



## 2016 Yalumba Vermentino “Y Series” (\$15)

This month there is really no theme, just two very interesting wines that should be a surprise to many of you. My first selection is a really interesting example of a classically Mediterranean variety produced in Australia. While this may sound unusual, climate change is forcing producers in many parts of the world to examine varieties that are not typical of their area. For instance, many scientists believe that in 50 years, it will be too warm to grow Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley. This is why many estates I speak to have started to experiment with Tempranillo and Grenache, which do well in hot, dry climates.

The Vermentino grape variety is thought to originate in Mediterranean rim, likely either in Liguria, Piedmont or Sardinia. It is a variety that likes high daytime temperatures and can exist in poor soils that hold little moisture. The cluster size of the variety is quite large, so it can yield relatively high amounts of grapes per acre. It also has strong, but not overpowering, aromatics when fermented at low temperature. Since the advent of cold fermentations in the 1980s, it has become a favorite in many Italian coastal areas, including Tuscany, as well as the island of Corsica. French vigneron in the Languedoc-Roussillon also call the Rolle grape a synonym of Vermentino, but recent DNA evidence is not conclusive that they are the same grape. The grape is well-known across Italy, but is starting to find homes in other parts of the world. Recently I have tasted examples from California and Oregon, and was not surprised when I was presented this bottling from Australia.

Robert Hill Smith, the fifth generation owner of Yalumba, is one of Australia's great innovators and is constantly experimenting with different European varieties. A few years ago their trials of Vermentino proved promising, so they expanded their plantings near Renmark, in South Australia. The sunny location along the banks of the Murray River are ideal for grape growing, and many other crops including citrus. Although not produced from vines farmed using certified organic practices, the warm, sunny and breezy area allows the vines to grow well with little man-made intervention.

As with most of the Yalumba wines, this one is also made with as little intervention as possible. Although the fruit is machine harvested, it is quickly destemmed and fermented at a low temperature using only the indigenous yeast on the skins, finishing at only 10.5% alcohol. The wine was left on the lees for a few months to build additional mouthfeel and some aromatic complexity as well.

When you are ready to serve this wine, allow it to warm on the counter for a few minutes and yes, it would be better if you splash it in the decanter, too. If you let this wine warm up a bit, it shows an exotic bouquet of Fuyu persimmon, lime and grapefruit peels, kiwi and tangerine. The feel on the palate is bright and lively, with moderate weight and a crisp finish. Drink by itself, with a goat cheese and spinach salad or simple roast chicken.

## 2004 Virgen del Valle Rioja Reserva Especial “Cincel” (\$20)

It is my belief that the two greatest values in the world for red wine are the 2015 Chianti Classico and older Rioja. Particularly if you can find them from an outstanding vintage, such as 2004. In the case of the latter, where else can you find a mature, perfectly stored bottle of red wine for \$20? Hold onto your hats, the feature this month may blow you away.

It is an industry-wide belief that Spain offers amazing value for both red and white wines. Most of the focus is on the wines from the lesser-known and up-and-coming areas, where producers farm old vines that produce very little fruit. When modern winemaking techniques are applied to these grapes, the result are wines that offer amazing concentration for bargain prices. The more famous wine regions of Spain (Priorat, Ribera del Duero and Rioja) are sometimes seen to offer less value because their international reputations are strong. However, due to the way wines are imported into the US, great opportunities exist to buy the wines at bargain prices when brands change importers. Such is the case for this wine.

The origin of this winery begins several hundred years ago when a hermit built his home into the cliffs of the Sierra Cantabria mountains that form the northern border of the Rioja region. Local legend say that the hermit named his abode in honor of the Virgin Mary. In the 1930s, a group of ladies living in the town of Samaniego established a cooperative, using the ruins of the shrine as their inspiration. Today this cooperative is considered one of the best sources for value-priced wines in the Rioja region, as they hold their wines well beyond the legal requirements for aging.

In terms of wine-growing regions, Rioja is a fascinating location with many natural advantages for producing world-class wines. As already stated, Rioja primarily lies on a plateau at the base of the Sierra Cantabria mountains. The other natural border to the south is the Ebro River. Most of the region lies on a plateau that is approximately 1,500 feet above sea level, but there are three sub-zones that are the exception. The most famous is Rioja Alta, which lies at higher elevations at the western edge of plateau. This area is higher and drier than the other zones, with limestone soils and a shorter growing season. Typically, the wines of Rioja Alta are more elegant and long-lived. Rioja Alavesa vineyards are typically as high in elevation as Rioja Alta, often over 2,000 feet above sea level, but the soils are much poorer. My experience in Alavesa is the vineyards lie in very thick beds of gravel, where vines struggle to survive. Generally, I find that the wines produced exclusively from Alavesa vineyards, such as the Cune Vina Real that we featured last year, are dense and a bit more rustic. These too will age a long time. Finally there is Rioja Baja, which is the lowest elevation and driest of the three zones. Where Tempranillo is the dominant grape of Alta and Alavesa, in Baja the grape of preference is often Garnacha (Grenache). This is a variety that thrives in very dry conditions and produces wines with lower acidity.

For many decades, the producers of Rioja owned land in all three areas, publicly stating it was to produce wines with more complexity. The true reason was that frost is a big problem in the region, and owning vineyards in different areas insured some crop each year.

All of the grapes used to make this wine come from the higher elevations of Rioja, as the blend is 90% Tempranillo and 5% each of Graciano and Mazuelo (Carignan). This wine was fermented in tank then aged in a combination of French and American oak barriques for a year. At that point, they made a barrel selection and the best barrels were allowed to age an additional year in the cellar. That wine was bottled as this very rare Reserva Especial.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for up to an hour. The nose is a complex combination of toasted panko breadcrumbs, graham crackers, cherry liqueur, toasted fennel seeds and nutmeg. On the palate it is extremely deep and complex, with a big sense of fruit polished by long and balanced tannins. Good now, you could easily cellar this wine away for another decade. Serve with slow braised meats such as lamb shanks, or a cocoa- and chili-rubbed pork tenderloin.

### Garlicky Scallops

To pair with the Vermentino, we want a dish that has rich flavor but is not heavy. Here the scallops play center stage, with a nice complexity added with garlic and the wine sauce. While you may be tempted to skip the breadcrumbs, they add a nice textural contrast. Just do not add them too early, only right before serving so they retain their crunch.

**3 inch piece baguette, cut into small pieces**  
**5 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 5 pieces**  
**1 small shallot, minced (about 2 tablespoons)**  
**2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley leaves**  
**2 pounds large sea scallops,**  
**tough tendon removed**  
**4 teaspoons vegetable oil**  
**4 medium cloves garlic, minced or pressed**  
**through a garlic press (about 4 teaspoons)**  
**1/8 teaspoon red pepper flakes**  
**2 teaspoons unbleached all-purpose flour**  
**1/3 - 2/3 cup clam juice (bottled)**  
**1/3 cup dry sherry**  
**2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice**  
**1 lemon, cut into wedges**

frequently, until garlic just begins to color, about 1 minute. Add flour and cook, stirring frequently, for 1 minute. Pour accumulated scallop juices into measuring cup and add enough clam juice to measure 2/3 cup. Increase heat to medium-high and slowly whisk in clam juice mixture and sherry. Bring to simmer and cook until mixture reduces to 3/4 cup, 3 to 4 minutes. Whisk in remaining 3 tablespoons butter, 1 tablespoon at a time. Stir in lemon juice and remaining tablespoon parsley.

4. Reduce heat to medium-low, return scallops to pan, and toss to combine. Cook, covered, until scallops are pink and cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes. Uncover and sprinkle with toasted bread crumbs. Serve with lemon wedges.

### Braised Lamb Shoulder Chops with Capers, Balsamic Vinegar, and Red Peppers

Typically in this country we eat lamb loin chops, but this recipe makes use of the flavorful, less expensive shoulder. The secret is the quick braise, which is just enough to soften the meat while building an amazing sauce. This is amazing with the Rioja.

**4 lamb shoulder chops, about 3/4 inch thick,**  
**trimmed of external fat**  
**Salt and ground black pepper**  
**2 tablespoons olive oil**  
**1 small onion, chopped fine**  
**1 red bell pepper, seeded and diced small**  
**2 small cloves garlic, minced**  
**1/3 cup dry red wine**  
**1 cup canned tomatoes packed in puree, chopped**  
**2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley leaves**  
**2 tablespoons capers, drained**  
**2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar**

1. Pulse bread in food processor until coarsely ground; you should have about 1 cup crumbs. Melt 1 tablespoon butter in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. When foaming subsides, add crumbs, shallot, 1/8 teaspoon salt, and 1/8 teaspoon pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, 7 to 10 minutes. Stir in 1 tablespoon parsley and transfer to plate to cool. Wipe out skillet with paper towels.

2. Thoroughly dry scallops with paper towels; toss with 1/4 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper in bowl. Return skillet to high heat, add 2 teaspoons oil, and heat until shimmering. Add half of scallops in single layer and cook until well-browned, about 5 minutes (do not flip scallops). Remove pan from heat and transfer scallops to large strainer set over bowl to catch any accumulated juices. Wipe out skillet with paper towels. Repeat with remaining 2 teaspoons oil and scallops; transfer scallops to strainer.

3. Return skillet to medium heat and add 1 tablespoon butter. When melted, add garlic and pepper flakes; cook, stirring

frequently, for 1 minute. Pour accumulated scallop juices into measuring cup and add enough clam juice to measure 2/3 cup. Increase heat to medium-high and slowly whisk in clam juice mixture and sherry. Bring to simmer and cook until mixture reduces to 3/4 cup, 3 to 4 minutes. Whisk in remaining 3 tablespoons butter, 1 tablespoon at a time. Stir in lemon juice and remaining tablespoon parsley.

4. Reduce heat to medium-low, return scallops to pan, and toss to combine. Cook, covered, until scallops are pink and cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes. Uncover and sprinkle with toasted bread crumbs. Serve with lemon wedges.

1. Sprinkle chops with salt and pepper to taste.  
2. Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in 12-inch heavy-bottomed nonreactive skillet over medium-high heat. Cooking in batches if necessary to avoid overcrowding, add chops; sauté until brown on both sides, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from pan; set aside.  
3. Pour fat from pan; return pan to medium heat, adding remaining tablespoon of oil. Add onion and pepper; sauté until softened, about 4 minutes. Add garlic; cook until fragrant, about 1 minute longer. Add wine; simmer until reduced by half, scraping browned bits from pan bottom with wooden spoon, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, then return chops to pan. Reduce heat to low; cover and simmer until chops are cooked through but tender, 15 to 20 minutes.  
4. Transfer chops to each of four plates. Stir parsley, capers, and balsamic vinegar into braising liquid; simmer until sauce thickens, 2 to 3 minutes. Adjust seasonings, spoon portion of sauce over each chop, and serve.