



This month we will take a break from the 2019 theme of vine-to-bottle to look at two wines that both struck me for their authentic sense of balance. They come from very different places, and are made by winemakers with dramatically different backgrounds, but the results are the same. These are very elegant, polished examples of New World Reds.

March, 2019

2016 Steele Cabernet Sauvignon “Shooting Star” (\$17)

It has been a few years since I last featured a wine from winemaker Jed Steele, so when I tasted this one a few months ago it brought back fond memories. When I started selling wine in the late 1980s Jed was famously going through a legal battle with Jess Jackson, the founder of Kendall-Jackson. They were at odds because Jackson did not want Jed to reveal the “KJ formula” or produce such a wine to compete with their Vintner’s Reserve. Eventually in court, it was revealed that the “secret” (dum, dum dum) was the addition of late harvest Riesling, leaving the wine with a small amount of residual sugar. This is almost absurd in this day, as most inexpensive California wines are fairly sweet, but in the pioneer days of the 1980s it was very uncommon. The irony is that having watched Jed Steele’s wine making over almost four decades, he would never make a wine like that under his own label.

Jed Steele is one of the last of the winemakers who helped forge California wine, from a time when these were looked at with suspicion from a wine drinking public accustomed to almost exclusively French bottlings. Jed was born and raised in Lake County, California, and 2019 marks more than 50 harvests in California. After graduating from UC Davis, he started making wine at Stony Hill in 1968. Although not well known to most consumers today, Stony Hill is one of Napa’s legendary Chardonnay producers and his experience there instilled in him a love for wines that are balanced and elegant. This led Jed to visit wine regions in Europe, learning the secrets of how to craft wines with great flavor but without the high alcohol and hard tannins that were common in California wines of the time.

Eventually, Jed became the founding winemaker at Kendall-Jackson, guiding them for ten vintages. He left in 1991, the first year they produced a million cases of wine, to launch Steele Vineyards. For several years, he continued to consult for other wineries, including Chateau St. Michelle in Washington State, and numerous brands in California. Nonetheless, he continued to champion the quality of wines being produced in Lake County, California, and today most of his wines come from this AVA, including our feature.

This county, north of Napa Valley, has most of the vineyards in the Red Hills on the slopes of Mount Konocti or lying surrounding Clear Lake, the largest natural lake in California. At an average of 1345 feet above sea level, this area is considerably higher than other North Coast AVAs. This means that Lake County is colder in winter, which delays the vines bud break by up to two weeks later than Napa Valley. Being farther from the ocean, the summer days are warmer, but the high elevations also mean the vineyards cool faster in the evenings. These conditions mean growers in this area prefer late ripening varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel. Steele is something of an expert in both varieties and makes several examples of each grape variety.

For their Shooting Star wines, which are the second label of Steele, he sources grapes from three longtime growers; Dorn Family Vineyards, Shannon Ridge Vineyards and Robin Hill Vineyards. The Dorn vineyard is perched on a hollow on the northwest corner of the dormant volcano, Mt Konocti. The grapes from this site provide a deep core of fruit to the final blend. Robin Hill Vineyard is owned and managed by Jeff Lyon, where the vines are planted in soils the vines really struggle with. The grapes they supply provide the wine final blend with great structure. Finally, the Shannon Ridge Vineyard sits over 1600 feet above sea level in the northeast area of Lake County. The grapes from Shannon Ridge provide power, which helps to complete the final wine.

The winemaking of all Steele wines is not about smoke and mirrors. There are no color additives or residual sugar added back after fermentation to add weight to mediocre wines. All of the grapes for this wine are destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks. After a little extra skin contact post-fermentation, the wine is then racked to American oak barrels, of which 20 percent are new, and the wine is aged for 15 months.

When you crack the cap on this wine, splash it into the decanter for a few minutes before you pour the first glass. This wine opens with the classic Cabernet Sauvignon notes, black cherry, creme de cassis, black currants, milk chocolate and toasted pecans. If you drink this wine over an hour or two, it then develops more complex, slightly smokey and peppery notes, with faintly herbal tinge. Although it is rare now, this is traditionally what Cabernet *should* taste like, providing even more complexity. On the palate, this wine displays moderate concentration, with smooth, polished tannins and moderate acidity, with the tell-tale crunch of old school Cabernet at the finish. Serve this wine with steak tips and gravy over rice, skirt steak with a bright chimichurri sauce or lamb patties with tzatziki sauce.

2015 Botanica Arboretum (\$29)

I have wanted to feature a wine from Ginny Povall for some time. We hosted her for a tasting in the Orlando store a couple of years ago, and her wines were very well received. Unfortunately she produces tiny amounts, so timing has always been tricky. Luckily for this month I was able to grab enough of her “tete-du-cuvee” for our feature, which blew my staff and me away during a tasting in December.

Unlike Jed Steele, Ginny is a self-taught winemaker who learned her craft by mail-ordering grapes and using a recipe to turn them into wine. Her homemade wine gave her the inspiration to purchase her own vineyard, and despite being born and raised in the Boston area, ended up buying the Protea Heights Farm, a short drive outside the town of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

In the 1940s, Protea Heights Farm was the first in South Africa to cultivate protea flowers, the national bloom of South Africa. These beautiful flowers bloom throughout the year, and today they export much of their production to Europe. In fact, they cultivate four blooms that were developed on their farm and are unique to Protea Heights.

The farm lies in one of the sub-zones of the Stellenbosch region, called Devon Valley. Officially the Stellenbosch region is considered a Mediterranean climate, although having traveled there it is a little more complicated. The three mountains that frame the region create unique microclimates within the entire region, protected the valleys from cooler winds that come off the Atlantic Ocean. There is an opening to the south that faces False Bay, so the region does receive moderating winds in the afternoon that cool off the hot days of summer. As a result, the Devon Valley is quite warm and dry, the perfect climate for grapes and Protea flowers.

When Ginny purchased Protea Heights in 2009, the farm included 53 acres of land. Twenty four acres are planted with Protea flowers, and starting in 2010, she planted 11 acres of vineyards. The plantings are primarily Bordeaux varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, as well as Pinot Noir and Semillon. As you can probably guess, she produces only a couple thousand cases of wine each vintage, divided between the Botanica and Big Flower labels.

Ginny takes a very non-interventionist approach to winemaking. The grapes are hand-harvested, destemmed and fermented as whole berries. After fermentation is complete, with several punch-downs each day, the wine is moved to French oak barrels where it is aged for 12 months, with 15% being new each year. Aboretum is a barrel selection, meaning that she chooses the best barrels of each variety to build the blend. The 2015 vintage is composed of 43% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot, 23% Cabernet Franc and 9% Petit Verdot.

Depending on producer, growing conditions and varietal, the wines of South Africa, can behave like New World examples, while others are very similar to Old World bottlings. Thanks to the warmth of Devon Valley and Ginny's approach to winemaking, to me this wine behaves in many ways similar to a wine from the Sierra Nevada foothills of California. You will want to decant this wine for about an hour before serving. Once you do, it offers a savory expression of these varieties, with notes of caramel, black peppercorns, dried cherries, damson plum preserves, fresh grated coconut and new car leather. When you take a sip of this wine, it shows dry, like the bouquet. There is soft, nicely plump, almost jammy fruit, with moderate tannins and very little acidity at the finish. Drink this wine with a coffee-rubbed ribeye or pot roast with prunes and orange peel.

Steak Chimichurri

When I visited Mendoza, Argentina, they served chimichurri with several cuts of meat, although it was explained to me that it is not common in that providence. This simple, bright tasting and herb driven sauce is very versatile, not just for beef, as it also tastes great on pork and chicken. Once you make this sauce it holds in the refrigerator for three days.

Chimichurri Sauce

1/4 cup hot water

2 teaspoons dried oregano

2 teaspoons kosher salt

1 1/3 cups loosely packed flat-leaf parsley leaves

2/3 cup loosely packed cilantro leaves

6 medium garlic cloves, whole, inside paper skin

1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1/4 cup red wine vinegar

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Steak

1 tablespoon cornstarch

2 tablespoons kosher salt

4 boneless strip steaks, 1 1/2 inches thick (about 1 pound each)

4 (2-inch) un-soaked wood chunks ground black pepper

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Combine hot water, oregano, and salt in small bowl; let stand 5 minutes to soften oregano. Meanwhile, place garlic cloves in a non-stick skillet and cook on medium high until papers are brown, about 6 minutes. Remove from pan, allow to cool for two minutes then remove from the paper. Pulse parsley, cilantro, garlic, and red pepper flakes in food processor until coarsely chopped, about ten 1-second pulses. Add water mixture and vinegar and pulse briefly to combine. Transfer mixture to medium bowl and slowly whisk in oil until incorporated and mixture is emulsified. Cover with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature at least 1 hour (if preparing sauce in advance, refrigerate and bring to room temperature before using).

2. FOR THE STEAK: Combine cornstarch and salt in small bowl. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and place on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Rub entire surface of steaks with cornstarch mixture and place steaks, uncovered, in freezer until very firm, about 30 minutes.

3. Turn all burners to high and heat grill with lid down until very hot, about 15 minutes. Place wood chunks in perforated disposable 9-inch aluminum pie plate and set on cooking grate. Close lid and heat until wood chunks begin to smoke, about 5 minutes. Scrape cooking grate clean with grill brush.

4. Season steaks with pepper. Place steaks on grill, cover, and cook until steaks begin to char, 2 to 3 minutes. Uncover grill, flip steaks,

and cook on second side until beginning to char, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip again and cook first side until well charred, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip 1 last time and continue to cook until second side is well charred and instant-read thermometer inserted into center of steak registers 115 degrees for rare, about 2 minutes, or 120 degrees for medium-rare, about 4 minutes. Transfer to large plate and let rest, loosely tented with foil, for 10 minutes. Slice and serve, passing chimichurri sauce separately.