

WINE GARAGE

FEBRUARY 2008 WINE SHIPMENT

RedOnly Club

Milovina Merlot Mendocino Co,

These folks have been growing grapes in Mendocino since the early 1970's and at one point were the largest grower in the county. Much like the similar story I have been telling about other growers, when things got bad in the grape market, they started making wine with the unsold fruit. They hired all the right wine making people to make wine they did. In fact, he hired one of my very favorite Mendocino wine-makers, Greg Graziano, to do all the important stuff. But the grape prices re-bounded, as they always do, and I secured this Merlot on a distress "I want out of Winemaking" sale. This Merlot is elegant, structured, complicated and way better than the Cabernet I was offered on the same buy. Some times Merlot has better Bordeaux characteristics than the king, Cabernet. Merlot is used to soften the tannins in a Cab or Cab-based blends. It is a bigger grape with more juice to skin ratio – skin is where you get the tannin – but if Merlot is grown in a cooler climate, the berries are smaller and the tannin based structure is more evident. Rich, and full bodied. Multi-layered flavors visit the palate either by themselves or sometimes simultaneously. Berry, chocolate, currants, plums, balsamic vinegar over strawberries (one of the best food combos), dried flowers. A distinct dusty (Rutherford Dust?) finish. Cool wine! What a deal, no? Better hurry with a reorder, because we will have exactly 5 cases left – and that is it. Not one more case left on the planet.

Blockheadia Rignosii Zinfandel, Sonoma '05, \$24.99

Michael Ouellette is a Sommelier here in Napa Valley – he doesn't actually work for a restaurant as a Somm (as they are referred to in the "Industry"), he now has a business that consults restaurants and sets up wine lists, complete with notes and staff training. He started out as the Somm and Director of Ops at Mustards Grill for 12 years (!), was a founding partner of Martini House, and launched Blockheadia winery in 1992. He obviously has connections in the wine country and uses them to source fantastic fruit for his wines. Since I am taking the same primrose path down the into the belly of winemaking – ie no formal training other than a curiosity to how it is done, I was intrigued, then highly impressed by his results. This wine is a blend of Zinfandel from Carneros and Russian River appellations. Since he chose fruit from cooler growing regions, the wine is done more in a Claret style – well balanced, subtle, and pairs well to food. Bright blackberry, plum, and strawberry fruit – coupled with some bramble, spice, blueberry pie, and nice toasty oak makes this wine a great choice for the All Red Club. Not over the top in any one direction – just a seamless expression of terrior. Try this wine as an aperitif with cheese, or paired with an entrée of chicken marsala, veal or other lighter dishes when you would have normally chosen a white wine. I drink red wine with fish sometimes – experiment!

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Kylix Petite Sirah Dry Creek

I was the last vintner to harvest fruit in Napa Valley in 2007. November 8th - to be exact. We got a deal on Petite Sirah that was unsold and selling for a song – only problem was I had to find a pick crew and all the accoutrements to go along with picking grapes in a wet vineyard after all the workers headed south of the border. I had twelve hours to find everything and everybody - and I did. We picked, trucked, crushed, de-stemmed, and fermented those 150 year old head pruned vine-grapes right before the second worst storm to hit that fall. I totally dropped everything that day – appointments with wine sales people, a meeting with our accountant and a phone conference call with the folks designing our label to get that Petite in. One dude came from all the way from Sacramento to see me that day and called my cell phone while I was playing picking foreman in a vineyard planted in 1870 and said, “I’m here at the store for our appointment”... I said, “Grab some glasses in the back room from Brooke, get back in your car, drive south on 29 for 2 miles and look for a guy standing along the east side of the road right before Twomey Winery, wearing a black coat. That’s me.” First time I ever had a tasting appointment out of the trunk of a car in the middle of a vineyard. We tasted this monster Pets, (in a Pets vineyard, remember) under dark grey skies while I was triaging pick bins for bunch rot. Tasted freaking great! Made by the same dude who produces Amphora Winery out of Dry Creek Valley – tough negotiator, this guy...almost met my match...but not quite. This wine was in the club...out... back in...out...then I had to give him the old stank eye...and back in again. All I went through to taste it for Christmas sakes...vi-olets, blackboard chalk, Santa Barbara beach tar (I swear) on the nose. Big, Black, and Brawny...like Cassius Clay, with the finesse AND the business end of his glove right on your piehole...pow! Bramble, blackberry, backstrap molasses pie (in Pennsylvania its called “Shoo Fly”) dried plums, and a deliciously minerally finish. If you don’t like this wine, don’t ever pick up Petite Sirah, because this is one of the best.

Mt. St. Helena Cab. Sauvignon Napa Valley '03, \$14.99

The two partners involved with this wine, Bill Davies (Schramsburg) and Tom Gamble (Gamble Ranches) have been friends since kindergarten. They started this winery to produce wine from their childhood stomping grounds. The core of the fruit came from Oakville, and mostly neutral oak was used to allow the beautiful fruit to shine through – only 21% of the cooperage was new. I get very subtle vanilla/toasty oak flavors. Fruit from other vineyards from around the Valley were added as well as Merlot and Cab Franc to add complexity and depth. Molasses, olive, and cigar box on the nose, Black licorice, white pepper, eucalyptus flavors coming in waves surrounded by black fruit. Soft tannin on the finish. What a deal for \$15!

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Vine Cliff Merlot Napa Valley 02

This is a special, special offering to the Club. We secured this wine at this price due to 2 factors: that stupid movie “Sideways” made the merlot market soft, and Ginny Sweeney is best friends with Joy. Ginny is married to Rob Sweeny, who is the GM of the Vine Cliff Winery – OK Rob is my bud too, but it all started with Ginny and Joy. (Well, actually, it started with Emma, since she was the reason that Joy and Ginny met because Ginny and Rob had a child that same time we did. Practically all our friends in Napa Valley are tied to Emma somehow). Vine Cliff, sits up on a hill off of Silverado Trail in Oakville – seriously major real estate in the Valley. Started (and funded) by Rob’s step dad (he owned Embassy Suites and sold them), at first I thought “here is another rich dude who wants to get in the wine business, and gives it to his son to run”. No no no. Rob went to Napa Valley College and got his degree in freaking viticulture first off. He felt he needed to learn the business from the “vine-up” so to speak. Then he slowly took on more responsibilities until he became the Director of Sales, then GM. This dude works his ass off, either driving a tractor during harvest, or traveling all over the world selling wine for at least 3 or 4 solid months of the year(if you put it all together) – being away from his family. A lot of work is involved between a little grape-growing on a hill in Oakville to popping a bottle at the Four Seasons in Tokyo. Their number one wine sells for \$155 and received amazing scores. Rob cut production way back, tightened up the winemaking and vineyard operations and started blowing away the wine critics. One night we were at a party with Rob and Ginny and this bottle of Merlot came in to the conversation, and here you go. More Cab-like, with firm structure and complexity. Black cherry, currants, pomegranate, smoked hazelnuts, toasty oak. Not at all flabby or soft. Big mouth full of wine that needs a big ass steak to stand up to it. All French Oak, 60% new and aged in the caves for 18 months. This wine sold for \$40 and got big numbers in the wine press. Thank Ginny and Rob for the opportunity to have it for almost half off.

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Martin Family Syrah "Estate" Dry Creek Valley 04 \$17.99

One of my favorite producers in Dry Creek, Martin Family, is changing hands. Sad. When we 1st opened the store, I was dealing with Bill's wife – when they were newly divorced and she had complete control over the winery until the estate was split up. Then she was paid off and out of the picture and I was dealing with Bill and a new GM. Now he is throwing in the towel and a group of investors are taking over and I got a smokin' deal on this normally \$30 Syrah as a close out. All I can say is, if you can find a better Syrah for under \$18 I'm a monkey's uncle. There is VERY LIMITED amounts of this wine left at these prices. This wine was the only the 2nd Syrah he made; I can see by reading the tech sheet on the wine that he was blowing out all stops. 80% French oak, 60% of which was new. Five (5!) punch downs per day – which was exactly what I did on my first foray into winemaking, thinking that 5 punch downs per day was better than the 3 that Massimo told me was all that was required because you wouldn't gain anything more from 2 additional punch downs. What happens, when the grapes are fermenting after yeast is added, is the carbon dioxide bubbles up through all the "must", which is made up of the grape skins and seeds. All that matter creates this hard crust called the "cap". To gain more skin to juice contact – which gives wine its color and tannins, and eventually more flavor-- you punch through this crust (cap) and make the carbon dioxide push up all the must all over again. And you wouldn't believe the heat it (fermentation) produces. The tool looks like a huge potato masher. In fact, that is what exactly I was buying at the hardware store to use to punch down the two bins we had in the back of the store this year – when, luckily, a friend was in line behind me that Saturday morn who happens to be the vineyard manager of Duckhorn, and asked what was I doing with that industrial potato masher. I told him "to punch down my wine". He looked at me with an incredulous stare and pointed to the wooded handle (with dried glue oozing out from the connection of the handle and the business end), and told me to use only 100% stainless steel or I was going to deposit all those chemicals right into my wine and perhaps TCA as well and who knew what else you big dummy! Whew, that was a close one! (thank god I rely on Massimo for all this important winemaking stuff, but I AM learning).This incredibly dark and rich wine (5 punch downs!), has all the right stuff (no glue). Creamy and rich, with toasty vanilla. The aroma reminds me of a mocha grande with vanilla sprinkled on top (French oak). Black cherry, blackberry compote and spicy black pepper (Dry Creek) predominate the palate. A multi-layered, complex finish with nicely softened tannins completes the picture. I had this wine in San Francisco's Indian (eastern, and the neighborhood is called the Tenderloin) food district with lamb curry – and ewe was it good.

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