



As the holidays approach, I like to present wines that reside firmly in the “crowd pleaser” category, as there is a good chance you will be sharing them with friends and family. This month I have a couple of amazing bottles for you, the first from a winery where I find a steady supply of features, and the second from one which I believe will become more of a regular contributor. Both are easy to understand and enjoy, but in no way does it mean they are simple.

November, 2018



The first pick is the newest vintage of an old favorite, the **2016 Halter Ranch Synthesis (\$23)**. I have selected three features from this winery for Reserve Club, and this is now the third in the New World Red. If this was “SNL,” Halter Ranch would be the Steve Martin of the special guest hosts. It is not hard to understand why. Halter Ranch, under the direction of winemaker Kevin Sass, move effortlessly between Bordeaux and Rhone varieties, all grown in their spectacular estate vineyard on the west side of Paso Robles.

For those of you new to the club, Kevin is one of the most awarded winemakers in Paso Robles. For nine years, he was at the helm of Justin Winery, producing their world- renowned Isosceles and Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon. When the Baldwins sold the winery in 2010 to Stewart Resnick and Fiji Water, the owner of Halter Ranch, Hansjörg Wyss, approached Kevin to make the jump to their winery. He was already extremely familiar with the vineyards at Halter Ranch, as they had been the grape source for most of the top-end wines made by Justin. One night over a bottle of Rosé, Kevin told me he would be happy working at Halter Ranch forever.

At the core of this wine is the 281 acres of vineyards that make up the Halter Ranch. The property is perfectly positioned on the west side of Paso Robles, on rolling hills that range from 1500 to 1750 feet above sea level. Located 14 miles from the cool Pacific Ocean, the vineyard has several different micro-climates, which allows for the cultivation of myriad grape varieties. Winemaker Kevin Sass and vineyard manager Lucas Pope divide the property into 81 different blocks, determined by soil type, exposition, and elevation. Each block is farmed for its unique conditions and grape variety grown. The blocks are also harvested and fermented separately, which leaves Sass with a huge palette of wines to use for creating the various blends the winery produces. Roughly sixty percent of the vineyard is dedicated to Bordeaux varieties, and the rest to grapes more common to the Rhone. There are also some experimental blocks which grow grapes outside these categories, such as Tempranillo.

For the 2016 Synthesis, Sass uses only two varieties, 76% Cabernet Sauvignon and 24% Petite Sirah. The core of this wine for every vintage going back to 2010 is roughly 76-78% Cabernet Sauvignon. Most vintages have featured Syrah as the second major player, occasionally adding small quantities of a third grape as well. Last year the blend was almost identical to the 2016, except for 2% Petit Verdot taking the place of a small amount of the Cabernet Sauvignon. Having watched this wine evolve over five releases, the Petite Sirah is a nice addition, adding a bit more muscle in the way of tannins to the final wine.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for a half hour before. Kevin’s goal is to make a wine that shows all the trademarks of Halter Ranch, but in a forward and ready-to-drink style. Nonetheless, I think it is always better to give wines sealed under screw caps a bit more time to develop. The closure is so good that the lack of oxygen stunts their development and they need a little air to open them up. Once you do the nose is explosive with notes of black raspberries, black currants, claro cigar wrapper, orange peel and a whisper of fresh laid asphalt- a tell-tale sign of Petite Sirah. On the palate this Synthesis is plump and generous, with soft tannins giving a small amount of frame to the long finish. Drink over the next two to five years with pot roast or a Santa Maria tri-tip sandwich.

My second pick is from a winery that is a new discovery for us, but something tells me they will soon become a staple in our stores. The **2016 Lujon Pinot Noir “Dundee Hills” (\$25)** is the logical choice for a November feature, but our tasting of this winery’s entire lineup revealed many great values. I could have just as easily selected their Cabernet Sauvignon and Red Wine (blend), and may do so in the coming months.

Although Willamette Valley Pinot Noir in the \$25/bottle range is not unusual, to find one from the hallowed Dundee Hills is extremely rare. In fact, a quick scan of my tasting notes shows me that most Pinots that are designated Dundee Hills cost me more than \$25 a bottle to buy!

This appellation is the true epicenter of the Oregon Pinot Noir movement. In the early 1960s a viticulture student at UC-Davis named David Lett searched the world for what he believed would be the perfect climate to grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. While it is hard to believe now, this was a time when these grapes pretty much only existed on the hillsides of Burgundy, France. Even more shocking to my younger members, there was no internet, so he did the research using books, and letters sent to viticultural programs across the globe. By some miracle, he decided that the perfect spot in the world was a group of hills in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. In 1965 he gathered 3000 cuttings from the UC-Davis nursery, rented a piece of land in Corvallis, Oregon, and planted the very first Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in the state. He then set out in his car, examining each parcel of land that was for sale, looking for the right combination of sun exposure and soil

type. David carried an auger in his trunk and, when he would come across a parcel of available land he felt had potential, would burrow down to determine the soil series. In 1966 he found a south-facing, twenty-acre parcel in the Dundee Hills. He bought the land and used his cuttings to plant the first vineyard in the Willamette Valley. Fifty-two years later there are 2,240 acres of vines planted in the Dundee Hills, virtually all Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and over 17,000 acres of vineyards in the state of Oregon.

Like a lot of the newer wineries I see from the Pacific Northwest, Lujon Wine Cellars works in both the Oregon and Washington State wine regions. Owner/winemaker John Derthick has worked for other wineries in both California and this region for more than twenty five years, and began making his own wine a few years ago. He started with a small bottling of a Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, and has now grown to producing eight different varieties from vineyards on both sides of the border. Like many producers just starting out, he buys his grapes from trusted vineyard sources. This gives him the versatility to experiment making different wines without tying up capital on land. For this Pinot Noir he buys the grapes from Kelly Vineyard, a site located within the sub-appellation area of Tualatin Valley. The soils in this part of the Willamette Valley are Laurelwood series soils, which is a silt-loam deposited on the area when Mt. Hood erupted 10,000 years ago. This soil produces wines with bright aromas and good lift on the palate.

To make this wine, John is careful not to overwhelm the delicate fruit. The vineyard is planted to three clones of Pinot Noir, Dijon clones 777 and 776, as well as Pommard. He de-stems the grapes then co-ferments the three types, aiming for an early cohesion of their different characteristics. Once dry the wine is racked to French oak barrels, first and second pass, and aged for twelve months.

When you are ready to drink this wine, splash it into the decanter for a few minutes before serving. Once decanted, it reveals a classic nose of fresh cherries, pipe tobacco, dried chanterelle mushrooms, white pepper and toasted pecans. On the palate it delivers a moderate core of fruit nicely balanced with moderate tannins and acidity. Drink this wine over the next two years with pork tenderloin, salmon or turkey.

Turkey Mole

After all of the years of producing write-ups for our two monthly clubs, I most often receive requests for two recipes. The first is the bacon wrapped pork filets, with the maple/mustard sauce, and the second is for this turkey mole recipe. While the list of ingredients is long, it really comes together easily and delivers big flavor. Some years I use leftover Thanksgiving turkey, braising the vegetables in a cup of chicken stock before picking up the recipe with step 5. Then I chop the turkey meat and combine in the sauce.

1 (6- to 7-pound) turkey breast whole bone-in
Salt and ground black pepper
5 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 medium onion, chopped medium
6 medium cloves garlic, peeled and crushed,
plus 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or
pressed through a garlic press
2 sprigs fresh thyme
1 bay leaf
2 tablespoons chili powder
2 tablespoons Cocoa powder
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
⅛ teaspoon ground cloves
1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
¼ cup raisins
2 tablespoons creamy peanut butter

1. Adjust an oven rack to the lowest position and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Using kitchen shears or a chef's knife, trim the rib bones and any excess fat from the turkey. Pat the turkey dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper.

2. Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add the turkey, breast side down and scatter the onion, crushed garlic, thyme, and bay leaf around the turkey. Cook, turning the breast on its sides and stirring the vegetables as needed, until the turkey and vegetables are well browned, 12 to 16 minutes, reducing the heat if the pot begins to scorch.

3. Off the heat, place a large sheet of foil over the pot and press to seal, then cover tightly with the lid. Transfer the pot to the oven and cook until the thickest part of the breast registers 160 to 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 hours.

4. Remove the pot from the oven. Transfer the turkey to a cutting board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest while making the sauce. Strain the juices from the pot into a fat separator, reserving the strained vegetables. Let the juices settle for about 5 minutes, then defat the juices; set aside.

5. Meanwhile, add the remaining 3 tablespoons oil, minced garlic, chili powder, cocoa powder, cinnamon, and cloves to the pot and cook over medium heat until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the defatted juices, strained vegetables, any-accumulated juices from the turkey, tomatoes, raisins, and peanut butter and simmer over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened, 8 to 10 minutes.

6. Discard the thyme and bay leaf, then puree the sauce in a blender until smooth, about 20 seconds. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Carve the turkey and serve, passing the mole separately.