



Reserve Club

Summer 2019

Issue XII.III

I originally planned the theme for this quarter as something like “where are they now” and select some new vintages of producers previously featured. This was after tasting with both Yannick Rousseau and the export manager for Henschke winery during a week in March. Of course I am biased but both wineries excel for the same reason, they understand acidity and the role it plays in the balance of wine. Then a couple weeks later I tasted our first selection, a newcomer to our portfolio, which is nicely concentrated and varietally correct, but softer and more generous. At that point I decided to shift the theme a bit and focus on the role of acidity in wine. Specifically how acidity effects picking times and decisions the winemaker makes in the cellar. In my opinion, and thirty years of tasting experience, tannin is not the most important factor that allows wines to age, but rather acidity that holds them together in the long term.

The first selection is the **2014 Lewelling Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75)**, produced by one of the oldest, continuously operated vineyards in Napa Valley still in the original family’s hands. This vineyard was established in 1864 by John Lewelling and today is owned by the 6th generation, Wight and Taplin families. Lewelling, like many men of the era, moved to California in 1850 as a prospector, but quickly settled near what is today the San Jose area and established an orchard/nursery business. He was quite successful then moved north to the Napa Valley in 1853 for health reasons. At the time there were several vineyards in the region and so he planted vines as well as fruit trees. Tragically phylloxera hit the valley in the 1870’s, so John converted most of the vineyards to orchards of tree nuts and prunes. John died on Christmas day, 1883, in St. Helena. At the time he was so respected that the California Horticulture Society declared him the “father of California agriculture.”

In 1950 John’s great granddaughter, Janice Lewelling Wight and her husband Russ built a residence on the property and began replanting the old vineyard. Today their sons, Alan, Doug and Dave own the ninety acre property. Dave is the winemaker, who has made all of their twenty-four vintages and Doug operates Wight Vineyard Management, overseeing not just the Lewelling vineyard but also five hundred acres for others in Napa Valley. Doug’s daughter Haley is now taking over for Dave as the winemaker, the seventh generation. They only produce around 600 cases of wine each year, so most of their grapes are sold to many well known wineries in the area, including Caymus, who have been customers of theirs since the 1970’s.

The grapes used to make this wine come from the oldest block on the ranch, a twenty-eight acre parcel planted in the late 1980’s. Their location on the western edge of the valley, on an alluvial fan below the Mayacamus Mountains, is an ideal site for producing Cabernet Sauvignon. Being a thirty year old vineyard the vines were planted after the last phylloxera outbreak, but still in the old “California sprawl” spacing; five feet between vines and nine feet between rows. This allows each vine to grow quite large and produce a relatively big fruit set, or number of grape clusters. Ripeness is not an issue due to the large size of the canopy. As part of the ripening process, the acidity in grapes drops as they achieve ripeness. In the warm growing conditions of Napa Valley growers rarely struggle with too much acidity, their problem is too little acidity. As a result it is very common to add acid to either the grape juice, called must, or after the wine is fermented. As a point of reference for the other two selections, the pH of this wine is 3.9 and the total acidity is 5.8 grams per liter. Those are very common numbers in Napa and reflect a “soft” style Cabernet Sauvignon built to be consumed within a decade.

Speaking with Haley Wight, she defines their style of Cabernet as “fruit forward” and that is apparent as soon as you pour this wine from the decanter. There is an alluring melted brown sugar and cigar box note that stands out in the bouquet, followed by the classic Napa Cab note of wet concrete, then herbs de Provence, red licorice, fresh cherries and Creme de Cassis. This wine has good concentration on the palate, with firm but well integrated tannins and relatively low acidity. Being a 2014 this wine is showing well now and will age gracefully for five to seven more years in proper conditions.

In March I made a quick trip to Napa for a seminar, but had enough time on a Sunday afternoon for two quick appointments. After a quick sandwich from Genova Deli my first stop was to my friend Yannick Rousseau, who works out of one of the industrial parks on the south side of the valley. I have selected a Rousseau wine in each of the last three years because I strongly believe that he is one of the few producers in Napa who still builds a wine with the acidity required for development in the bottle over decades, not just years.

Yannick grew up in Gascogne, the famous Cognac region of Southwest France. Surprisingly his family were not winemakers, but butchers, which is the inspiration for his entry level wine, Son of a Butcher (SOB). His grandfather did

Buy six bottles of the Reserve Club features and receive a 20% discount off the listed prices

make a few barrels of wine each year for family consumption, and his favorite grape was Merlot. Yannick grew up drinking his grandfather's wine, who was named Pèpè, and when he discovered the Cavedale vineyard he knew the Merlot they grow would be perfect for a reserve level wine made in his honor.

The Cavedale Vineyard is located in what is now the Moon Mountain AVA. Most of the vines are planted more than 1200 feet above sea level, and above the fog line. The soils of the region are primarily volcanic, which are poor in nutrient content and drain quickly. Most vineyards, like Cavedale, lie on slopes that face east so they only receive direct sun until the early part of the afternoon. This allows the site to cool down faster and the grapes retain greater natural acidity. The combination of poor soils, elevation, slope, and exposure combine to make the grapes from this AVA very sought-after for their power and concentration. Like his grandfather, Yannick only produces six barrels of this wine, or 150 cases. The wine was aged for 18 months in French oak barrels, of which half are new.

When you open the **2016 Y. Rousseau Merlot "Pèpè" (\$59)**, make sure to decant it for at least forty-five minutes before serving. Immediately aromas of cedar, fresh blackberries and red plums, maduro cigar wrapper, black tea and black licorice ooze from the glass. On the palate this wine shows firm tannins and moderately high acidity, with the classic Moon Mountain level of high concentration. Make note of the mouthwatering grip of this wine after you swallow. This is due to a relatively low pH for red wine, 3.6, and high acidity. Drink this wine over the next twelve to fifteen years.

Finally, during my annual tasting with Henschke wines I was struck by the lovely texture and surprising delicacy of their **2016 Henschke Henry's Seven (\$50)**. I am sure that most of you remember my previous feature from Henschke, the 2013 Euphonium. That wine was a blend of Shiraz, with significant amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. The Henry's Seven is a Rhone-inspired blend that shows how producers in the warm climate of Barossa deal with acidity, by blending grapes rather than changing the chemistry of the wine in the cellar.

The Henschke family came to Australia in 1841, fleeing religious persecution in their homeland of Silesia, Prussia, then part of Germany but now located in modern-day Poland. Johann Christian Henschke and his young family made the difficult, 98 day voyage, but he lost his wife and daughter during the trip. When he and his two young sons arrived, they originally settled in Adelaide, along with many other German immigrants. He remarried, became a citizen, and in 1862 moved to the Barossa range, where he and his wife purchased their estate in what is today called the Keyneton area. His first vintage of wine was produced in 1868, and begins what is today a six-generation winery.

The family has continuously made wine since those days, but the modern era for them began with Cyril Alfred Henschke, who was born in 1924. He started to take over the winery in 1952, transitioning their production from fortified wines to exclusively table wines. Cyril's son Carl next took the reins, continuing to focus on quality at a time when most wine in Australia was sold in bulk. Carl's mantra was "better rather than bigger." In 1970, he was the first Australian winemaker to be awarded a Churchill Fellowship, which allowed him to travel to other wine regions and learn new and modern techniques in winemaking. This set the stage in 1979, when Carl's son Stephen took over winemaking. Stephen, along with his wife Prue, studied in Geisenheim, Germany for two years prior to taking the helm, and brought with them a far greater understanding of how to use technology and vineyard techniques to improve the wines. This included better refrigerated tanks for fermentation, vertical shoot positioning for trellising in the vineyard and a slow transition to all wines being bottled under screw cap. Stephen is a strong proponent for this closure, having studied the effects of aging on the wines for more than two decades.

The Henry's Seven bottling is produced in honor of Henry Evans, who planted the first vineyard in Keyneton in 1853. From his original seven acre planting he quickly became recognized for producing the finest wines in South Australia. Sadly upon his death in 1868 his widow Sarah, a strong believer in the temperance movement, closed the winery and tore out the vines. Then in 1997 Stephen and Prue decided to plant a vineyard in his honor. Prue is a highly regarded viticulturist and took about making a massal selection of cuttings from Shiraz, Grenache and Viognier vineyards in the region. This allows for more genetic diversity than simply using clones ordered from a vine nursery, further building complexity into the final wine. In addition, the Shiraz and Viognier are co-fermented. All of the components of this blend are aged in older French oak hogsheads, which are slightly larger than traditional barriques. The blend for the 2016 is 66% Shiraz, 15% Grenache, 10% Mourvedre and 9% Viognier, which is co-fermented with the Shiraz. After the blend is made the wine is aged in wood for ten months.

Because this wine is shipped under screw caps I strongly suggest decanting before serving. To me the deep red wines bottled under screw cap are always a little reductive and oxygen helps open them up. Once you do this wine delivers a knockout combination of black raspberry jam, black licorice, candied orange peel, dark chocolate, Espresso roast coffee beans. On the palate it is quite dense but not overweight, with a lovely lift of red fruits framed by moderately high acidity and moderate tannins. The pH of this wine is 3.5 and the total acidity is 6.0 grams per liter, so this wine has plenty of freshness that will get you mouth watering after swallowing. Drink between 2020 and 2030.

Buy six bottles of the Reserve Club features and receive a 20% discount off the listed prices