripen very slowly. Their two other vineyards lie outside the commune of Castelnuovo dell'Abate, at lower elevation, but are planted to vines that are more than thirty years old. From these old soldiers they receive grapes that add great power and dimension to the final blend. All three vineyards are farmed using organic methods. They also perform an extreme green harvest each year during veraison, so their yields are 25 percent below the maximum allowed by the Consorzio for production of Brunello di Montalcino.

Once the grapes are hand-harvested, they are sorted and fermented in those beautiful, upright oak fermentors. The juice spends up to 30 days on the skins after fermentation, with frequent pump-overs, then the dry wine is moved to large Slovenian oak botti. Although the regulations require only 24 months of aging in oak, at Il Palazzone they go up to 40 months, depending on the vintage. For the more supple and generous 2009, this wine spent 34 months in wood.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for up to an hour before serving. Immediately upon pouring, the first glass this wine displays a rich nose of cooked red plums, dried cherries, balsamic syrup, cedar, toasted marshmallows and a bit of dark chocolate. On the palate, it is incredibly deep and smooth, but still shows a surprising frame of tannins that frame the finish. Good now, this wine will improve for up to another 10 years in proper storage.

As I look around at the wines I want to be drinking out of my "retirement" cellar, it is the 2015 Northern Rhones and Burgundies that interest me most. Both regions enjoyed beautiful harvests and the best wines will take 15 to 20 years to reach their apex. A sneak preview of the joy these wines will bring in the mid-2020s is the **2015 Xavier Monnot Maranges 1er Cru "Clos de la Fussiere" (\$50)**. I have been a fan of Xavier's wines since we first tasted them with importer Bobby Kacher more than a decade ago. He owns 42 acres spread from the city of Beaune, south to the Maranges appellation, with their primary holdings in the village of Meursault. Xavier is unusual in that 60 percent of his production is white and 40 percent is red. Typically, you do not see Burgundy estates so equally divided.

The lesser known Maranges AOC is the southern-most appellation of the Cotes du Beaune, encompassing three villages; Cheilly-lès-Maranges, Dezize-lès-Maranges and Saigny-lès-Maranges. The appellation is interlocked with neighboring Santenay and in fact share a couple of premier cru vineyards. Though the hill-slopes are differently oriented to those of the Côte de Beaune, their origins are geologically the same. The vineyards mostly have a south/south-westerly exposure and lie at altitudes of 800-1200 feet above sea level. Soils in the area are mostly brown limestone, intermixed with clay, sand and loam. Due to their warmer exposition and relatively fertile soils, the wines of Maranges are softer and more approachable young. Although this wine may age for 15 years, I thought it a good example of the vintage but approachable enough to enjoy in the near term.

The Clos de la Fuissiere is a monopole *climat* that lies within the premier cru vineyard of La Fuissiere, in the village of Dezize-les-Maranges. A *clos* is a walled vineyard, with this one lying at the bottom of the premier cru site. It is a three acre site that has been in the Monnot family for five generations and the vines are quite old, most older than 30 years. He also farms his vineyards using the *lutte raisonnée* approach. This means “reasoned struggle” in French, and is an approach that you do nothing unless necessary, and then only the bare minimum. In the new world, we call this sustainable farming.

When Xavier assumed control of this estate in 1994, he immediately began a process of replanting the old, diseased vineyards farmed by his father and grandfather. He used a combination of massale selection, meaning cuttings from his original vines, as well as some clones in the replanting. Being a trained oenologist, he also upgraded the cellar, although the wines are very much hand-made at this estate. In 2005, he renamed the estate, changing it from René Monnier, which was his grandfather. Having watched these wines for many years I can comfortably say that he is coming into his own and ranks among the elite of the highly acclaimed Meursault producers.

If you want to enjoy this wine young, say, with Thanksgiving dinner, then you will want to decant it a good hour before serving. Immediately upon pouring a glass you will be greeted with an inviting combination of fresh black cherries, black raspberry puree, rose petals, pomegranate syrup and tea olive flowers. In the mouth, this wine shows gorgeous balance, with moderate acidity and tannins framing the ample fruit into the long finish. Drink this wine from 2017 to 2027.

For my final pick I found another one that is pretty approachable now, the **2004 Olabarri Rioja Gran Reserva (\$45)**. If I have written it once, I have a dozen times, that there are no greater values in the world right now than Rioja Reserva and Gran Reserva. Where else can you buy a perfectly cellared wine that is 13 vintages old for less than \$50?

The history of this winery begins in 1985, when Pablo Olabarri purchased the 100-year-old Anguciana winery. It was his intention to create a high-quality estate-bottled Rioja, but he never saw his dream realized. Upon his death in 1990, his son Luis Olabarri took over the family estate and continues to oversee operations today. Along with current winemaker, Fernando Salgado, they use techniques which are rooted in tradition passed down from the 100-year-old estate, along with the best modern winemaking technology has to offer. I still divide Rioja producers into “old-school” and “modernists” styles, but I find Olabarri wines to be down the middle. I describe this group as “enlightened traditionalists.”

They produce this wine from grapes grown in the the Bikandi vineyard, which lies in the sub-region of Rioja Alta, specifically near the village of Fuenmayor. This 50-acre vineyard lies at a little less than 1500 feet above sea level, on soils that are ancient river bed, a mix of sand and gravel. The average age of the vines is 50 years old, but several blocks are far older, with some pushing a century. Each vine is spur-trained, so the leaf canopy is high and shields the grapes from the extreme Spanish sun. Being old vines each only produces a few clusters of highly concentrated grapes. Hailing from the exceptional 2004, this wine shows the great ripeness and tension of high quality Tempranillo, augmented with 20% Graciano and Manzuolo.

Like most of the traditional estates, the Olabarri’s use a combination of French and American oak barrels and large casks. This wine was aged for 24 months in the large casks, then bottled and held an additional 10 years before release. Officially the legal requirement for Gran Reserva is only three years of bottle aging, but sales of this category are not what they should be, hence the 10 years. One of the reasons this wine falls into the “enlightened” category is that while aging in older, neutral oak, they do keep the barrels full. For decades it was the practice to let the wine in the barrel evaporate, which is common everywhere, but not “top off” the barrels to keep them full. Not topping off encourages the development of all sorts of problems, most notably acetic acid, which is vinegar. This is part of the reason why the old-school Rioja producers never developed a big following in the US as their wines were something of an acquired taste. Today almost all producers practice good barrel management, which includes topping off, so the wines are much better.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for up to two hours before serving. This is not so much for the tannins but for the bouquet, which takes on layers of dimension with each passing moment. When you pour the first glass, you are met with a mind-bending combination of cinnamon, nutmeg, dried cherries, cooked blackberries, molasses, milk chocolate, dried herbs oregano and fennel seed. This wine has a gorgeous sense of texture and body, with tannins that are still firm but very well-integrated. One of the great elements of older wines is the length of finish, and this one goes on for almost a full minute. Serve this with braised pork shanks, lamb chops or rabbit and chorizo paella. Drink from 2017 to 2024.

