



RED & WHITE DECEMBER WINE CLUB



Pope Valley Winery Merlot

Napa Valley 2007 \$20.99

(NOTE: this wine needs to breathe at least one hour before enjoying)

This winery, nestled in the bucolic Pope Valley just east of St. Helena, has a special meaning for me. It was the site of my very first wine buying trip – actually BEFORE I was a wine buyer. The year was 1981 (I was still too young to drink legally) while I was in college in Santa Barbara. I was working at this funky coffee house in Isla Vista called Borsodi's. It was collectively owned by this socialist acting troop who all worked at the restaurant and they had a rule that everyone took a shift washing dishes – including the owners – and there was no dishwashing machine. It was all done by hand.

Totally sucked, I must say...I waited tables, cooked, hosted, and yes, washed dishes. My job was to make 15 gallons of tomato sauce, which I did at my kitchen in the house I rented, bringing the supplies on this cart I rigged to my bike – until I got followed by the Health Department who got tipped off by a disgruntled employee and they busted me. Anyway, the manager was adding wine to the restaurant beverage list. My roommate had just returned from Napa Valley and brought back some Pope Valley wine that I shared with him and he was impressed. So I told him I could probably get a good deal from these dudes running the tasting room and he gave me a budget to spend and my buddy Nick and these 2 chicks and I packed into his 1972 VW Fastback and we went “on a roady”.

One of the girls was this French exchange student who didn't speak a word of English, but I figured she knew wine. We stayed at a friend's house in Santa Rosa the first night and then headed over the hill to Napa – and got completely lost, somehow ending up in Lake County. It was like 110 degrees that day, no AC in the Fastback. The car started REEKING of body odor. Nick, who was driving looked at me and nonchalantly smelled his armpit, giving me the high sign to see if the smell originated from me – it didn't, or from the girl with me in the back either.... It was the FRENCH CHICK. It was so bad my eyes were stinging.

It was common knowledge that the French didn't use B.O. juice in those days. We rounded a bend and low and behold was the fantastic site of Lake Berryessa (Amelia calls it: Lake White Trasha). I called out: “lets all go SWIMMING!”, and whispered to my chick to give the French chick some freaking B.O. juice afterwards. So, freshly bathed (and slathered in deodorant) we pulled up to Pope Valley Winery. Founded in 1897 and built as a gravity flow (state of the art back then) winery, it is very much like it was over a hundred years ago. Except the 2 young dudes who ran the place back then (there is new owners who bought the place in 1997). My first buy trip. Little did I know I would make my living 30 years later by finding deals in Napa Valley, and at Pope Valley Winery to boot. This Merlot is grown at Eakle Ranch and is quite yummy – much better than the wine PVW made 30 years ago.

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A Cab lover's Merlot, this wine is big and bold with pronounced tannin and extracted flavors. Aromas of blackberry, mineral, and toasty oak, the wine was aged in French and American oak for 2 years before bottling. Bold dark fruit stand out on the palate with boysenberry, blackberry, blueberry all intermingling with licorice, cola, and black pepper. Long extracted finish with loads of tannin. I just tasted this wine I had open on my counter for 4 days and it was lovely. Serve with grilled New York steaks.

Benessere Sangiovese

Napa Valley 2007 \$23.99

Benessere Pinot Grigio

Carneros Napa Valley 2010 \$21.99

Christopher and Kristine Williams migrated from Arizona after tl must say, I have been trying to get these wines for a club shipment since day one. Never discounted, always selling out.... “No, sorry, can't do it, we sold out, no” was all I got from these St. Helena trailblazers. All they make are Italian grape varieties and a couple of Zins. NO Cabernet. It takes some balls not to make Cab having a winery right in the middle of Napa Valley just a little north of St. Helena. BIG balls. I like that. This is the best Sangiovese I have had from Napa. Made from an unbelievable mixture of 12 separate Sangiovese clones, all hand picked, gravity racked, hand sorted, aged in new and one use French oak, this wine shows what quality wine-making techniques can do for grape juice. Benessere, “prosperity and well being” in Italian, really knows how to treat this grape that is mostly found in Chianti Classico. Originally sold for \$35, I finally got the deal I wanted. This must show you the state of affairs in Napa these days. Medium color in the glass, lush mouthfeel on the palate, the first flavor that comes to mind is black cherry. Pomegranate, currant, tobacco, cocoa, and a hint of earth all dazzle the taste buds along with those black cherries. Dried black cherry, in fact. I just popped one in my mouth that I bought in the farmers market last month and that is the flavor exactly. Round, soft tannin, yet present on the finish. This is what we call a “pretty” wine, well balanced and subtle. Perfect choice with Chicken Cacciatore. The Pinot Grigio comes from the cool Carneros region in southern Napa Valley. With a delicious perfume of citrus and stone fruit emanating from the glass, the mouthfeel is both rich and tart at the same time. Soft, lush, but a little “zing” on the finish. The grapes were hand picked in the early morning and brought to the winery still cold from the Carneros fog. Hand sorted to extract undesirable berries then whole cluster pressed and fermented in stainless steel. At one point the juice was racked into neutral French oak barrels briefly to build complexity and balance. Meyer lemon chifon, nectarine, papaya, mineral, and wild thyme all stand out on the palate before a lush, rich, yet tangy finish. Serve with grilled fish, Sand Dabs being my hands down choice. Delicate yet flavorful just like this wine.

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Diamond Oaks Cabernet Sauvignon

Mt Veeder Napa Valley 2006 \$18.99

Mt Veeder juice, 2006 awesome vintage, under \$20 bucks? Yep. Sad story though, the winery is gone and this is the last of the wines after the sale in 2010 to Bill Harlan. Yes, THAT Bill Harlan who started Meadowood and has his cult Harlan Cab that sells for \$500 per bottle, and his Bond label at \$250. Ever notice restaurants in your town that open in a space that seems jinxed? Business after business tries their luck on that corner, new remodel, new concept, new chef, great ideas.....but eventually close – always. The corner is in a perfect neighborhood, great foot traffic, best side of the street, concept sounds interesting, but a year or 2 and there is paper on the windows, closed for re-modeling signs, sits vacant for a while then, boom – new signs go up and grand opening banners fly. You wish them well but you know deep down, secretly, that they will eventually fail because... that space is just plain jinxed. Same deal here. Back in the late 70's the Diamond Oaks space was Vichon Winery. Gorgeous property, sits high on the hill on Mt Veeder, views to die for. Vichon took the wine world by storm, one of the first white blends that really took off. A blend of Sauv Blanc, Chard, and I think Chenin Blanc. I used to pour it while working as a waiter during college in SF. Then....closed. After Vichon the property was bought by Mondavi and became "La Familia", Mondavi's Italian-only side show. This was at the height of the Sangiovese-Super Tuscan era in Napa. The next big thing... Sangiovese. Bocce courts, Tuscan theme, olive oil, beautiful views, great wines.... Closed. Eventually both brands, Vichon (Mondavi bought the brand) and La Familia de Mondavi were sold off. A wealthy real estate developer, Dinesh Maniar, tried his luck next. But you know, jinxed is jinxed, yo. See ya. At one point Maniar owned over 500 acres of vineyard but was 10 million in the hole when he sold DO to Harlan. Harlan didn't take the brand or inventory just 4 acres of Cab, the winery, and 2 acres of olive grove. I think he is smart enough to stay away from starting a new brand on site, and using the land as a buffer for his Harlan property. This wine rocks, by the way. Was priced way higher than you are paying. Ripe and rich, velvety on the palate. Aromas of sage, blackberry, and leather. Flavors of black pepper, plum, smoky oak, blackberry, and chocolate covered cherries. At this price you can serve this wine with a burger and feel pretty good.

Robledo Family Winery Sauvignon Blanc

Lake County 2009 \$11.99

I love these American Dream stories. Reynaldo Robledo comes to California from Mexico as a migrant vineyard worker earning \$1.10 an hour. Works his way up the ladder and eventually starts his own Vineyard Management Company, purchasing over 300 acres of vineyard along the way.

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He sells off most of the grapes but decides to make his own and starts this winery. Named after his seven son's, this SB was sourced from their Lake Co vineyard. Lovely nose of lemon zest, grapefruit, and honeysuckle. Crisp acidity in the mouth with lively citrus flavors, melon, grapefruit, dried flowers, and green apple. Lush and crisp at the same time, delicious offering of Sauv Blanc. Perfect as an aperitif served with cheese or oysters on the half shell.

Cache Creek Chardonnay

Lake County 2008 \$15.99

Amelia and I were headed back up to Trinity Co last week for some more Steelhead fishing and we decided to take a shortcut to Hwy 5 by heading north through Lake Co and cutting over via Hwy 20. We passed by the Cache Creek vineyards and were blown away by the beauty of this rugged country. Started by the Van Pelt family when the patriarch purchased 590 acres along Cache Creek in 1997 – Bill passed in 2004. He would explore his new acreage and had found a herd of Tule elk one day – hence the elk drawing on the label. They farm sustainably, respecting the wildlife that live amongst the vines, shunning herbicides and placing owl boxes in the vineyards to utilize a natural gopher control program. We headed up to Redding to meet our guide, Mat Dover, for some fishing. This dude is amazing, going above and beyond the call of duty to get us into fish. Last month we stayed on the river until dark, rowing in complete blackness towards the pull-out for 45 minutes, he instinctually knowing the way – guiding on this river for 20 years. He works out of The Fly Shop in Redding if you ever want to catch Steelhead or big ass Rainbow Trout. The Trinity was running too low and clear for any chance at nabbing a monster steelie so we changed gears and floated the Sacramento out of Anderson, targeting both Steelhead and Rainbow Trout. It hadn't rained for close to a month – bad news for the Trinity. Floating along the river we spotted so much wildlife: geese, ducks, kingfishers, herds of deer, bald eagles, and an enormous bobcat stalking a pod of ducks just off the banks – thinking twice before charging into the icy river. What a site, bald eagles fishing the river, bobcats stalking prey, fat Rainbows smacking your fly, ripping of yards of line, jumping, trying to throw the hook. Makes me appreciate vintners trying their best to protect California wildlife. Cache Creek is on its way to getting an organic certification for their vineyards – and trips like these make it hit home as to if its worth all the pain to farm sustainably. This wine is yummy and what a value. Hand picked and sorted, gently whole cluster pressed, racked into French oak barrels, and forced through malolactic fermentation to create that rich, buttery Chardonnay flavor. Buttered toast, jasmine, and quince on the nose, with vanilla, honeycomb, dried flowers, hazelnut, and lemon curd on the palate. Rich and chewy mouthfeel and a hint of acid on the finish. Perfect pairing for Trout Almandine .