



April, 2019

This month, I finally get to feature a couple of wines that have been on my short list for a long time. They are both from wineries I have featured before, but the wines themselves have not yet been featured. I have no doubt when you taste them that you will see it was worth the wait.

2015 Isenhower Cabernet Franc (\$25)

This wine was supposed to be a feature in October 2018 and paired with their amazing Cabernet Sauvignon that was such a great wine. Unfortunately, the distributor and I crossed wires and it was never ordered. No big deal, thankfully Denise Isenhower likes us and was willing to wait a couple of months to ship this wine now.

The label for this wine may look familiar, from the Isenhower's new "I - Series" wines made from grapes they purchase, not grow. Their labels that each feature a different flower native to the Columbia River are used for their estate wines. Brett and Denise Isenhower like to describe their 1997 entrance into the wine business as "diving head first into a shallow pool." Both were working as pharmacists in Colorado when Brett caught the wine bug and they moved to Walla Walla, Washington. While they both maintained day jobs as pharmacists, Brett picked up evenings and weekends working as a cellar rat. In 1999, they crushed 17 tons of grapes, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah, from space they borrowed at Cayuse, which they released on September 1, 2001 to great critical reviews.

Ironically, their biggest break came at the beginning of the recession in 2009. The New York Times ran a story about how they were coping with a drop in sales. What was newsworthy was their decision to cut production by 50% and stop selling their wines through the distribution chain. In effect, their goal was to become more successful by being small. At the time, they were selling to over 20 distributors but decided to keep only one, located here in Orlando, and focus all their attention on selling from their tasting rooms. Even though they were making less wine, the demand meant they could raise prices, or at least keep them the same, and retain more of the profits by cutting out middlemen. For those of us in Orlando, as very loyal customers, it meant less wine but the quality was, and is, better than ever.

Although Brett is not a "trained" winemaker, he is skilled at crafting very polished wines. He does this by purchasing grapes from top vineyard sites in Washington, each selected for unique attributes they contribute to the final blend. All of the fruit for their wines, except Syrah, is de-stemmed, double hand-sorted and fermented with indigenous yeast. Also, all of their wines besides this one are 100 percent pure varietal, and their entry level wine called The Last Straw is a blend of the tanks and barrels not used in other wines.

In order to create complexity in this mono-varietal wine, the Isenhower's use four vineyards and three clones of Cabernet Franc. Olsen Ranch was planted in 1991 and is located on the Eastern end of the Yakima Valley. On the Western end of the Yakima Valley resides Dineen Vineyard (planted 2004). Eritage Vineyard was planted in 2013 North of Walla Walla and Vista Montagna (planted 2000) is a tiny vineyard on the East side of Walla Walla. Dineen Vineyard Cabernet Franc was harvested on September 26, Olsen Ranch Vineyard Cabernet Franc on September 27, Vista Montagna on October 6 and Eritage Vineyard on October 30. All the grapes were hand-picked, hand-sorted and fermented by yeasts native to the vineyards. All the Cabernet Franc wines finished fermentation in relatively neutral French Oak barrels. The wine was blended in June of 2018 and bottled in August of 2018. They produced 450 cases.

When you open this wine, decant it for half an hour before serving. Good examples of this grape offer a complex array of aromas that are accentuated with oxygen. You quickly discover an exotic combination of green olive brine, matcha tea, fresh blackberries, black peppercorns and a bit of cocoa powder. On the palate, it is quite broad and round for Cab Franc, developing moderate tannins mid-palate, along with moderate acidity and a long finish. Drink this wine with an herb-rubbed pork tenderloin or grilled tuna steaks with a green olive tapenade.

2015 Marietta Christo (\$25)

I started buying the wines from Marietta in the late 1980s when owner/winemaker Chris Bilbro was starting to make a name for himself. Chris began his working life in hospital administration but quickly tired of the politics and stress of an office job and founded Marietta Cellars in an old cattle barn in the Alexander Valley area of Sonoma County. He learned his love of wine from this great Aunt, for whom he named the winery. For over 40

years, Marietta and her husband Armé operated an inn near the town of Cloverdale in northern Sonoma. It was at their table he learned the value of family, food and of course, wine.

In 2012, Chris sold the winery to his son, Scot, as he began a long, slow battle with cancer that he lost in January of this year. However, watching the transition of this brand under Scot's ownership has been exciting. In Chris' later years, I found the wines inconsistent, especially as they seemed to always have a little residual sugar. When Scot took over the winemaking, he immediately started finishing the wines dry, and even experimented with all non-vintage bottlings for a couple of years. While I found them thrilling, I think the industry pushed back on the concept of "the best blend from the cellar" wines, and he returned to vintage dating a few years ago. He also added a new "honorary" bottling, to join their top bottling, the Angeli Cuvee, and Armé. It is called Christo, for his dad.

The grapes for this wine come primarily from their estate vineyard in Mendocino County, the McDowell Ranch. I had the pleasure to visit this estate in 1992 when it was still owned by the Crawford family, who were pioneers in planting Rhone varieties in northern California. Due to the heat and high elevation, the red wines from this area have intense color and structure, exemplified in this bottling. Most of the ranch was planted a few years before I visited, making many of the Syrah vines on the property almost 30 years old. Other Rhone varieties have been added as well, such as Grenache and Viognier. Scot also owns a sizable vineyard in the Yorkville Highlands, located on the border with Sonoma county, which is becoming the place for Petite Sirah and Zinfandel. Scot uses grapes from both areas, as well as the original estate vineyard in Alexander Valley of Sonoma to craft Christo.

The blend for the 2015 vintage is 64% Syrah, 23% Grenache, 7% Petite Sirah and 6% Viognier. Viognier is a white grape that is occasionally fermented with Syrah, a process called "co-fermentation." The technique started in the northern Rhone valley of France, in the region of Cote-Rotie, likely as a way to lighten the brood-ish nature of Syrah. Today, winemakers find that the combination of these two grapes makes for a darker example of Syrah, described as "co-pigmentation." The addition of Grenache adds a nice lift to the wine, while Petite Sirah contributes color and tannin.

When you are ready to serve this wine, you will want to decant it for at least a half-hour, but up to an hour is fine. Then it delivers a rich nose of blueberry and blackberry jams, Luxardo cherries, cocoa powder, black pepper, allspice and vanilla. On the palate, it has a deep sense of fruit, framed with well-integrated tannins and a long finish. Drink over the next three to five years with smoked pork ribs or leg of lamb stuffed with olive tapenade.

Tapenade stuffed leg of lamb

When traveling in the south of France, this is the type of dish that is often served to me at lunch. It is not hard to put together and cooks without any real attention. The leftovers make great sandwiches too, on crusty baguettes with a smear of garlic aioli. Do not let the inclusion of anchovies put you off, as this dish does not taste fishy. Their inclusion ramps up the umami in the tapenade, as their flavor fades into the background. I do encourage you to buy good green olives, such as Picholines, as they will enhance this dish immensely. Reserve a tablespoon of the tapenade and blend with a half-cup of mayonnaise for the above mentioned sandwich.

4 anchovy fillets
5 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
Finely grated zest of 2 lemons
1 tablespoon chopped marjoram
1/2 teaspoon of dried thyme
1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1 cup pitted green olives
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
One 7-pound, bone-in leg of lamb

Preheat the oven to 450°. In a food processor, combine the anchovies, garlic, lemon zest, marjoram, thyme and pepper and pulse until finely chopped. Add the olives and pulse until finely chopped. With the machine on, add the olive oil and process to a coarse paste.

Place a rack in a roasting pan and set the lamb on top. Slather the lamb with the olive paste and roast on the lowest rack of the oven for 20 minutes. Reduce the temperature to 350° and roast the lamb for about 1 hour and 10 minutes longer, until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the meat registers 125°. Let rest 15 minutes before carving. Pour any accumulated juices into a bowl and serve with the lamb.