



December, 2018



If you have been a member of any of our clubs for very long then you have a good idea about my criteria for selections. I am a fanatic for varietal correctness and that a wine is true to the place where it is grown. In Europe, the emphasis for winemaking is typically to emphasize the place where the grapes are grown. The French word for this is *terroir*, which roughly means “the flavor of the place.” This recognizes that some places where grapes grow have a unique character unlike any other. The selection of the grape, or grapes, grown there is the perfect vehicle to let that character shine through. It is not an accident that specific grapes are selected for the area, but the result of trial and error that often began in the dark ages after the fall of Rome.

In the New World there is obviously not that history, but at the same time we know a lot more about what each variety needs to be successful, in terms of producing a ripe crop of grapes. Some places, like California or Southeastern Australia, are blessed with many different areas where vines thrive and produce good quality wine. Often the wines are made purely from one area, in a way that emphasized the unique character, or *terroir* of that place. Sometimes wines are a blend of different areas, to either emphasize varietal character or to hit a specific price point. Our two selections this month are “California” blends, one to achieve varietal correctness at a specific price; the second to emphasize varietal character in a ready-to-drink style. Both continue the holiday theme of “easy drinkers” to enjoy with friends and family who may not be as into wine as you.

My first selection is the **2017 Carson Scott Pinot Noir (\$16)** which is already a popular item in the Orlando store. Being something of a Pinot Noir purist I had to wrap my head around this one, because it is riper and lower in acidity than I prefer. For those who do not know me, I am something of an acid freak, and not the kind you took in college, but rather the type that gives wines focus. In fact, Jean Reilly, the Master of Wine who teaches Wine and Spirits Education Trust classes in my store, frequently asks me to buy something with low acidity so she can demonstrate that character to her students. I am still working on that. Anyway, something happened while I was meeting the distributor of this wine that convinced me it would be a good club selection for December. During my tasting with them a customer stuck his head in my classroom, where I meet with vendors, so I offered him a glass. He took one sip and I saw his eyes light up in delight. This started me thinking that maybe for the December picks I should get off my high horse and pick something fun. This time of year, when there is already enough stress about everything else, perhaps a solid glass of wine is enough.

The first thing to notice about this wine is it sports a general “California” appellation. This means that the winery sources grapes from multiple areas around the state. If you remember the Lujon Pinot Noir feature from last month, that wine came from a single vineyard site. The wine was made to accentuate the unique character of the site where the grapes were grown. For this wine, winemaker Joe Otos is shooting for drinkability, but with good balance. He used grapes harvested from warmer areas provide color, body and flavor. Then blended it with Pinot Noir grapes growing in cooler areas give freshness and structure. The result is a wine that delivers pure Pinot Noir fruit character, but in a softer, more generous package than cooler climates such as the Willamette Valley or Sonoma Coast.

I rarely dive deeply into the chemistry of wine, because my proof readers claim it is too boring, but there is an interesting teaching point between the Lujon Pinot Noir feature of last month and the Carson Scott. One of the primary ways that wines are measured for balance is by their pH. This is a complex topic, but to simplify it for our purpose, think of pH as the strength of acidity in wine. Almost all wines fall between a measure of 3 to 4, with the lower numbers meaning higher acidity. For perspective, water is considered neutral with a pH of 7. Most of the Pinots I enjoy, like the Lujon from last month, have a pH that hovers around 3.5. The Carson Scott has a pH of 3.75. Not a big difference, but you will see it texturally on the palate as this wine spreads out more due to a softer acidic frame. Still with me? Ok, let's drink this bad boy.

Decant this wine when you first open it, because the nose is a bit closed. After five or ten minutes out of the bottle it delivers a gorgeous nose of fresh red plums, black raspberries, dried black plums, caramel and tarragon. On the palate it is plump, with a good sense of fruit, restrained by a thin veil of tannins and moderate acidity. Drink over the next year with hoisin glazed pork tenderloin, smoked salmon spread or deviled eggs with crispy pancetta.

Every time I look at the label of the **2017 Omen Cabernet Sauvignon (\$28)** it reminds me of the 1987 John Carpenter movie, Prince of Darkness. Perhaps this pick may have been a better October selection. Regardless of the label, the wine in the bottle is quite good, and a surprisingly honest example of Cabernet in an era where there is a lot of smoke and mirrors winemaking.

The grapes for this wine are grown in two warm areas, with a little more than half of the grapes coming from Paso Robles, and the balance from the Sierra foothills. We have explored Paso Robles extensively in this club so it will suffice to explain that the richness and texture of this wine come from the grapes grown in that area. Less common is the forty-eight percent of the grapes that come from three sites in the Sierra foothills, which form the eastern border of

the state. Wines from this area are typically very concentrated and add great structure to this blend. This is due to a couple of very unique circumstances that make the Sierra foothills a region to explore.

Unlike most of the other regions of California we feature, which are affected at least in some small way by their proximity to the coast, the Sierra foothills lie too far east for such phenomenon. The climate in this part of the state is hot, and dry during the day, but cool down at night due to elevation and cool air settling down the mountains. One winemaker in the area, Bill Easton, once told me that while they frequently reach 110 degrees during a summer day, they often drop below sixty degrees at night. This is great for achieving ripeness in the grapes but it also preserves natural acidity.

The other important factor is the soils of the area, which are primarily decomposed granite from the eroding Sierra Nevada mountains. On the west side of the state the soils are complex, as millions of years of plate tectonics have created many different pockets of virtually every type of rock known to man. On the east side of the state that is not the case, and so most of the vineyards are planted in very poor, mineral laden, granite soils. There is little water holding capacity in these soils so the vines produce less grapes, but achieve greater concentration.

In addition to using 90% Cabernet Sauvignon from these areas, the folks at Omen use 5% Syrah and 5% Petite Sirah from the Sierra foothills as well. Winemaking is very minimalist, where they de-stem the grapes then cold soak them for three days before fermentation commences to extract color. Then the juice is fermented and left on the skins after to further develop color and tannin. Aging is done in a combination of barrels, with 20% being new. They also proudly proclaim this wine is bottled without any additions, such as coloring agents or gum Arabic. Yes this is a thing, but not a topic for right now.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for a half hour before serving. Then the nose offers you a combination of ripe, fresh red cherries, red currant jam, toasted bread crumbs, caramel, dark chocolate and fresh sawn cedar. On the palate this wine is quite plump to start, with forward tannins that slightly encapsulate the fruit into the long finish. Drink over the next two years with smoked beef brisket, herb crusted lamb chops or cheddar cheese soufflé.

Cheese Soufflé

One of the geekier publications I read is Edward Behr's *The Art of Eating*, which is an e-zine that is released four times a year. One article last year focused on making puffy dishes using eggs, things like pop-overs and soufflés. Since then I have been fascinated with them, and particularly how well they work with wine. This version is ideal for the holidays because it is quite easy to make and the effect is dramatic. This is a fantastic dish for wines with moderate tannins, so try with almost any Pinot Noir, Merlot or soft Cabernet Sauvignon.

1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (1/2 cup)

1/4 cup (1 1/4 ounces) all-purpose flour

1/4 teaspoon paprika

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/8 teaspoon white pepper

Pinch ground nutmeg

4 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 1/3 cups whole milk

6 ounces Gruyère cheese, shredded (1 1/2 cups)

6 large eggs, separated

2 teaspoons minced fresh parsley

1/4 teaspoon cream of tartar

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray 8-inch round (2-quart) soufflé dish with vegetable oil spray, then sprinkle with 2 tablespoons Parmesan.

2. Combine flour, paprika, salt, cayenne, white pepper, and nutmeg in bowl. Melt butter in small saucepan over medium heat. Stir in flour mixture and cook for 1 minute. Slowly whisk in milk and bring to simmer. Cook, whisking constantly, until mixture is thickened and smooth, about 1 minute. Remove pan from heat and whisk in Gruyère and 5 tablespoons Parmesan until melted and smooth. Let cool for 10 minutes, then whisk in egg yolks and 1/2 teaspoons parsley.

3. Using stand mixer fitted with whisk, whip egg whites and cream of tartar on medium-low speed until foamy, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and whip until stiff peaks form, 3 to 4 minutes. Add cheese mixture and continue to whip until fully combined, about 15 seconds.

4. Pour mixture into prepared dish and sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon Parmesan. Bake until risen above rim, top is deep golden brown, and interior registers 170 degrees, 30 to 35 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining 1/2 teaspoon parsley and serve immediately.