



## The Odd Couple

August, 2018



This month I have selected wines made from two grapes that enjoy popularity, but on the fringe of the winemaking population. My first pick is a Shiraz from Australia. This is a grape that is not popular enough in my opinion, so let me see what I can do to fix the problem. The second selection is a Zinfandel, from our old friends at Tierra y Mar. Zinfandel is a variety that comes in and out of fashion, and right now is relatively popular. This is a great example, and one that will make fans of some of you not familiar with the grape.

The first pick for this month is the **2014 Hope Estate Shiraz “Basalt Block” (\$18)**, which I believe is a great introduction this variety. At the same time, if you are new to the premium level of Shiraz, this wine is a high bar to set your expectation. It comes from winemaker Michael Hope, who I have met several times, and never deviated from his goal for serious Shiraz at an affordable price.

Wine was not Michael’s first career choice. He began as a pharmacist, opening a chain of outlets across Australia, that quickly became one of the largest in the country. Deciding it was time to relax and raise his family, he and his wife moved to the Hunter Valley, an hour outside of the city of Sydney. They purchased a good size piece of property which contained thirty acres of vines. Michael had no professional wine experience, but saw the vines as good cashflow and began learning how to tend them. After a few years of selling grapes to other wineries, the winemaking bug bit him and he tried his hand at bottling his own wine. Those original bottlings caught the attention of the Sager family, who are American importers we have worked with for a long time. They agreed to bring his wines to the US and gave Hope a launching pad. Through much of the 2000’s he was one of the few brands from Australia to grow in the US, although he is still small enough that I would call him a boutique producer.

One of the things I enjoy about Michael’s Shiraz is that he bottles from two, very geographically different, regions. This bottling comes from his estate vineyards in the Hunter Valley, on the eastern side of the continent. He also makes a Shiraz from Western Australia called the Ripper. They are made almost exactly the same, but show dramatic differences in their character.

With a relatively close proximity to Sydney, the Hunter Valley has a very long history of grape growing and winemaking. The first significant planting of grape vines in the Hunter Valley occurred in 1825 by James Busby. Busby traveled to Europe and South Africa, collecting vine cuttings, and planted them in his estate called Kirkton. His success led to several other wineries in the area, and by 1870 there were 1800 acres planted in the Hunter. In fact, at the Paris Exhibition of 1855, wines from the Hunter won numerous medals. This was to the dismay of Napoleon III, who used the Exhibition to not only show off French cultural superiority, but also unveil the Bordeaux Classification of 1855.

It is easy to see why the Hunter offers great potential. The valley runs southwest from the Brokenback Mountain range to the cool Pacific ocean. Inland the climate is very hot and dry, but the funnel shape of the valley draws in cool ocean breezes each afternoon. As a result the area enjoys a vast swing in diurnal temperatures that yields grapes with natural balance. The name for this wine comes from a vein of weathered basalt that dominates the soil. Basalt is a soil of volcanic origin which creates a mineral rich environment for the roots.

To make this wine, Michael prefers to let the grapes do the work. They are destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks, then aged in new and older hogsheads (400 liter barrels). Unlike many producers of Shiraz, he likes the subtle effects of French oak and does not use barrels from America.

When you are ready to open this wine, decant it for a half-hour. The nose immediately greets you with a rich combination of blackberry jam, dried black figs, dried black cherries, vanilla wafers and dark chocolate. On the palate it shows a dense core of fruit, framed by a mineral edge similar to wet potter’s clay, with moderate tannins and acids. Drink this wine from now to 2023 with anything off the grill or even pasta Bolognese.

My second selection is the **2015 Tierra y Mar Zinfandel “El Rio Vivo” (\$25)**. This is the first Zinfandel I have selected since July 2017, and it is long overdue. I have an attachment to Zinfandel wines that goes back to my early days at my second job in the wine business, as the retail manager at Dexter’s. My first job was working in, and ultimately running, a wine shop that focused primarily on French wines. When I moved to Dexter’s in 1992, his business focused more on California wines. The wines that were all the rage at the time were the 1990 Zinfandels, particularly those produced by Ravenswood, Ridge and Kent Rosenblum. It is hard to believe now, but our top selling wine for that year was the Ravenswood Vintner’s Reserve Zinfandel, which we sold for \$7.99.

The origin of Zinfandel is one shrouded in mystery, although modern DNA testing has helped to clear way some of the fog. Around that time David Darlington published **Angel’s Visits: An Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel** a book examining the history of the grape and how it ended up in California. It is an entertaining read and I still recommend it, although the conclusion of the book has been disproven. Most of the chapters highlight the personalities that made up the

cult of Zinfandel, Joel Peterson of Ravenswood, Paul Draper of Ridge and a handful of other, smaller producers. What we did not know then, that we learned in 2000, is where this curious grape originated.

In the 1960's a researcher from California named Austin Goheen noticed a similarity between Zinfandel and the grape Primitivo, which primarily grows in the Apulia region of Italy. He and other California researchers, using the technology of the day, showed that the two varieties were the same, and proposed that Zinfandel was brought to the US from that region. Then in 1976 an Italian researcher, Dr. Lamberti of Bari, suggested that the origin of the grape was likely from Croatia, where the grape is called Plavac Mali. By the early 1990's he proved they were similar, but not identical. Nonetheless, ambitious Croatian winemakers, led by Mike Grgich of Grgich-Hills winery, petitioned the US to include Plavac Mali as a synonym for Zinfandel on wine labels. Then in the 1990's, UC-Davis researcher Carol Meredith and her team studied the grape using new DNA analysis, and determined that this information was incorrect, and that in fact, one was the parent of the other.

This led to a search of the coast of Dalmatia, and the discovery of the grape Crljenak Kaštelanski, of which only 9 vines were found, scattered in a vineyard near Omiš, Croatia. The match was made, identifying this almost extinct variety as the missing parent of both Zinfandel and Plavac Mali. It was also determined that Zinfandel and Primitivo are genetically identical, but at the same time different. This is attributed to subtle mutations to adapt to different environments. Ironically, Primitivo was taken to Apulia *from* California, likely in the late 1800's.

For our feature this month, the grapes come from a cooler site for Zinfandel, the El Rio Vivo vineyard in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma County. The conditions where these vines grow allows for the grapes to ripening slowly. This is important because the big problem with the variety is that the clusters can ripen unevenly. This means that some grapes may be so ripe they look like prunes, while others on the same bunch may be underripe and tart. With the cool ocean breezes and fog lowering the temperature each morning in this vineyard, the clusters ripen evenly and winemaker Bruce Cunningham and his team end up with great material to work with.

All of the grapes for this wine are hand-harvested and sorted, then fermented in open top, 1 ton bins using indigenous yeast. The wine is left on the skins for 8-10 days after fermentation, then racked to a combination of neutral French and American oak barrels, where it ages for 10 months.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for a half-hour before serving. Then the wine will hit you with a bold combination of blackberry jam, toasted pecans, graham crackers, caramel and toasted macarons. On the palate it is fairly firm with wood tannins framing the deep fruit, stretching into a long finish. Drink this wine from now to 2023, with braised pork chops, lamb Vindaloo or smoked baby back ribs.

## Chipotle Pork Chops

This easy recipe is a great complement to either wine feature this month. In fact, I think the slightly spicy/smoky nature of the sauce works well with almost any red!

**1 28 oz can of whole tomatoes**  
**1 medium onion, peeled and cut into chunks**  
**4 medium garlic cloves, peeled**  
**4 chipotle chilies in adobo, and the sauce that clings to them (and maybe a bit more)**  
**1 tsp cumin**  
**salt and pepper to taste**  
**4 center cut, bone-in pork chops, about 8 oz each and 1/2 inch thick**  
**1 tbsp vegetable oil**  
**3/4 tsp dried oregano**  
**1 1/2 oz cotija cheese**  
**Fresh cilantro leaves, torn from stems**

In a blender, puree the tomatoes, onion, garlic, chilies, cumin and 1 teaspoon salt until smooth, about 1 minute. Using a paring knife, make a couple of vertical cuts in the silver skin that encircles each chop; evenly space the cuts and try to cut through the silver skin without cutting into the meat. Season the chops on both sides with salt and pepper.

In a 12-inch skillet over medium-high, heat the oil until beginning to smoke. Add 2 of the chops in a single layer and cook until well browned, about 3 minutes. Transfer to a large plate, turning the chops browned side up. Repeat with the remaining 2 chops. Let the empty skillet cool for 2 to 3 minutes.

Add the tomato puree and oregano to the skillet. Cook over medium, stirring and scraping up any browned bits, until slightly thickened, 10 to 15 minutes; adjust the heat as needed to maintain a simmer. Return the chops, browned side up, and any accumulated juices to the pan, nestling the chops into the sauce.

Spoon sauce over the chops to submerge. Cook, uncovered, until the meat near the bone reaches 160°F or is just barely pink when cut, 4 to 5 minutes.

Transfer the chops to a platter. Taste the sauce and season with salt and pepper; for added spiciness, stir in additional adobo to taste. Spoon the sauce over and around the chops, then sprinkle with the cotija and cilantro.