



This month I am excited to be a trail blazer for one of our favorite wineries, Isenhower Cellars, and their new series of wines. Some of you may remember that several years ago, in 2009, the New York Times ran a story about how this winery coped with a drop in sales due to the recession. Their decision was to cut production by fifty percent, 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 twenty distributors but they decided to keep only one, located here in Orlando, focusing 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 middle men. The strategy works, and entrenched Isenhower Cellars as a

premier, cult winery in Washington State.

Now things have dramatically improved, and the supply of grapes in Washington State has grown as well. The Isenhowers are now buying grapes from trusted growers to produce a new tier of wines, one of which I featured this month in the New World Red club. For this club I selected their new Chardonnay, which is a wine I believe they have never made before, and an old favorite, the Last Straw. As you will see, these are a testament to their perseverance and dedication, and we are delighted to be one of the first to present the wines to our club members.

### **2017 Cocobolo Chardonnay (\$15)**

The Cocobolo wines are the newest project by the Isenhowers, named for the dense hardwood from Central America that have a desert-like appearance. They like to think that the wood is indicative of the high concentration these wines possess, especially for the price. Reading between the lines of the technical information, I think these are a pet project for Denise. She has typically been the “front of the house” face of Isenhower, but who now appears to be also taking a hand in the production.

To make this wine they use grapes that are grown in the Ancient Lakes sub-AVA of the Columbia River Valley. This area takes its name from a series of thirty-five lakes formed by the Missoula floods that washed across central Washington at the end of the Ice Age. These floods, each led by a wall of water estimated to be one-hundred feet tall, swept the region of its top soil and carved the Columbia River gorge. In the process, all of the top soil was moved and deposited in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. This is the reason that it is considered to be one of the most fertile growing regions in the world. The soils it left behind in areas like the Ancient Lakes are far from rich, with very low organic material, the perfect medium for grape vines. In addition to the lack of natural nutrients in the soil, the Ancient Lakes region only receives about six inches of rain each year. This cuts down on the need for chemicals to stop mildew on the vines and keeps the weeds at bay as well. While the grapes used to make this wine are not certified as organically farmed, the grower does little intervention other than tending to the vines during growing season.

Those of you who know me are probably surprised to see a domestic Chardonnay as the feature this month. But this is not your average domestic Chardonnay as it does not go through Malolactic Fermentation. In addition to coming from a super cool area like Ancient Lakes, this wine also has some relevant teaching points. One of the big knocks we hear against Chardonnay, is some consumer's belief that they are all “oaky and buttery.” Those attributes come from two different winemaking techniques. The “oaky” part comes from aging the wine in new, heavy toast barrels. Think of the way Cognac, or any other barrel aged spirit tastes, and you have an idea of what flavor the barrel imparts on the wine. Barrels quickly lose their “oaky” flavor as they are used, much the way a tea bag loses its flavor if used more than once. The “buttery” flavor is actually a compound called diacetyl, which is created as a by product when bacteria convert the malic acid in wine, to lactic acid. Malic acid is the same as you find in Granny Smith apples, if that gives you an idea of the flavor. Lactic acid what is found in milk and dairy products. If the “mL”, or malolactic fermentation is allowed to proceed, especially at very low temperature, the buttery compound lingers in the wine. If the mL occurs at warmer temperatures, the diacetyl blows off. Here is a fun fact for you, the “butter” applied to popcorn at the movies is usually just oil infused with diacetyl for the flavor. Yummmm.

When you are ready to open this wine, allow it to warm on the counter for a few minutes before serving. Then when you pour a glass the bouquet explodes with notes of fresh pineapple, honeysuckle, apricot preserves, green apple slices and a touch of powdered donuts. Then on the palate it displays a bright, lively, sense of fruit with a rounded mid-palate and modest acidity at the finish. I chose this for a pre-holiday selection because I want to show the versatility of good, unwooded Chardonnay with or without food. You can serve this by itself, or with baked brie in puff pastry with apricot preserves, roast chicken or lobster salad.

### **2016 Isenhower The Last Straw (\$20)**

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 at Cayuse Cellars; Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah, which they released on September 1, 2001 to great critical reviews.

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. When looking at their top wines, which sell in the \$40 range, you learn that each is typically a pure variety, such as Cabernet

Sauvignon or Syrah, but created from grapes grown in two or three single vineyards. When Brett assembles the final blend it is the extra parts that make up the Last Straw.

Despite the lowly designation of Red Table Wine this one has incredible pedigree, the components being from some of the top vineyards in Walla Walla and Columbia Valleys. The name "Last Straw" is because each part of this wine was crafted to be used in one of the Isenhower's more expensive wines, but due to one reason or another was left on the cutting room floor. At that point winemaker Brett puts them all together into one final blend.

In the cellar his attention to detail is incredible, with each cluster sorted twice to ensure only the healthiest grapes make it to the fermentor. Brett is also an advocate for "wild" or "native" yeast, which live in the vineyards and winery. These native strains of yeast ferment under different conditions, lengthening the fermentation, and as a result the wine develops additional layers of flavor. Brett is of the belief that this may be the only "table wine" in Washington produced using wild yeast fermentations since all the components were intended for a much more expensive wine. The blend is a mix of 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Grenache, 14% Malbec, 13% Petit Verdot, 11% Cabernet Franc and 4% Mourvedre. After fermentation the wine is aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels for eleven months before bottling.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for a half-hour before serving. When you then pour a glass it oozes out of the glass, with notes of ripe blackberries, cranberry sauce, cassia buds, blood orange peel, claro cigar wrapper and milk cocoa powder. On the palate the wine is firm to start, with a good sense of fruit framed by moderate tannins and low acidity. Drink this wine over the next three years with pot roast, lamb shoulder steaks with mint sauce or piccadillo.

## Salad with Warm Herbed Goat Cheese

- 1 1/2 cups pecans**
- 12 ounces goat cheese, softened**
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives**
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme**
- 2 large eggs**
- 12 cups hearty salad greens**

### Vinaigrette

- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar**
- 1 teaspoon minced shallot**
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- 1 teaspoon honey**
- 1/2 teaspoon regular or light mayonnaise**
- 1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard**
- 1/4 teaspoon salt**
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper**

*When Chardonnay is made without oak, and the malolactic is blocked, it can work really well with a salad, particularly one with a rich centerpiece. This recipe improves on the classic breaded, fried goat cheese disks but using nuts as the crust, and baking it to reduce fat. Please make sure you freeze the disks per the instructions or they will melt before the nuts toast.*

1. Pulse pecans in food processor until finely chopped; transfer to medium bowl. Add cheese, chives, and thyme to food processor and process until smooth. Refrigerate cheese mixture in covered bowl until firm, at least 1 hour or up to 2 days.
2. Using hands, roll 2 tablespoons chilled cheese mixture into twelve 1 1/2-inch balls. Beat eggs in medium bowl. One at a time, dip balls in egg, then roll in nuts, pressing gently to adhere. Place balls 2 inches apart on rimmed baking sheet. Press balls into 2-inch disks with greased measuring cup. Cover with plastic wrap and freeze until completely firm, at least 2 hours or up to 1 week.
3. Adjust oven rack to upper position and heat oven to 475 degrees. Remove plastic and spray cheese lightly with cooking spray. Bake until nuts are golden brown and cheese is warmed through, 7 to 10 minutes. Let cool 3 minutes. Toss greens with vinaigrette. Serve warm cheese rounds over dressed salad.

## Lamb Chops with Garlic

*This is a really easy recipe that works with many wines, especially the Isenhower Last Straw. It is important to make sure that all of your ingredients are assembled before you start cooking the chops, because once they are done the pan sauce comes together quickly.*

- Eight 1/2-inch-thick lamb loin chops (about 2 pounds), fatty tips trimmed**
- Salt and freshly ground pepper**
- Pinch of dried thyme**
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- 10 small garlic cloves, halved**
- 3 tablespoons water**
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice**
- 2 tablespoons minced parsley**
- Pinch of crushed red pepper**

1. Season the lamb with salt and pepper and sprinkle lightly with thyme. In a very large skillet, heat the olive oil until shimmering. Add the lamb chops and garlic and cook over moderately high heat until the chops are browned on the bottom, about 3 minutes. Turn the chops and garlic and cook until the chops are browned, about 2 minutes longer for medium meat. Transfer the chops to plates, leaving the garlic in the skillet.
2. Add the water, lemon juice, parsley and crushed red pepper to the pan and cook, scraping up any browned bits stuck to the bottom, until sizzling, about 1 minute. Pour the garlic and pan sauce over the lamb chops and serve immediately.