



Reserve Club

Summer 2018

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The first pick for this quarter is something of a “where are they now”, the **2015 J. Bookwalter Conflict (\$58)**. You may remember that I also selected the 2012 as a feature for the winter 2015 offering. John is one of the real good guys in this business, and he makes wines that are crowd pleasers, so his wines appear frequently in all of the clubs.

As Washington State wineries go, the Bookwalter's are considered pioneers in the state. His dad, Jerry Bookwalter moved to Washington State in mid 1970's to become the viticultural manager of Sagemoor Vineyards. That 500-acre property includes the now famous Bacchus, Dionysus and Weinbau sites. Born in California and with a degree from UC Davis, he had been managing vineyards in the Golden State, but fell in love with the climate and potential of eastern Washington. In 1993, the winemaking bug finally bit him and he launched J. Bookwalter wines. The first efforts, made in his garage, were mostly white wines, but when his son John joined him, they moved into a commercial building. Over time, they realized that customers had a hard time finding them in an industrial complex, so they moved into an actual winery and have since added a restaurant.

I am always amazed when I taste the Bookwalter wines because winemaker John, Jerry's son, has no formal training. In the mid-1990's John stalked Zelma Long, the legendary winemaker of Simi, at a conference in the Tri-Cities area. She agreed to consult on the Bookwalter wines and John absorbed her wisdom like a sponge for their early offerings.

During a recent tasting with John, he told me that they are now using Claude Gros as a consultant for their wines. Although Gros is not a household name like some consultants, he has been the guiding light of several of my club features of late, so I was able to talk to John about what it is with his wines that is making him such a commodity. Unlike many consultants, such as Michel Rolland, who often make wines that taste very similar, regardless of grape variety and region, those from Gros seem to show a great sense of terroir. Part of this is because Gros has come to prominence as a consultant in the Languedoc region of France. This is an area where there is diverse geography, soil, and grape varieties grown. As such, wines produced in the many different appellations can have very distinctive and unique character. With each estate he consults for he guides them to produce wines that are both distinctive and yet very modern.

According to John this is because of his unique approach in the cellar with respect to fermentation and aging. Gros believes in fermenting quite cool, and “going to barrel dirty”. This is a technique where the just-fermented wine still has a percentage of lees in suspension as it goes into barrel. It is contrary to the techniques of many squeaky clean, UC-Davis trained winemakers who want to avoid problems in the barrel. Gros also advocates using thick staved barrels, topping them off frequently, and very little racking. All of this is a way of leaving the wine as natural as possible, fixing problems as they arise but leaving the wine to evolve very slowly. There are other things unique to the Gros process but I have been sworn to secrecy.

To produce the 2015 Conflict, Bookwalter uses a blend of 47% Cabernet Sauvignon, 45% Merlot and 8% Malbec, all from their estate, Conner-Lee Vineyard. The Cabernet vines were planted in 1987 and the Merlot in 1992, so the vines are producing some amazing fruit that offers them great flexibility in the cellar. All of the grapes are destemmed and fermented in open top fermentors for two to three weeks until almost dry, then racked a combination of small barrels and 400 liter puncheons. The wine is then aged for fifteen months in barrel, then fined with egg whites before bottling.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for at least a half-hour before serving. Once you do it explodes with notes of blackberry jam, black licorice, Vietnamese caramel, maduro cigar and dried brown figs. On the palate it has really good concentration, with forward tannins that quickly frame the fruit but do not overwhelm the wine. Drink from 2021-2028, about 1000 six packs produced.

My second pick, the **2013 Y. Rousseau Tannat “The Musketeer” (\$65)** is also from a winery that was previously in the spotlight with their 2012 Merlot. At that time I really wanted to feature this wine but it was above my budget. Since then Yannick's distributor in Florida closed and we are now able to buy the wines direct, which shaves off just enough for them to squeeze under the limit.

What draws me to this bottling is that it is produced from Tannat, a variety that is rarely found in the vineyards of California, but is famous as the base of the wines from the Madiran region in Southwest France. By coincidence, Yannick was born and raised in the nearby Gascogne region, and is quite familiar with the variety. His first job was working for Chateau Montus, the premier winery in the region. This is the second Tannat I have featured from California in this club, also putting the spotlight on Kent Rosenbloom's version under his Rockwall label, way back in 2011.

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For those of you who only drink wine for the health benefits, you are going to love Tannat. The variety is often described as the “healthiest” wine grape, due to the high level of anthocyanins, or antioxidants. For winemakers the challenge is to produce a wine that is not too tannic from this variety, and in an effort to do so, one even invented an entirely new winemaking process. In the early 1990’s in the village of Madiran, Patrick Ducournau began experimenting with bubbling oxygen through the wine during fermentation and ended up creating the process of micro-oxygenation. This process is frequently used by Michel Rolland, there he is again, to soften tannins and make wines more approachable when young.

Tannat has been planted in California since the 1940’s but has only recently become popular. As of 2015 there are 579 acres planted although only 526 are actually bearing fruit. The most visible advocate for the variety is Tablas Creek in Paso Robles, who successfully lobbied for wines to be labeled Tannat in 2005. This bottling is produced exclusively from grapes grown in the Alder Springs Vineyard in Mendocino County, one of the most unique sites in the North Coast.

The 140 acre Alder Springs Vineyard is unique to most in California in that it lies at 2400 feet above sea level and only 12 miles from the Pacific Ocean. This is a very cool site, above the fog line, so the grapes ripen extremely slowly to yield wines with amazing concentration. In addition, each vine is meticulously tended by hand, with up to three quarters of the grape clusters removed so the vine can concentrate all energy on a few grapes. To put this into perspective, the average crop yield in Napa Valley is just under 8.5 tons per acre, but here the yields are typically 2. This is why wineries like Kosta Brown, Arnot-Roberts, Bedrock and Yannick Rousseau source grapes from this vineyard.

Yannick is quite gifted at producing a wine from Tannat that is drinkable when young. Along with his history producing this variety in his native country of France, he also worked under Luc Morley at Newton Vineyards when he first moved to Napa in 1999. Morely has a gift for producing extremely polished wines from mountain fruit, as seen by his Newton Unfiltered bottlings, Peter Michael, Carte Blanche and his eponymous wines. Yannick follows his lead, producing wines almost exclusively from steep, mountain sites.

When you are ready to serve this wine I would encourage you to decant it for up to an hour. Then when you pour the first glass it reveals a brooding nose of Luxardo cherries, cooked cranberries, dark chocolate fudge, tangerine peels and cloves. The feel on the palate is firm, with a deep sense of fruit framed by a muscular tannins that stretch this wine into a long finish. There are 235 cases of this wine made. Drink from 2021-2033.

Last, but certainly not least, the **2009 Six Sigma Cabernet Sauvignon "Else's Reserve" (\$59)** is a concession that the previous two selections need some time, so here is one to drink now. It is from a small winery, but large estate, in Lake County, about an hour north of Napa Valley. The Six Sigma Ranch is owned by Kaj and Else Ahlmann, who purchased the 4300 acre cattle ranch in 2000. They farm 40 acres of vineyards on the property that are also high elevation, located between 1700 and 2400 feet above sea level.

The unusual name for this property comes from the Six Sigma process, which is used to improve the output process by identifying and removing the causes of defects and minimizing variability in manufacturing and business processes. (I would go into greater detail, but the Wikipedia definition is the most boring thing I have ever read and do you care? I don't.) During Kaj's decades as an executive in the reinsurance business he implemented the Six Sigma process at GE Capital Services. He now uses the same processes to improve the wines at Six Sigma Ranch.

As you might expect for a 4300 acre property, there is a diverse topography and growing conditions for vineyards. Being farther north than Napa and at higher elevation, the climate in Lake County is conducive for a long growing season. Daytime temperatures during the growing season are hot, but the evenings cool off rapidly due to the “cold sink” effect of Clear Lake, which is nearby this estate. Clear Lake is one of the deepest lakes in the US and quite large, so its effect on the entire county is dramatic. The grapes for this wine come from their oldest block, named for their daughter. It is a north facing site, making it the coldest of the estate vineyards, and the last one to be harvested each year. Their goal is a more structured and savory example of Cabernet Sauvignon, more “Old World” if you will, and the conditions in this site give them those qualities.

The winemaking at the time that this Cabernet was produced was directed by Merry Edwards. The grapes are hand harvested and sorted, then cold soaked for four days before alcoholic fermentation is allowed to proceed. Juice is pumped over the cap twice a day until the wine is dry. At that point it is racked to 100% new French oak barrels where it undergoes malolactic fermentation. After twenty-four months the wine is bottled without filtration. Only 300 cases were produced.

As I previously stated, the reason I chose this wine is because it is starting to come around as a very good example of mature California Cabernet Sauvignon. After a half-hour in the decanter it delights the senses with a complex bouquet of cherry fruit leather, cooked black raspberry puree, wet concrete, lilacs, allspice and a slight hint of hay barn. The feel on the palate is classic Merry Edwards, extremely dense, but with polished tannins and nicely integrated acidity. Although this wine is showing well now, it will improve for up to another five years. Drink from 2018-2023.

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