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There are many cultural references in movies and books about drinking properly aged, fine wine, but the fact is that more than ninety percent of all wine is made to be consumed within a couple of years of the vintage. This quarter I have selected wines that have been held back at their respective wineries for years, in one case decades, and are now ready to drink. In each case the primary fruit components have given way to the complex, tertiary elements that are the true sign of fine wines. I hope you enjoy them this holiday season with good friends and family.

No need to find your readers, or clean your glasses, yes the first pick is the **1990 Chateau Bel-Air Lagrave Moulis-Medoc (\$69)**. It is rare to find a wine just-released from the chateau with this much time in bottle, and this one is a testament to how gracefully wines age when never moved from their original location.

As you can probably expect, I found this wine during my visit to Bordeaux in March of this year. Primarily I was there to taste the newly vinified 2017 vintage, but on my last day I crisscrossed the city, tasting with four different negotiants. These are the “middle men” of the Bordeaux trade, as generally one does not deal directly with the chateau. Every negotiant has their own pet projects, and my final visit was with a boutique firm, called The Wine Merchant, who specializes in smaller properties who frequently sell their wines to a private client base in Europe. Most of the twenty odd wines they presented were good, but not note worthy, until they pulled out a selection of wines from this chateau. Unfamiliar with the winery, I dove in and found a couple of treasures.

The Seguin-Bacquey family who own Chateau Bel-Air Lagrave sell most of their wine to a private client list that includes many of the starred restaurants in France. They only release any real quantity when there is a need for cash, and even then it is only in small amounts. During my visit to this negotiant I tasted the 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1989, 1990 and 1997 vintages, mostly out of magnums. Two vintages stood out, the 1990, and the big surprise, the 1997. I say this because 1990 remains my second favorite vintage of the last century, behind the 1989s, but 1997 was something of a weak year. It goes to show that cooler vintages, often not loved by critics, often produce the most long-lived wines.

Chateau Bel-Air Lagrave is a tiny estate, only 25 acres, located near the town of Arcins and Chateau Poujeaux. There is something about this spot, which also includes the superb Chateau Chasse-Spleen, where the wines have an uncommon ability to age. One of my travel companions commented that this area of Moulis, which lies just north of the Margaux appellation, sits on a very deep bed of gravel, a remnant of the final decades of the ice age. As the glaciers receded, massive rivers formed as water poured off the Central Massif which dominates the center of France. For several hundred miles rock, sheared by the water, tumbled south, and the resulting gravel was deposited in what is today Bordeaux. Most of what we called the Haut-Medoc sits on this bed of gravel, which is the perfect medium for growing Cabernet Sauvignon.

This is why the blend for this wine is approximately 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot and 5% Petit Verdot. It is aged for 18 months in roughly 30% new barrels. When you are ready to serve this wine, you WILL NOT want to decant it. My recommendation is the pull the cork and pour a half glass of wine. Allow the bottle to rest for fifteen minutes, then pour and try to consume within two hours. Immediately the subtle notes of a well aged, older wine ooze out of the glass, with notes of well worn leather, claro cigar wrapper, dried porcini mushroom, cooked strawberries, balsamic vinegar, orange pomander and old velvet drapes (I know, weird but if you know the smell you will get it). There is surprising texture and breadth on the palate, with the ample fruit softly framed by a little remaining tannin, that lasts into the long finish. Drink this wine from 2018-2020 with standing rib roast, morel mushroom flan or rack of lamb.

Our second selection is from one of Europe’s most legendary producers, the **2005 Lopez de Heredia Rioja “Vina Tondonia Reserva” (\$55)**. Unlike the wine above, which was released more than two decades ago but held back at the winery, this is a current offering from a winery that ages their wines for a notoriously long time. Their process, from vineyard to bottle, was established by their founder in 1877 and is still strictly followed by the current family members running the estate. This winery has many fans, and a few vocal detractors, but I believe that in the last five years their quality has reached another level, with this wine being one of their finest offerings ever.

The story of Don Rafael Lopez de Heredia y Landeta begins, like most Rioja estates, in the later half of the nineteenth century. At that time a root louse called phylloxera was devastating the vineyards of Europe, particularly France. This forced many in the wine business to change course, with more than few traveling over the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain, where the infestation never became much of a problem. Don Rafael was Chilean by birth, and studied winemaking in Bordeaux before leaving to seek his fortune in the then-unrealized wine region of Rioja. He established his winery, Lopez de Heredia in the capital city of Rioja, Haro. Today it is the oldest firm in the city and the third oldest in the region, and one of the last to be still managed by members of the founding family. Currently the estate is guided by the founders great-grandchildren; Maria José, Mercedes and Julio César Lopez de Heredia. Unlike almost every winery in the region, and the

world for that matter, they still follow the same minimalist winemaking as their great-grandfather, with only a few nods to modernization.

Although he established his firm in 1877, it was not until 1913 that Don Rafael began planting his first estate vineyard, Vina Tondonia. This site lies on a peninsula that creates a bend in the Ebro River, in the sub-zone of Rioja Alta. This site is surrounded by what are the vineyards of the Rioja elite of today, including those of Benjamin Romeo, Muga, Ramirez de la Piscina, CVNE, Allende, Ysios and Remelluri. Today the family farms four different sites, a total of 220 acres of vines, and uses only estate grown grapes for their wines.

The blend for most vintages of Vina Tondonia, including 2005, is seventy-five percent Tempranillo, fifteen percent Garnacha and five percent each of Mazuela (Carignan) and Graciano. Grapes are hand harvested, destemmed and fermentation takes place in large, oak tanks using indigenous yeast strains. The must is pumped over the cap of skins several times a day to extract color and provide oxygen to the yeast. Once the wine is dry it is moved to small, 225 liter American oak casks, made on site by their own cooper, where this wine rests for six years. At this point the wine is lightly fined using egg whites, then bottled. The wine is then left in the cellar for six more years before release.

When you serve this wine, it does need to be decanted for a half-hour, or even a little longer, before serving. Then it reveals a complex combination of holiday spice cake, cherry liqueur, Craisins, vanilla bean, coconut macaroon, black raspberry hard candy and a lightly smoky undertone. On the palate the fruit is relatively plush and soft to start, with restrained and integrated tannins, and moderate acidity that persists into the long finish. Good now, this wine will age gracefully until at least 2030. Serve with slow cooked leg of lamb or braised pork shoulder.

My final pick for this quarter is a wine that has been in the running several quarters in a row, but typically ended up on the cutting room floor in favor of other Italian selections. Just yesterday, October 30th, I discovered that the intended third pick was destroyed in shipping, so I called this one up to the bigs. This in no way diminishes the prestige of the **2007 Castello della Regine Selezione del Fondatore (\$49)** as you will soon discover, it more than holds its own.

I first discovered this winery a couple of years ago during a tasting with their distributor. This is a large estate, of just over a thousand acres of land, located in Italian state of Umbria. Unlike the more famous wine regions of Umbria, which lie just over the border of the famous Tuscan wine regions, this property sits an hour southeast of Orvieto, not far from the border with Lazio. The original manor house, Castelluccio Amerino, was established around 1500 AD, and has been controlled by various royal families ever since. In addition to wine, which only occupies 300 acres of land, this property also produces olive oil, Chianina beef and cereal crops, as well as substantial holdings of forest. Because of their diverse bioculture, the estate is farmed using organic methods and their vineyards are completely isolated from those of other properties.

One of the advantages this estate has is that not being in a historical location, they are not encumbered by tradition or DOC/DOCG limitations for the wines they produce. Nonetheless, the estate has a long history of producing wine, with harvest records and sales receipts dating back more than 250 years. Most of their current vineyards are propagated from the original vines brought to this estate over two hundred and fifty years ago. Winemaking at this estate is managed by Franco Bernabei, a consultant from Tuscany that oversees many of that region's top estates. The estate grows many different varieties and they are careful to use cuttings from their own estate to preserve genetic diversity when replanting older vineyards. This wine is made exclusively from Sangiovese Grosso that was brought to the property from Montalcino more than two centuries ago. The vineyard used to make this wine is planted using a massal selection of those original vines, with most now being more than sixty years old and one block being over ninety years old.

The vineyard where the vines for this wine are planted lies at just over a thousand feet of elevation, on a steep slope that faces northwest to southwest. This exposition allows for a very slow ripening of the grapes, so acidity is naturally preserved. The soils are iron rich clay and sand, which retain enough moisture for the vines to endure the dry summers of this landlocked area.

Winemaking at this estate is quite modern, with all of the grapes hand-harvested and destemmed, with fermentation taking place in temperature controlled, stainless steel tanks. To extract color the cap is punched down several times a day during fermentation using a pneumatic press that moves between the tanks. Once the wine is dry it is raked to small, French Allier barriques where it undergoes malolactic fermentation and aging. This wine spends three years in oak barrels and is held back for eight years in bottle before release.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for up to one hour before serving. It displays an exotic bouquet of an old bookstore, dried and candied cherries, clove, blood orange peel, fig molasses and charred wood. On the palate this wine is quite deep, with a fine but obvious tannins that give this a slightly rustic edge. Drink now to 2030 with grilled steaks.