



# RED & WHITE WINE CLUB

## **Vine Cliff Chardonnay “Los Carneros”**

Napa Valley 2008 \$24.99

Here is yet another feather in the Wine Garage hat of outstanding wine club selections – due primarily to the fact that we live, work and play in Napa Valley. So do all our friends and some of these friends run amazing wineries. Sometimes, friends share delicious lunches at some of the outstanding restaurants found in this Valley – and of course wine is involved in these friendly lunches – and when those friends start talking about business (their wine businesses, duh), well..... here is the result. An absolutely gorgeous bottle of Chardonnay that normally retails for \$39 - brought to you for only \$24.99.

You may have heard of Vine Cliff in the wine press these past few years. Rob Sweeney, one of my very best friends here in the Valley, my lunch companion described in the scenario above, and President/GM of Vine Cliff, took an enormous gamble several years ago by slashing the total overall production of the winery so he could concentrate on “quality” over “quantity”. His gamble paid off in spades and the winery has now a stable of awards and some seriously high review numbers from the Spectator, Wine Enthusiast, and Robert Parker. When I attended the prestigious “Taste of Yountville” a few years ago, a trade-only tasting of Yountville appellation wineries including the likes of Screaming Eagle, Opus One, Bond, Harlan..... all the cultist offerings available – well, my very FAVORITE wine of the entire tasting was the Cabernet from Vine Cliff.

Vine Cliff has a long history in the Valley dating to 1860's as being a part of George Yount's property. He died in 1865 and the hillside estate was purchased by Colonel Stephen Fry and the land was quickly turned into vineyards and a winery was built. Soon, Vine Cliff was producing 19,000 gallons of wine per year in its glory days of the 1890's and was a model farm in the Valley but then phylloxera struck – the grapevine destroying louse – and all was lost in just a few years.

Then Charles and Nell Sweeney purchased the land in 1985, all 100 acres – and built an amazing hilltop mansion. Charles was the savvy hotel baron who started, and then sold, the Embassy Suites chain. Rob, the oldest son, joined the winery team in 1990. Now I know what you are thinking.... SUPER rich dude, comes to Napa with all this money, gives his spoiled silver spooned son the reigns to make another fortune in the wine biz, blah blah blah - seen it a hundred times. Nada. Rob CARVED out of nowhere a role for himself at the new winery by enrolling in Napa Valley College to learn viticulture starting from ground zero. He busted his ass day after day in the blazing sun replanting all the vineyards by hand, learning Spanish on the fly. Rob didn't get “handed” squat except an opportunity to make the new Vine Cliff Winery his life's work – so that now after 22 years he has the wonderful job of traveling around the country (world, really) trying to sell the wine that they make to every conceivable market that is known.

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Months and months on the road living out of hotels, eating crap food, missing his wife and 2 boys while he is doing “ride withs” with whatever bozo freaking loser of a salesman in bumbreak Iowa who didn't make his numbers last quarter. Rob is there to kick some ass to get sales up and to see that his brand is in front of every conceivable wine buyer and somm. Then his “fun” part of the job kicks in during harvest when he works 14 hours a day, 7 days a week for..... sometimes MONTHS, until every little grape is crushed and every drop of wine is tucked away in barrel or tank. Post harvest he does get to relax and spend time with the family but come January..... Its back on the road to bumbreak bozo-land to do it all over again. If the winery doesn't make money.... Rob doesn't make money.

The dude grows a mean ass garden too, at one of his vineyards out in Calistoga. He was once late for a dinner party at a mutual friends house back some time ago because a pipe burst in the vineyard and guess who gets to deal with problems after hours? (You don't call Mr. Roto Rooter Man in a vineyard). He brought back some of the best tasting tomatoes I ever had the pleasure to slice into. Life of a wine mogul, yes? Anyway, this Chardonnay kicks some serious butt and you owe it all to Rob Sweeney because of his hard work, dedication, exacting standards – and allowing me to take him to lunch and get him a little buzzed on our Chihuahua Cabernet at Tra Vigne restaurant. He says, by the way, that the Chihuahua Cab is my best wine made to date....fruit bomb. Grown in Carneros where the grapes have a longer hang time due to the cool growing conditions so close to the SF Bay, Rob extracted some unique and yummy flavors from the grapes. The nose yields an interesting aroma of cinnamon toast, vanilla ice cream smothered in that pineapple stuff you find in a malt shop, and sugared ginger. Meyer lemon, and grilled nectarine (from charcoal, of course) shows up on the front palate with more tropical fruit on the mid, such as guava, mango, and kaffir lime. The mouthfeel is rich yet the finish has brilliant acidity and crispness with green apple and baking spice. The wine was fermented in 45% new French oak and sat on its lies for ten months. Serve with peel-and-eat shrimp, grilled mahi mahi with a generous squeeze of lime, or cheese. Pretend you are a wine mogul while sipping.....

## **La Czar Sauvignon Blanc**

Sonoma Mountain 2007 \$12.99

Mike Pelczarski is a quiet bear of a man, who one day wandered in the store with some delicious wine tucked under his huge arms. Not un-like numerous vintners before him, Mike made a lot of money (he was responsible for all those CD disks from AOL that came in the mail for about ten years or so), wanted to do something that he actually had some passion for (wine),

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and was so enthusiastic that he started out a little too rambunctious for his britches (made too much wine way too fast). We certainly had things in common and struck a quick friendship. His winemaker, Rick Davis, was well known by the Garage and we had his personal label offered up in several clubs (Calstar Zinfandel). Rick cut his teeth in the wine biz with Flowers Winery at the Sonoma Coast, Gainey in Santa Barbara, Tandem Winery, Alcina, and Londer - all back up here in Sonoma. This wine was a very late decision as a club selection. I had something all lined up but Mike forced me to taste this wine and I was blown away, by both the flavors and the cost.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aromas I have encountered with my nose scrunched up in a glass of SB. Total perfume to my soul. Grapefruit, kiwi, lemongrass, myrrh, and apple explode from the glass straight down your nostrils like a shotgun blast. If I had to live in a wineglass for the rest of my life, this Sauv Blanc may be the smell I would want to curl up with for all eternity. The entire staff was baffled as well, I'll have you know. I have had THOUSANDS of whiffs of Sauvignon Blanc and this wine wins the all time prize. On first sip, you feel a slickness of texture – glycol perhaps, that mutes the aromatics for a second then the citrus, apple, and grass pop on the palate. Granny Smith, wheatgrass, spinach, pommelo fruit, and hazelnut assault en-force in the mid-palette. The finish is rich yet crisp with honeysuckle and tangerine, and unctuous gooseberry (visited by a feline). Try this wine with some Chinese food such as Orange Chicken, or sweet and sour soup, or a rich California Roll at a favorite sushi bar.

## **Wine Garage “Joy Ride”**

Suisun Valley Solano County 2009 \$19.99

This is the second vintage of our crazy white blend. I utilized the same varietal components but tweaked the percentages of the blend – and REALLY tweaked the winemaking technique. Our 2008 vintage showcased Albarino as the predominate grape variety, with Sauvignon Blanc (from Napa Valley), Viognier, and a splash of Muscat Canneli. Everything was whole cluster pressed and stainless steel tank fermented. The nose was extremely aromatic, the body had some weight to it, and the finish was crisp and clean. All the fruit – except for the Sauv Blanc – came from Howard Babcock's vineyard in Suisun Valley in Solano County. For this vintage I decided to drop the Sauvignon Blanc and replace it with Verdelho – the famous grape from Portugal whose genealogical parents are thought to be a cross between Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir. Howard's neighbor, Bob Ballester, had a small vineyard recently planted to Verdelho and I decided to make the new Joy Ride completely appellated in Suisun Valley. Suisun Valley lies within the southern end of the Coast Range, between the Vaca Mountains and the Mt. George Range to the west, and ends at Suisun Bay to the south while to the north it starts at the Napa County line.

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Suisun Valley lies within the southern end of the Coast Range, between the Vaca Mountains and the Mt. George Range to the west, and ends at Suisun Bay to the south while to the north it starts at the Napa County line. It is approximately 3 miles by 8 miles. It contains about 15,000 acres of which approximately 2,200 acres are planted with grapes. With the strong marine influence from San Pablo and San Francisco Bays, the wind blows cool and strong from May until October – perfect climate for crisp white wine grapes. I feel that this region will be one of the most sought out areas for unique white wine production in the coming years. My winemaker friend, Ted Osbourne, had a glowing review from James Laube of the Wine Spectator on one of his wines from Suisun a few years ago and Ted and I made a pact last year to use the Suisun Valley AVA on our wines from Solano (instead of “North Coast”) on everything from this great wine growing region from here on out. When the grapes came in – it wasn't the typical “pick everything and throw it in the press”. It took almost a 45 day spread for all the varietals each to ripen. The first was the Muscat, then the Viognier, later the Verdelho, and finally the Albarino. The composite brix (sugar) levels were on average 23 (dry). Each batch was vinified separately and later blended together then.....the radical thought took hold in my crazy winemaker brain, “why not ‘barrel ferment’ and push it through malolactic fermentation”? The fruit was certainly crisp and tart enough, why not see how these babies taste with a little more body, mouthfeel, and weightiness to them. I gambled. Massimo was absolutely against it. I am always trying to push him out of the box – he is always trying to be the conservative influence on my craziness in being a unique wine producer. I gambled anyway. The wine stayed on its lees in neutral French barrels for a year.

Halfway through the aging process, I tasted the wine from barrel and thought I had made a huge gamble and lost. The wine tasted like CRAP! I was so bummed. Then I tasted it again a month later, and then another month later and ..... BOOM. She came around! OMG! An unbelievable transformation occurred, I really couldn't understand how it happened but the wine just came together beyond my wildest dreams. I have never tasted a white wine like this. The final blend is 39% Viognier, 26% Verdelho, 23% Albarino, and 12% Muscat. The nose is an aromatic blend of papaya, lime, hazelnut, limestone, and honeysuckle. Amazing acid and brilliant clarity on the first sip, then a rich weightiness of fruit – not a lick of butter (as per Chardonnay, that goes through malolactic fermentation). Lemon chiffon, white peach, green papaya, straw, wet stone, vitamin, and under ripe cantaloupe mingle on the mid palate. Every sip is different from the last. The finish has a nuttiness mixed with virgin olive oil and jasmine, then slammed with a green apple acidity for a crisp and clean finish. This, to me, tastes like a French white Burgundy – a mineral laced Chardonnay without a hint of oak or toast or butter. Try this with ALL FOODS. It is perhaps the quintessential “food wine”. I ran out today for a Thai Papaya Salad for lunch – shredded green papaya, chili, limes, and toasted peanuts. Perfect pairing..... We won the gamble, I hope you agree.

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## Two Mile “Founder’s Rock” Red Blend

California 2008 \$15.99

San Francisco is such a “foodie” town – one of many reasons why I love it so much. In the past few years, a crazy phenomenon has been occurring in the culinary community – “underground” restaurants. Sick of all the red tape of permits and health department inspections et al, chefs have started to host dinners guerilla-style in warehouses or private homes or trailers - where the watchful eye of big brother doesn’t exist. You sign up on a web site, pay for your meal on Pay Pal, and the morning of the dinner you get an email message that reveals the location. One such organization is called Forage SF/Urban Kitchen. These guys host dinners once per month or so with a menu that has been foraged completely within and around San Francisco. I signed up. Fifty bucks per, with \$30 more for a wine pairing for each of the six courses. The email that morning stated the dinner was to be held in a nightclub in the Mission district – it was Sunday night, so the club was “closed”.

We showed up and there was already a line around the block to get in. You get to the host and tell them your email address and then get escorted to a table. Candles, flowers – the space looked great. An army of servers sashayed around the joint, all working for tips and obviously very experienced at their craft. The host came out with the chef of the evening and explained the menu and where everything was foraged from: starter, oysters, salad, soup, gnocchi, and dessert. We sat close to the bar where the wine dude was preparing all the flights. We struck up a conversation after I commented on how yummy his sparkling wine was that was served with the oysters. Never heard of them; Two Mile, an urban winery out of Oakland. Each wine was paired perfectly. I told him I was a buyer and invited him up to the store for a tasting.

My favorite wine was this one, a blend of 60% Syrah and 40% Petite Sirah. The Syrah has quite a pedigree – and a Wine Garage connection – it is sourced from Unti Vineyards in Dry Creek, one of the most exciting Syrah vineyards in Sonoma and is managed by Levi, who is our past wine club manager, Katie Akers’s, boyfriend. The Petite is sourced from the Rosciano Vineyard in Livermore Valley. Livermore is just east of Oakland in a very warm AVA that grows some outstanding Petite Sirah (the other grape varieties are pretty much crap, if you ask me, probably why you never have seen a Livermore AVA wine from me). This wine is super yummy and extremely extracted. Practically black in the glass, the nose opens up to dried lavender petal, smoke, sandalwood, and minerals. The palate shows earthy mushroom, blackberry jam, tobacco, and sweet crème de cassis. The finish is long and rich with more earth and black fruit. Awesome wine for an amazing price. Have with a hearty, slow roasted meat dish like Yankee Pot Roast with caramelized onions.

## Leveroni Merlot

Sonoma 2008 \$19.99

Pat Stornetta and Joe Leveroni, a sister-brother team, are wine-growers on the 570-acre Home Ranch with its 250 acres of vineyard and the family’s dairy of 500 milking cows. They continue a four-generation tradition of farming and conservation that has preserved this historic site since 1886. The Home Ranch is located between Sonoma Creek and Arnold Drive, just southwest of the town of Sonoma. Their Sonoma Valley Appellation vineyards are separated from the Carneros District by Leveroni Road, the scenic wine country corridor that bears the family name. Cooling afternoon winds and summer evening fog help create conditions that produce wines with great acidity and structure, while displaying the lovely depth of flavor for which Carneros wines are renowned.

The primary grape varieties on their estate vineyard are Merlot and Chardonnay with smaller plantings of Syrah and Pinot Noir. Most of the grapes are sold to prominent wineries, however Pat and Joe hold off a very small portion of the best fruit from their property for their label, which was established in 1996. All four wines express the estate vineyard where they were grown, and are priced as exceptional values. This Merlot is outstanding. Dark and rich with an impressive nose of ripe plums, vanilla, toasty oak, and rose petals. The full mouthfeel yields a velvety fruit forward structure that opens up with blackberry, black cherry, sage, chocolate, and moss. The finish is extracted and concentrated with a hint of oak and supple tannin. Have with a Pulled Pork sandwich from the Fremont Diner, right across the street from the vineyard.

## Napa “Jazz” Bordeaux Blend

Napa Valley 2006 \$19.99

Made by McKenzie-Mueller Winery - a small, family-run winery committed to making high quality wines. Founded in 1989 by Bob Mueller and Karen McKenzie, the fifty acre estate is tucked away in the Los Carneros region of southern Napa County. They made their first vintage in 1990, producing 500 cases. Now they produce 2500 cases a year. Bob and Karen were both raised in the Napa Valley, where Bob grew up working the family farm. After Bob graduated from UC Davis, he and Karen met over a vat of Zinfandel grapes, and it’s been love, wine and kids ever since! To say that the winery is a family operation would be an understatement - their five children have each helped out in winery operations. Bob is the wine grower and wine maker, and Karen has made it all possible wearing her different hats: homemaker, office manager, and tour and tasting guide. Now a high school art teacher, her love of people and approachable style continue to guide McKenzie-Mueller winery. Bob Mueller was raised in Rutherford, just north of Napa, where his family farmed grapes.

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After graduating from UC Davis, Bob went to work for the Robert Mondavi Winery. He began his career working in the cellar, and eventually became the Director of Enology at Mondavi. In 1979 he and Karen bought their first vineyard on Big Ranch Road, and in 1989 they founded McKenzie-Mueller Vineyards and Winery. Like most wineries these days, these guys needed to do a second label so they could sell some of the excess juice that wasn't moving at the normal \$45 price tag. I would assume this is correct since this juice was in barrel for two and a half years. This is a blend of 44% Cabernet Franc, 28% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Malbec, and 10% Merlot. Ripe and juicy, this classic left-bank Bordeaux blend is super yummy and an amazing bargain for \$20. Since the wine was aged in huge 225 liter hog heads, you really don't detect too much wood on the palate and the nose is reminiscent of gentle cedar, raspberry, cherry, and currant. Soft and velvety mouthfeel, the wine opens up to a hint of moss, leather, black plum preserves, coffee, and black tea. Rich and satisfying with an extended finish and gentle tannin. Nice wine for Pork dishes like stuffed Pork Chops or Carnitas tacos.

