

I am writing of this release from the seat of a United Airlines flight that originates in Rome and ends in D.C., on my way back from a week of leading a wine tour in Tuscany. During the six days of this tour, my group and I visited seven family owned wineries in the regions of Chianti Classico, Montalcino, Montepulciano and Torgiana. All of the estates were family-owned and ranged in size from 200,000 case production per year down to 2,500. Regardless of their size, I chose each winery because I know the families are dedicated to the highest possible quality. It is no coincidence that the three wines I have selected for this quarter are from domestic producers of whom I feel the same. Although they may not have hundreds of years of history farming their land, each has a respect for their vineyards and wine that is not as common as it once was in the American wine scene. So this quarter we celebrate that attitude and how they plan to proceed through the generations.

My first selection for this quarter comes from one of my favorite wineries in Washington State, the **2014 Isenhower "Children's Reserve Cuvee" (\$75)**. Looking over my spreadsheet of club selections, I am surprised that I have never chosen an Isenhower wine for this club, as there have been six selections in other clubs dating back a decade. It may be because their wines are generally below my price range for this club, but with this new limited offering they have something that works.

Brett and Denise Isenhower like to describe their 1997 entrance into the wine business as "diving head first into a shallow pool." Both were working as pharmacists in Colorado when Brett caught the wine bug and they moved to Walla Walla, Washington. While they both maintained day jobs as pharmacists, Brett picked up evenings and weekends working as a cellar rat. In 1999, they crushed 17 tons of grapes, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah, from space they borrowed at Cayuse, which they released on September 1, 2001 to great critical reviews.

Ironically their biggest break came at the beginning of the recession in 2009. The New York Times ran a story about how they were coping with a drop in sales. What was newsworthy was their decision to cut production by 50% and stop selling their wines through the distribution chain. In effect, their goal was to become more successful by being small. At the time they were selling to over 20 distributors but they decided to keep only one, located here in Orlando, and focused all their attention on selling from their tasting rooms. Even though they were making less wine, the demand meant they could raise prices, or at least keep them the same, and retain more of the profits by cutting out middlemen. For us in Orlando, as very loyal customers, it meant less wine but the quality was, and is, better than ever.

Although Brett is not a "trained" winemaker, he is skilled at crafting very polished wines. He does this by purchasing grapes from top vineyard sites in Washington, each selected for unique attributes they contribute to the final blend. All of the fruit for their wines, except Syrah, is destemmed, double hand sorted and fermented with indigenous yeast. Also, all of their wines are one hundred percent pure varietal, except for this one and their entry level wine called The Last Straw, which is a blend of the tanks and barrels not used in other wines.

Due to the exceptional nature of the 2014 vintage, Brett and Denise decided to make one wine to celebrate their children, using the artwork from their eleven year old daughter Keegan. It is a reserve wine and also a blend, taken from their best lots. The base of the wine is 67 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, from the Seven Hills Vineyard; 18 percent Petit Verdot from the Dionysus Vineyard and 15 percent Cabernet Franc from the Dineen Vineyard. They produced 92 cases of this wine, or four barrels. It was aged for 28 months in barrel and was bottled without filtration.

When you are ready to open this wine, decant it for a half-hour and up to an hour before serving. The color is a teeth-staining violet, with thick legs which are moderately stained. The bouquet is mix of cooked black cherries, Thai basil, sandalwood, red licorice, cola syrup and vanilla wafers. On the palate it is quite big and concentrated, with tannins that rise up late on the palate and frame the long finish. Drink this wine from 2019 through 2025.

My second selection is also from a favorite winery, this time located in Sonoma, California, and the Bilbro family and their **2016 Marietta Cellars Zinfandel "Angeli Cuvee" (\$38)**. I started buying the wines from Marietta in the late 1980s when owner/winemaker Chris Bilbro was starting to make a name for himself. Chris began his working life in hospital administration but quickly tired of the politics and stress of an office job, and founded Marietta Cellars in an old cattle barn in the Alexander Valley area of Sonoma County. He learned his love of wine from this great Aunt, for whom he named the winery. For over 40 years, Marietta, and her husband Armé,

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operated an inn near the town of Cloverdale in northern Sonoma. It was at their table he learned the value of family, food and of course, wine.

When I started buying the wines from Marietta, their big seller was simply labeled Old Vine Lot #7. It was a non-vintage, Zinfandel-based beauty that sold for \$5.99 and easily compared in quality to wines twice the price. Then, in the mid-1990s, Chris began bottling a Zinfandel blend made from very old vines, growing in Alexander Valley. He named it the Angeli Cuvee, in honor of the family who planted the vines in the early 1900s. It is hard to believe now, but 20 years ago this wine received such high ratings from critics that it was highly allocated, and I divided a few cases among dozens of clamoring customers. Today the wine is no different, but critics do not give big ratings to many Zinfandel based wines any longer, so supplies are pretty good. This is also the one wine that Chris asked his boys, Scot and Jake, to not change when they bought him out in 2012.

Watching the transition from Chris to his sons has been exciting. For years I found the wines a bit inconsistent, and they leaned to a little sweetness by the end of his career. Scot took over the winemaking, and he immediately started finishing the wines dry, and even experimented with all non-vintage bottlings for a couple of years. While I found them thrilling, I think the industry pushed back on the concept of “the best blend from the cellar” wines, and they returned to vintage dating a year or so ago.

Officially the blend for this wine is 96 percent Zinfandel and two percent each of Petite Sirah and Syrah. I have a suspicion that the wine is actually a field blend made up of those vines of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Carignan, then finished with a little Syrah. That tiny piece of Syrah is likely from their holding in Mendocino County, the McDowell Ranch, home to some of those vines in California. The wine is aged for 15 months in neutral barrels, and there are 2,000 cases made.

I strongly suggest decanting this wine for at least an hour before serving, as it weighs in at 15.1% alcohol and a little time in the decanter tempers the heat. Once you do, this the wine explodes with notes of cooked black currants, blackberry jam, graham crackers, cinnamon sticks and a touch of menthol. On the palate this wine shows quite dense at first, then lightens up for a moment before the firm tannins frame into a long finish. Despite the relatively high alcohol, this wine manages to show a nice sense of balance. Drink between 2019-2029.

The final selection for this quarter is the **2016 Anderson’s Conn Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55)**. I have been buying the wines from Anderson’s Conn Valley for many years, and only while doing research for this feature did I learn that the founder, Gus Anderson, passed away in 2016. Gus, and his wife Phyllis, visited the Orange Avenue store every spring for many years, traveling through Central Florida on their way to visit friends living in the Leesburg area.

The winery was founded in 1981 when Gus, along with his wife and son Todd, purchased 40 acres at the base of Howell Mountain, just off Conn Valley Road. At the time Gus was an orthodontist who was sick of looking at teeth, and Todd was a geologist. For the first few years they sold grapes, and made a little wine on the side. They enjoyed it so much that Todd suggested they build a winery, so in 1987 they produced their first commercial vintage. Gus and Phyllis retired from the day-to-day operations in 2001, handing the winery over full-time to Todd.

Although Todd has a strong personality, I do believe he is one of the more talented winemakers in Napa. The family never expanded their original 40 acres of vines, but with an ideal location, I think they were afraid to mess with the dynamic. Their vineyard lies in a bowl-shaped area at the base of Howell Mountain, in a small valley cut by the Conn Creek. In the afternoon the cool air rolls down the mountainside and through the valley, ultimately settling in the area around Lake Hennessy. This lowers the temperature in their vineyards by a few degrees, which stretches out their growing season and prevents the grapes from over-ripening. Although their wines never lack for power or texture, they also consistently possess good freshness, which is a real trick in Napa reds.

To make this wine they use only grapes grown in the estate vineyard. This is only the second vintage of this wine and my guess, although it does not say it in the tech sheet, is that it comes from younger vines. If most of their vines were planted in 1981, they probably need to replant some blocks that are no longer producing enough fruit to be commercially viable. Todd, along with full-time winemaker Robert Hunt, craft this bottling using 87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc and 1% Petit Verdot. The wine is aged in French oak barrels for 18 months.

When you are ready to open this wine, make sure to decant it for up to an hour before serving. It shows the classic Napa nose of cooked blackberries, blueberries and black plums, with notes of kirsch, toasted marshmallows, dark chocolate and dark cigar wrapper. On the palate it shows good concentration, with the moderately dense fruit lifted by a nice frame of acidity and framed by moderate tannins. Drink this wine from 2020 to 2030.

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