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and Nicholas
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CORRECTION

In the Publisher's Picks section of our April/May 2020 issue, we mistakenly stated that Artinstall's Brilliant London Dry Gin is produced in the UK. It's actually produced in Wisconsin. We regret the error.



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You've Got Our Ear; We've Got Your Back

PHOTO: JENNIFER OLSON



**Tasting Panel Managing Editor
Ruth Tobias lives in Denver, CO.**

A handwritten signature of Ruth Tobias in purple ink. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and is positioned below the printed name.

For the past several weeks, I've been interviewing restaurateurs, sommeliers, and bar managers around the country about their approach to operating during the pandemic for an online series we've called "Profiles in Resilience." Never in my life have I used the word "pivot" so much—nor, perhaps, "poignant."

To recap a few, I spoke with Linden Pride, whose New York establishment Dante was named World's Best Bar not one year ago; now, he told me, "It feels like we're back at day one again. We're just trying to survive." His decision to remain open for takeout and delivery was based largely on the obligation he felt to continue providing health insurance for employees who would otherwise be "left out in the cold." Also in New York was Rosemary Walker, a furloughed sommelier at The NoMad who found herself hosting virtual wine tastings for groups from coast to coast almost overnight—and who wondered whether her accidental gig was a sign that "the role of the somm is going to change" for the foreseeable future. And then there were Roger and Suzanne Perry of Florida's Datz Restaurant Group, who shared an extraordinary tale of generosity: After they put their rare whiskey collection up for sale online as a means to raising funds for payroll, an anonymous donor purchased a bottle of 25 Year Old Pappy Van Winkle they'd listed at \$20,000 for double the asking price.

Of course, theirs are just three of countless such stories unfolding across the globe—all running the gamut from heartwarming to awe-inspiring to mind-boggling to devastating and back again. One day it's a charming little item about a talented young chef in my home base of Denver who shrewdly took a break from the kitchen to start a brand-new company two days before the city shut down: He's now the proud, not to mention busy, owner of Mile High Disinfectant Services. The next day it's the inconceivable news that Noma—the world-renowned Copenhagen restaurant that put New Nordic cuisine on the map—is reopening, at least temporarily, as a burger joint. Now *that's* a pivot.

This issue, whose very theme could be "Profiles in Resilience," is packed with still more accounts that we hope may enlighten and encourage readers striving to endure in both the on- and off-premise spaces. What's more, we're eager to hear your own survival stories, which you can send directly to me at rtobias@tastingpanelmag.com. Meanwhile, be sure to check out our sister publication, *The SOMM Journal*, which has joined SommCon in launching the SOMM Relief Project. And finally, above all, please stay safe. ■■

cedar + salmon

WINES CELEBRATING

OREGON

CELEBRATE OREGON WINE MONTH THIS MAY



UPFRONT

SOIL

Under the Nails

**FOR 20 YEARS, BENZIGER
FAMILY WINERY HAS LED THE
WAY IN BIODYNAMICS**

**Chris Benziger in the
vineyards with his
Labrador, Bluie.**

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN



The Benziger Home Ranch lies in an extinct volcanic caldera on Sonoma Mountain.

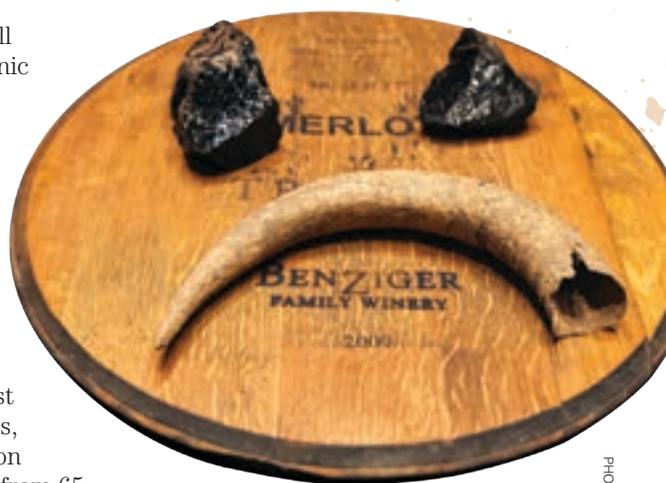
BY DAVID GADD

On a blustery spring day, Chris Benziger stands high on a hill overlooking Home Ranch, the 85-acre estate located in an extinct volcanic caldera on Sonoma Mountain that his family purchased in 1980.

The multitasking vintner has held multiple roles since he and his family built Benziger Family Winery, which has been synonymous with a revolutionary way of farming since becoming the first Demeter-certified Biodynamic producer in both Napa and Sonoma counties 20 years ago. Chris' current duties extend from farming and shepherding to making the precisely prescribed Biodynamic preparations used in all of the Benziger estate vineyards.

Chris loves to tell the story of how his family transitioned the estate from conventional grape monoculture to a sustainable, organic, and Biodynamic farm that is now a vibrant ecosystem, occupied not just by vines but by olive and other fruit trees, flower and vegetable gardens, sheep and cows, owls and hawks, and bees and other insects. In addition to increasing wildlife diversity, the Benzigers reduced planted acreage from 65 to just 35 acres, converting the other 30 into orchards, gardens, and pasturage. Meanwhile, careful attention to terroir allowed them to identify 29 unique grape-growing microclimates on the estate, promoting maximum potential for each variety.

Chris was still in high school when his older brother Mike and sister-in-law Mary brought him to the farm they had purchased near Glen Ellen. The family had been involved in the liquor business in New York and once owned an old-school winery in Brooklyn, but "Mike saw the potential in California and brought my dad out to see it," says Chris. "He was all over it." The entire clan of 13 eventually moved to Northern California.



Cow horns are used in Biodynamic preparations, while black obsidian rocks are scattered throughout the Benziger vineyards.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY

Benziger’s “woolly weeders” also till the soil with their hooves and provide natural fertilizer.

Mike and Mary’s ranch—the historic Wegener Winery, whose whites were favorites of neighbor (and vintner) Jack London in the early 20th century—had been abandoned for 50 years. The family struggled to revive it using conventional farming techniques. “We had erosion and mudslides [as well as] phylloxera and other diseases,” Chris recalls. “We were constantly fighting, fighting, fighting. I remember walking through the vineyards and the only sound I heard was the wind—not an insect, nothing. That’s what farming was back then.”

Meanwhile, Mike had become interested in an alternative way of farming developed by Austrian philosopher and social reformer Rudolf Steiner, creator of the holistic and ecological system known as Biodynamics, which involves treating a farm as a living organism. (The term is now a trademark belonging to Germany-based oversight organization Demeter International, administered in the U.S. by the nonprofit Demeter Association, Inc.) In 1993, the Benzigers brought on Biodynamics expert Alan York, known as the “Guru of Green,” from Mendocino, where he had been working with Paul Dolan. York came down to see Home Ranch, nestled in its sunny 360-degree bowl on Sonoma Mountain. “He said, ‘This would be perfect [for Biodynamics],’” Chris recounts. “We said, ‘Let’s do it!’”

It took seven long years to make the transition. “The first four years were really tough, because you’re taking all the [chemical] defenses out of the vineyard,” Chris says. “We almost gave up.” But a visit to successful Biodynamic vineyards in France encouraged the family to continue with the project. They eventually obtained sustainable certification from Stellar Certification Services, Demeter’s sister organization, and organic certification from California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). Finally, in 2000, Benziger Family Winery was certified Biodynamic; the following year, it produced its Bordeaux-style flagship blend Tribute, the first certified Biodynamic wine from the Benzigers’ dream estate on Sonoma Mountain.

“Working with Alan York was the best education I could have had,” Chris says. (Sadly, York died in 2014 at the age of 62.) During the transition to Biodynamics, the family “went cold turkey” on conventional farming. They built insectaries, birdhouses, and owl boxes, doing everything they could to attract natural predators for vineyard pests. With the aforementioned conversion of 30 acres into gardens, orchard, and pasture, the estate became a closed ecological system—“a circle of life,” in Chris’ words—where, today, nothing is thrown away and everything is composted. A small herd of Scottish Highland cattle provides manure, while a flock of sheep (the Benzigers call them “woolly weeders”) not only eat grass and devour weeds but also till the soil with their cloven hooves and, as digestion takes its natural course, provide fertilizer as well.

“The caldera of the Home Ranch is a natural geological lasagna,” Chris explains, with multiple layers of varied soil types, among them basalt, red aggregate, welded tuff, breccia, and obsidian. Because the vines are no longer being artificially fed and watering is strictly limited, the roots now dig much deeper, delivering more minerals and in turn better expressing the vineyard. “It’s all about one word,” says Chris: “authenticity.”

Admittedly, some of the more esoteric aspects of Biodynamics can be perplexing: Take the practice by which manure is packed into cow horns, planted for six months, dug up, and stirred for one hour to create a “dynamized solution” to spray on the fields. Chris encourages those unfamiliar with Biodynamics not to be put off by the “voodoo.” “What Biodynamics is really all about is all that groundwork beforehand,” he explains. “That’s the base of the pyramid. The esoteric preparations are the tippy top of the pyramid. When people hear them explained, they say, ‘Oh, you’re making a plant probiotic. That doesn’t sound so strange.’”

Make no mistake: Biodynamic farming is labor intensive. “We have to be proactive,” Chris says, “because we can’t be reactive. We can’t go nuke the north forty like a conventional farmer can. We have to know where the hot spots are, where the wet spots are, where the hole in the fence is—all that stuff—and fix it ahead of time. We have to read the book of nature so that we can preempt any problems.”

In addition to Home Ranch, Benziger’s three other Sonoma County properties—de Coelo, Bella Luna, and Sunny Slope—are also certified Biodynamic, and the Benzigers encourage outside fruit suppliers to follow their lead toward natural, chemical-free farming. In vineyards where Biodynamics



Benziger's Sonoma Mountain estate, called Home Ranch, produced its first Biodynamic wine in 2001. Today, all of Benziger's estate wines are Biodynamic.

proves unfeasible (as at the sprawling Sangiacomo ranch in Carneros), Benziger works with the growers to achieve Stellar sustainable or CCOF organic certification. By 2007, it had the distinction of having all 50 of its growers certified as either sustainable, organic, or Biodynamic, one of the first wineries in the U.S. to achieve this goal. (That Benziger makes some wines from non-Biodynamic sources does not affect its Demeter-certified status, but for obvious reasons those wines cannot be labeled as Biodynamic.)

When describing the Benzigers' arc toward Biodynamics, Chris likes to share a pertinent quote often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." Despite the struggle, the Benzigers know the success of their Biodynamic adventure has had a positive influence: "We were on the forefront of pushing the [American] wine industry to be more responsible in how they farm," he says.

Like his brother Mike and other family members, Chris feels that the only way to assure the quality of Benziger wines is by having the soil from the vineyard under his nails. From his high hill above Home Ranch, he concludes: "The best impression a winemaker can leave on his wines are his footprints in the vineyards." ■■

Biodiversity is a key tenet of Biodynamics. Benziger's insectary provides a habitat for bees and other beneficial insects.

Tasting Notes from Publisher Meridith May

While sheltering in place these past few months, I have been able to devote my full attention to an unusually voluminous amount of wine. I have tasted bottles two or three times more expensive than those below, and it just amazes me how some winemakers really get it. The following scores reflect my appreciation of these wines' ability to overdeliver for the price.



Benziger Family Winery 2018 Pinot Noir, Monterey County (\$20)

A perfume of wild strawberry and red cherry is equally perky and earthy.

Rose petal and cinnamon stick

are swathed in creamy red berries. The wine finishes with mocha and sweet, freshly tilled soil. **92**



Benziger Family Winery 2018 Sauvignon Blanc, North Coast (\$15)

A clean, crisp, and lively white, with a bouquet of grapefruit and freshly mowed grass that's followed by flavors

of pineapple, gardenia, and honeyed cashew as well as floral, fragrant notes of white tea leaves. High-toned acidity and a line of minerality offer a salty finish of stone fruit. **91**



Benziger Family Winery 2017 Merlot, Sonoma County (\$19)

The nose is expressively ripe, with plum, spiced heather, and a trace of new oak.

White-peppered black cherry and a touch of cocoa line the palate. Silky tannins and fine acidity run through a brambly cranberry finish. **91**



Benziger Family Winery 2017 Chardonnay, Sonoma County (\$16)

A refreshingly modern take on Chardonnay.

The aromas are sensuous but bright, with McIntosh apple

and lemon ice leading the way. On the palate, the wine is a floral beauty, with apricot nectar and skin defining a slightly fleshy textural experience. Jasmine and lemon pepper leave a kiss on the finish. **93**



Benziger Family Winery 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$20)

A focused aroma of cinnamon and oak accents ripe plum in this approachable,

incredibly great value red, which is sumptuous, bright, and sleek on the palate. Spiced blue fruit melds with supple tannins for easy drinking; balanced acidity offers superb food-pairing abilities. **93**

contents

June 2020 Vol. 78 No. 4

74

cover story

- 54 WELL BORN**
From Bien Nacido Onward,
Provenance and Prescience
Are Part of the Miller Family
Heritage



up front

- 6 SOIL UNDER THE NAILS**
For 20 Years, Benziger Family
Winery Has Led the Way in
Biodynamics

category report

- 74 A GREAT TUMULT**
Beyond the Caribbean,
Rum Producers Are Shaking
Things Up

features

- 86 MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?**
Blind Tasting Barolos and
Brunellos Proves a Worthy
Challenge
- 94 UNEXPECTED PLEASURES**
White Wines from Israel
Are the Hidden Gems of the
Mediterranean

Old distilling records speak to the illustrious history of Puerto Rican rum producer Don Q.

**YOU ARE WHAT
YOU DRINK.**

66 CALORIES.

2.4 CARBS.

**REAL FRUIT
FLAVORS.**

**TEQUILA,
PURE & SIMPLE.**



contents

June 2020 Vol. 78 No. 4

Employees at Oakland, CA, restaurant Cosecha don the requisite PPE.



PHOTO: CLARA RICE

departments

- | | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-----------|--|-----------|---|
| 4 | Letter from the Managing Editor | 32 | Winery Spotlight: Hahn Family Wines | 58 | Publisher's Picks |
| 14 | Industry Spotlight | 34 | Five Minutes With ... Jon McDaniel | 66 | Taking Inventory |
| 20 | ForceBrands Movers & Shakers | 36 | ForceBrands Hot Shot: Rachel Doueck | 70 | Sustainability: Smurfit Kappa |
| 22 | Marketing: Vintage Wine Estates' Jessica Kogan | 40 | Brand Spotlight: Dulce Vida Tequila | 72 | Restaurants: Oakland, CA |
| 24 | Lone Star Libations | 42 | Burgundy: La Tâche | 82 | International Portfolio: Chopin Imports |
| 26 | Restaurant Business | 44 | Industry Initiatives: United Sommeliers Foundation | 92 | Retail: Gary's Wine & Marketplace |
| 28 | Portugal: Vintage Port | 46 | Down the Aisle | 93 | Event Recap: South Beach Wine & Food Festival |
| 30 | The Ransom Note | 48 | Blue Reviews | | |



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Kim Beto Joins Joseph Phelps Vineyards as Vice President of Sales

After a 16-year tenure as Vice President of Key Accounts for California at Southern Glazer’s Wine & Spirits, industry veteran Kim Beto has joined esteemed Napa producer Joseph Phelps Vineyards as its Vice President of Sales, replacing Mike McEvoy following his retirement on June 1.

Beto comes to the position with decades of experience selling Joseph Phelps wines, first as the owner of now-closed fine-dining restaurant 231 Ellsworth in San Mateo. Referring to Joseph Phelps as an “iconic winery and ‘First Growth of Napa,’” Beto says he’s been fortunate to have worked with members of the Phelps family for years as a longtime admirer not only of legendary labels like Insignia but of the St. Helena estate itself. “There’s a tremendous beauty and energy here—it’s a very special place, and I can see why Joe chose it,” he says.

Among his priorities in his new role, he adds, are working closely with the second and third generations of the family business to perpetuate the estate’s heritage and honor Joe Phelps’ legacy while “trying my best to grow the brand’s presence worldwide.” As for adjusting to the realities of an industry perhaps permanently altered by the coronavirus pandemic, Beto says the short-term goal is to continue “getting wine [like Insignia] to customers that want it . . . whether it’s by selling through e-commerce or retail or on-premise through a to-go pack. You have to be creative and supportive.”

That said, he’s confident that Joseph Phelps’ sterling reputation will help point the way forward. A Syrah pioneer and the producer of Napa Valley’s first proprietary Bordeaux-style red blend, “Joe paved the way for so many people,” Beto notes. “It’s a tremendous honor to carry on his legacy with the Phelps family.”

High Noon Releases Two New Flavors, Debuts Media Partnership with Barstool Sports

To coincide with summer’s arrival, E. & J. Gallo’s High Noon Hard Seltzer recently debuted new Lime and Peach flavors to join the lineup of Black Cherry, Grapefruit, Pineapple, and Watermelon; all clock in at 100 calories, are gluten-free, and are made with real vodka, fruit juice, and no added sugar. A variety eight-pack with an assortment of four flavors will also launch in June.

In addition, the bestselling spirits-based hard seltzer brand announced an innovative partnership with prominent sports media company Barstool Sports, which will integrate High Noon across a variety of its flagship programs. The companies began collaborating earlier this year under a traditional media



buy that quickly gained momentum, inspiring them to seek additional opportunities for collaboration. “What initially caught my eye was the can, and when I tasted it, I knew I wanted to partner with High Noon,” says Barstool Sports President Dave Portnoy. “It’s so refreshing, and I love that it’s made with real vodka. I’m excited to get behind the brand and share High Noon with our fans.”

For more information, visit highnoonsunsips.com.

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Bar Vet Tobin Ellis Is a One-Man Reference Library for Industry Relief

by Ruth Tobias

Seasoned bartender turned Las Vegas-based hospitality consultant Tobin Ellis has seen his share of calamity in recent years. Pre-coronavirus, the most dire was the 2017 mass shooting on the Strip—the aftermath of which was, in his recollection, a melee of good intentions that overwhelmed blood banks and inadvertently waylaid first responders. The lesson for Ellis was the predictability of “chaos in crisis—all communication breaks down, for the best reason: Everyone rushes out to help without thinking it through. It’s helping that isn’t helping.”

That insight stuck with him at the onset of the pandemic, when he began conceiving of a comprehensive database of resources for the industry to which he’s devoted his life. His initial assumption that such a thing would already exist was instantly disproven as he surfed hastily built webpages and thought, as Ellis puts it, “Gosh, if I were in dire need, this would frustrate me—[the links] aren’t organized. There’s no filtering. There are no maps. I guess I put myself in the shoes of a restaurant worker: If I were in Ohio, I’d want to know what’s in Ohio.”

{ continued on page 18 }

Hospitality consultant Tobin Ellis is the founder of Barmagic of Las Vegas and the creator of the Hospitality Relief Dashboard.



Along with links to hundreds of assistance organizations and initiatives, the Hospitality Relief Dashboard highlights useful statistics and relevant news stories.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOBIN ELLIS

CELEBRATE

THE FLAVOR OF MEXICO



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Thus he set about constructing the Hospitality Relief Dashboard—which lives on the website for his consulting company, Barmagic of Las Vegas—with such key questions in mind as “How will people use this and what do they need? What’s fast and intuitive for someone who’s already stressed out?” As of late May, the result is a compendium of some 650 links. National resources are alphabetized and categorized under headings like “Playbooks,” “Personal Finance (Tipped Workers),” and “Support Groups + Mental Health”; state resources are accessed by clicking on an interactive map, to which visitors can also add links. Toward the top of the page, the most visited links appear in a “Trending Resources” section. Sprinkled throughout are graphs and charts that Ellis calls “small, fast, visual pieces of data to show people what’s going in the hospital-

ity industry,” for instance the decline in U.S. restaurant sales since March 1. Relevant news stories are housed on a separate page.

Time-stamped updates are constant, yet the dashboard is just “the triage phase” of his vision for industry recovery, Ellis says, targeting “people and businesses that are bleeding out and need help.” Next comes “the repair/rebuild phase: Let’s get people back on their feet.” To that end, he’s about to publish the Bar & Restaurant Revival Guide, which he describes as “a free document containing dozens and dozens of stories of people who have figured out how to recapture their revenues [as well as those of] concepts and business models that didn’t have a problem with this crisis because they weren’t so vulnerable with tiny margins [to begin with].” With no registration requirement, no paywalls, and no

data collection, he promises, the guide will “just be up and free.”

And the final phase, Ellis says, is prevention—creating the informational infrastructure to shore up the industry for the crises of tomorrow. Deeming clear communication channels between hospitality’s many sectors essential, he’s put together a diverse task force of colleagues with an eye toward “leveraging [the ability of] different communities” to coordinate future relief responses, reducing the odds of both needlessly duplicated efforts and of “the people who most need help falling through the cracks,” as he puts it.

For a man who designed a commercial bartenders’ cockpit that bears his name, it seems the most important industry tools Ellis may ever create are in development as we speak. Visit barmagic.com/relief to learn more. ■■

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Ryan Easterly has been named Director of Sales at **Rolling Fork Spirits**. He had been Market Manager at Stillhouse Spirits.

Josh Kaye has been named Vice President of Operations at **Frederick Wildman and Sons**. He had been Head of Supply Chain at Fever-Tree USA.

CAREER CORNER

BevForce BUZZ:

Optimizing E-Commerce Teams

Digital marketing experts predicted that the result of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic would be a boost in e-commerce sales. They weren't wrong: Over the past few months, e-commerce has proven to be a key channel for driving economic growth. Though changes in demand and complications in the supply chain could affect long-term projections, the underlying narrative of e-commerce is that it has never been more important.

As companies strengthen their online presence and move toward a digital-first strategy, there has been a surge in e-commerce hiring, not least in the beverage industry. "E-commerce roles are incredibly important hires for many companies, especially now," ForceBrands Division Director Jennifer Fisher says, adding that related skill sets will remain valuable even when the crisis passes, as certain shifts in consumer behaviors and lifestyles will have staying power. "There will likely continue to be a sense of uncertainty about returning to normalcy, and a lot of companies are preparing for that," she explains. "When it comes to e-commerce, people are going to get used to going online to get products in case of another pandemic. Already these roles were in super-high demand, and it's only going to continue to grow." ■■



As companies strengthen their online presence and move toward a digital-first strategy, there has been a surge in e-commerce hiring, not least in the beverage industry."

Want to connect with beverage industry leaders? Tap into ForceBrands' specialized beverage division BevForce at forcebrands.com/bevforce or email hello@forcebrands.com for more information.

95

POINTS

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- Feb. 2020



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Rewriting the Brand Narrative

Jessica Kogan is Chief Digital Marketing Officer for Vintage Wine Estates.

HOW DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER MARKETING CAN BE AN ALLY TO THE TRADE IN THESE TRYING TIMES by Meredith May

Within the pages of a trade publication like ours, the three words you almost never see are “direct to consumer.” Building strong relationships with distributors and supporting the three-tier system has been our steady course of action from the beginning. The very idea of promoting wine and spirits sales outside of this realm has been unthinkable, and as Publisher, I have given strict orders that the subject of online sales is not one we deem to address.

Here’s where I bring in the word *however*.

Before the pandemic, we lived within the confines of a rosy status quo: We went to work, our kids went to school, we enjoyed socially interactive leisure time. However, we are now living in a parallel universe from which we are seeing that old world in a new light from an increasing distance. Our vision is all too sharp and our focus is changing in so many ways.

So, with this preamble, I’m now taking a stand for direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales. To help put this decision in perspective, I spoke with Jessica

Kogan, Chief Digital Marketing Officer for Vintage Wine Estates.

“The climate in the marketplace is one of empathy. People are rallying more than they did with the financial crisis of 2008,” she noted. “They’re stunned, scared, and trying to cope.”

In the late summer of 2001, Kogan left her home in New York and moved to San Francisco to work for a company called Razor Fish. She was one of the first web designers of the dot-com era, and she pursued work in launching brands online. Among them was wine label Cameron Hughes, which gained strong momentum after its debut in the post-9/11 climate of late 2011; in 2008, it was sold to Costco. “But then once again, our world flipped on its head,” she recalled of the recession that arrived shortly thereafter.

Nearly a decade later, in January 2017, Cameron Hughes was acquired by Vintage Wine Estates (VWE). President Terry Wheatley had grown the company’s portfolio to 14 wineries and 27 brands, and Kogan, who had proven successful at building consumer-marketing plans, was

brought in to run the digital side. “We built up DTC through tasting rooms, wine clubs, QVC TV, and even telemarketing,” she said.

Now, as the coronavirus pandemic impacts every facet of our industry, Kogan is adamant about keeping channels open to customers. Aware that VWE needs the support of the distributor network, she believes that this is a time for quick thinking and action on the digital front; without abandoning wholesale, it is crucial to keep business going. “I feel for the on-premise community and want them to know that when this is over, we will be sending customers to support restaurants,” she said.

In the meantime, DTC translates to the moment at hand. “Thanks to the technology we built on our website, we can send [customers] to the retail locations near them that carry our brands,” Kogan said. “But the beauty of all this is for all of us not to just sell wines but to take the time to build brand awareness and, ultimately, loyalty. It’s the customer who needs to be satisfied and have easier access to purchasing right now.” ■■



BRIGHT. ROBUST. LONG FINISH.

DON Q RESERVA 7 RUM IS CRAFTED WITH PATIENCE AND PASSION IN PUERTO RICO FROM A BLEND OF RUMS AGED A MINIMUM OF 7 YEARS IN AMERICAN WHITE OAK BARRELS.



PHOTO: TRAVIS TOBER

For Polish holiday Dyngus Day, Austin's Nickel City partnered with Luksusowa Vodka on a themed cocktail kit.

Survival skills

HOW TEXANS ARE PIVOTING AMID THE PANDEMIC by Lori Moffatt

On March 13—which would have been the first night of the just-canceled South by Southwest multimedia festival—my husband and I went for drinks in downtown Austin. The eerie quiet was sad then, but it was about to get worse as, soon thereafter, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued regulations that limited bars and restaurants to carryout and delivery service while encouraging residents to shelter in place through April 30. (Liquor stores and wine shops remained open.)

A system of gradual reopening began statewide on May 1, though at the time of this writing, there's a lot of volatility: Dining rooms can operate only at reduced capacity, while barrooms remain closed. One lifeline that may—or may not—continue is the temporary relaxation of state liquor laws and licensing requirements, allowing for the curbside pickup and delivery of alcohol. The result, says Justin Elliott, Texas Director of Mixology for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, is that “bars and restaurants have confronted this existential threat to the on-premise universe by retooling their business models on the fly.”

Even so, most people expect social-distancing habits and capacity reductions to impact profits for a while. “If

I were a bar owner, I would shift my business model to 25% focusing on to-go orders, as we are seeing a tectonic shift in the business,” says Brian McCullough, an on-premise portfolio manager and corporate mixologist for Texas-based retailer Spec's Wine,

model until occupancy limits increase?

While considering those questions, Travis Tober, owner of historic Austin neighborhood bar Nickel City, is striving simply to “stay even, stay relevant.” Until it makes sense to reopen, he's offering elaborate cocktail kits complete with 375-milliliter bottles, vacuum-packed condiments, and bar swag, which he promotes on social media. (Side note: Due to the rise in cocktail kits, 375-milliliter packaging is in high demand that may outlast the crisis.)

Also in Austin, McGuire Moorman Hospitality Beverage Director Alex Holder, who oversees the bar programs of 12 concepts, says that his restaurant group is “opening and closing as this thing evolves”; while one spot focuses on groceries, for example, another moves lots of wine. But dynamics change by the day. As for kits, he adds, “We curate them to be super-special, with shakers, glass bottles, jiggers, and branded recipe cards. Having nice packaging is part of our brand.”

In Dallas, meanwhile, Chelsea Corner Beverage Director Casey Willis says his team has relied on their experiences during the 2008 economic crash to weather the current storm. “We essentially had a week to launch a new to-go restaurant. We used a combination of social media and old-school poster-plastering the neighborhood to get the word out.” With abundant outside seating, Chelsea Corner reopened on May 1 and will continue to adapt as necessary. “Every table [is] 6 feet apart, and the staff wears masks and gloves,” Willis says. “The key to survival is being able to pivot—and not panic.” ■

PHOTO: JACKIE KLUSMEYER/MCGUIRE MOORMAN HOSPITALITY



A Zombie kit from McGuire Moorman Hospitality concept Pool Burger in Austin, TX.

Liquor, and Finer Foods. Certainly proprietors are weighing many variables in the near term: Do they have enough space to maintain distance between tables? Do the communities they serve feel safe enough yet to go out? Or are they better off maintaining the to-go



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Welcome to the New Normal

BRANDING IN THE AGE OF COVID-19 by David M. Morgan

With the Department of Labor attributing 60% of the nation's March job losses to restaurant and bar closures, it's clear that the hospitality industry has been hit harder by the coronavirus pandemic than just about any other market segment. Almost overnight, we find ourselves at an inflection point: Ready or not, we'll need to rethink what we do and how we do it if we aim to survive.

Social Distancing and Space Allocation

Restaurant and bar owners know the critical importance of maximizing every square foot for greater occupancy and therefore revenue. With social-distancing ordinances in place, that will be jeopardized. Turning unused space into displays for on-brand retail items, which typically offer higher profit margins than prepared food, could help improve bottom lines.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott recently allowed the state's restaurants to sell products from distributors at retail pricing, provided the items are in their original packaging—a good idea, given the food shortages that consumers are facing. Around the country, we are already seeing steakhouses reinvent themselves as butcher shops, upscale restaurants packaging together ingredients to make their signature dishes and cocktails at home, and well-known bakeries selling everything from flour and eggs to aprons, cookbooks, and spatulas. Selling purposeful merchandise enables customers to take a piece of their favorite place home.

Reimagining Takeout and Delivery

This pandemic will inflict lasting changes within the delivery and takeout ecosystem. Restaurants need to refine their relationships with third-party delivery companies to allow for more personalized experiences that provide the customer

with clearly defined points of brand differentiation. The cost of these delivery services is substantial for both consumers and participating establishments, and the current value proposition needs to be challenged.

Moving forward, the entire delivery process must evolve to better represent the restaurant and its ethos. From taking orders online to preparing, packaging, and delivering the food, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring that the quality of the home experience is consistent with that of dining out; this will be critical to any restaurant's long-term viability.

Technology can also enhance customer experience by allowing beverage directors to provide virtual winery tours, post virtual tastings led by sommeliers, or track the wines customers have enjoyed in the past.

Telling Great Stories

To thrive in these hard times, restaurants and bars must make their distinct voices heard and forge strong relationships with their customers through social media and other online channels.

Even as states ease their restrictions, experts are predicting that the pandemic will continue for the next 18



Taking Advantage of Liberalized State Liquor Laws

Beverage sales contribute roughly one-third of an upscale restaurant's profits. Now that many states are relaxing laws against alcohol deliveries, operators have the opportunity to expand revenue in ways that were previously unimaginable. Making the most of this opportunity will require proper packaging as well as better communication, and wine and cocktail lists will need to become more descriptive so that customers can make informed choices.

to 36 months. That means we're likely to experience several bumps before we approach something that remotely resembles terra firma. That said, we will build the New Normal together—and the New Normal after that. Defeat is not an option. ■■

David M. Morgan is the founder of Master & Shaker, a bespoke beverage-marketing company that identifies synergies and builds unique partnerships between brands, distributors, and vendors to their mutual benefit.



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Decades of Decadence

MUSINGS ON A MARATHON TASTING OF VINTAGE PORT

story and photos by Anthony Dias Blue

Back in the old days of February, before anyone had even heard the term “social distancing,” I attended Don Schliff’s annual Port extravaganza at the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. Schliff is a retired distribution executive who managed over his many years in the industry to build one of the world’s most extensive collections of vintage Ports. Titled

“Decades,” the luncheon featured at least one wine representing every decade from the 1830s (that’s not a typo) to the present as well as a five-course feast crafted by Wolfgang Puck.

While magnums of the stunning 160th edition of the Krug Grand Cuvée were poured for the 40 or so guests mostly clad in formalwear, Schliff provided the entertainment, standing over a hot flame and snapping off the top of each bottle with glowing-red Port tongs. The tasting was organized in five flights, from oldest to youngest; the first began with a wine from 1834. Said Quinta do Noval’s Christian Seely, “The 1834, made just 19 years after the Battle of Waterloo, still [shows] fruit . . . grown so long ago, in an unrecognizable world. The Duke of Wellington himself, who liked to drink several bottles of Port each day, may well have drunk this wine, which would have been 18 years old when he died in 1852.” It and Noval’s silky 1844 were unparalleled experiences. (Also from 1844 was the rich, vibrant, and complex Cossart Gordon Bual Madeira, demonstrating the fact that Madeira lives virtually forever.)

Moving through the other decades in the first flight, the Sandeman 1870 was lovely—soft, smooth, toasty, and deserv-

ing of 96 points. In the second flight, the Cockburn’s 1912 was delightfully youthful, with a chewy and rich style; I gave it 95 points. Next came, in my view, the star of the show: the stunning Niepoort’s 1927. It was rich and layered, deep and dark with spice and chocolate, and everything a great Port should be at its peak. Amazing! 100 points.

But the first wine in the third flight was also a fully formed beauty: the 1931 Quinta do Noval, which was ripe and smooth with rich fruit, toast, and a hint of dark chocolate (98 points). It was followed by the brilliant 1945 Taylor Fladgate. Eschewing the subtlety typical of this house, the wine was described by Seely as “monumental.” I’d add that it was powerfully rich and concentrated, with notes of licorice (97 points).

Though elegant and balanced with concentrated cherry and pepper notes, the 1970 Graham was still youthful, with complex flavors that need more time to knit. Nevertheless, it was a stunning wine from a great vintage (97 points). After the lovely 1994 Taylor Fladgate (96 points) came a string of impressive wines from Quinta do Noval: the 2000 (94 points), the 2000 Nacional (99 points), the 2011 Nacional (98 points), and the 2017 Nacional, a young but breathtaking 100-point wine.

After tasting through 24 Ports over the course of six hours (not to mention the Champagne), it was a weary and unbuttoned group of tasters who made their way, rather unsteadily, to the parking lot. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I took an Uber. ■■



Don Schliff masterfully opened each bottle.

The event’s lineup of vintage Ports spanned every decade from the 1830s to the 2010s.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF COTE

In Manhattan, Korean steakhouse Cote has remained open for takeout and delivery, offering such items as this ssam kit.

Drinking and Dining in the Time of Coronavirus

HOW NEW YORK IS COPING WITH THE CRISIS by David Ransom

With the coronavirus raging across the globe, these are trying times for us all. This column typically showcases the wines, spirits, and people that intrigue me at events I attend here in New York; with the city's hospitality industry on life support, I'm instead focusing on what the state's alcohol retailers and restaurateurs are doing to survive in this surreal new world.

For the former, business is brisk. According to Nielsen data, spirits sales were up 75% in March compared to the same month in 2019; wine was up 66% and beer 42%—and online alcohol sales were up 243%. Ken Maguire, owner of Fox & Hound Wines and Spirits in New Paltz, is cautiously optimistic about his curbside-pickup business. "We're doing holiday sales numbers in spring; customers are buying more at once and

will buy the magnum of a spirit if one is available," he says.

Tony Russo has had a similar experience. The owner of Aries Wines & Spirits in White Plains says that "we've definitely had to adjust, but business is good. While we are still open to foot traffic and keep a masked and sanitized [elective] staff on the floor, over 80% of our business is now delivery and ordered by phone or online. To make ordering easier, we've added online customer access through . . . Minibar and Drizly."

For restaurants, of course, it's a different story. Many of New York City's 27,000 restaurants are closed indefinitely, and the majority of front-of-house workers are furloughed. Some establishments have remained open to offer takeout and delivery; in a historic move to help drive revenue, the state is

also allowing them to sell alcohol with accompanying food orders. But their employees now bear responsibilities that extend far beyond their job titles. "We're trying to keep the business alive with a skeleton team of just the partners," says Victoria James, partner/Beverage Director at Cote in Manhattan. "On a given day, I'm doing anything from peeling potatoes to expediting food and packing up wine orders—and most days run from 9 a.m. until midnight."

I'm writing this column in late April. My hope is that by the time it's in print, the tide will be turning in our favor. We all long for the day when we will once again be able to shop at our favorite stores, go out to restaurants and bars, and support our vibrant and hard-working beverage and hospitality community. ■■

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Home Grown

CELEBRATING ITS 40TH ANNIVERSARY, HAHN FAMILY WINES HIGHLIGHTS THE STRENGTH OF THE CENTRAL COAST WITH **SMITH & HOOK**

story by Michelle Ball / photos by Jeremy Ball

As a 15-year-old growing up in Monterey County, Megan McCollough watched daily as a vineyard was planted just down the street from the house where she worked as a nanny. At the time, she didn't think much of it—grapevines aren't exactly at the forefront of any teenager's mind.

It wasn't until a decade later—after McCollough graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and started her career at Hahn Family Wines in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA in 2011—that she realized the significance of the memory: That vineyard had been one of Nicky and Gaby Hahn's sources for their flagship label, Smith & Hook, where McCollough was promoted to winemaker in 2017. Making the connection, she says, "was pretty special for me."

The brand's name honors the original owners of two parcels purchased in 1979 by the Hahns, whose inaugural release was the Smith & Hook 1980 Cabernet Sauvignon. Those familiar with the early days of Monterey County viticulture might recall the difficulties Cabernet presented: The cool-climate conditions tended to yield underripe grapes, which imparted high pyrazines and undesirable green notes in the finished wines. To avoid this, the Hahns largely dry farmed and reduced yields so that the clusters could fully ripen.

**Smith & Hook winemaker
Megan McCollough in
Smith Vineyard.**



Despite their success in that endeavor, the early 2000s found them replanting the vineyards to varieties better suited to the climate while sourcing their Cabernet from warmer areas—including some near McCollough's hometown. The label was therefore transitioning to the Central Coast designation it now uses when Director of Winemaking Paul Clifton joined Hahn Family Wines in 2003; his team was given the flexibility to explore multiple appellations in search of the best sites and growers for the brand.

Today, McCollough explains, Smith & Hook Cabernet Sauvignon is sourced from three subdistricts in Paso Robles, which offer fleshy black cherry and heavy tannins; San Antonio Valley and Hames Valley, which add undertones of spicy black pepper and currant; and Arroyo Seco, which provides the backbone. She's also experimenting with fruit from the Paicines AVA in San Benito County. This diverse array of terroirs aids in blending for a consistent flavor profile year after year, which is critical insofar as Smith & Hook is a by-the-glass staple on many wine lists, offering a true expression of the region (not to mention value with its \$25 SRP). "But if I can also make it better in this current vintage than the last, that's the goal," says McCollough. ■■

Publisher Meridith May's Tasting Notes



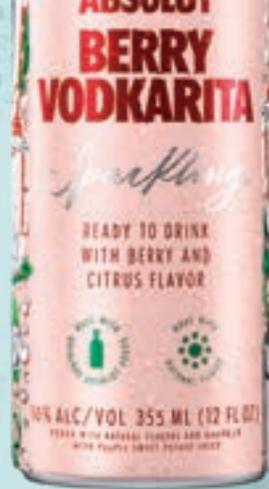
Smith & Hook 2016 Proprietary Red Blend, Central Coast (\$25)

This blend of Merlot, Petite Sirah, Malbec, and Cabernet Sauvignon is aged in French oak for 26 months. Sensuous aromas of dark chocolate and black plum precede a luxurious mouthfeel heightened by a coating of anise and roasted coffee beans. Supple tannins join tart black cherry, set against an underlying granite steeliness. Bright acidity balances out the bold structure as dark fruit and black pepper appear on the streamlined finish. **92**



Smith & Hook 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Central Coast (\$25)

Ripe black cherries and scents of violet are a great opening for this red, aged 15 months in French oak. Following the entry of a rich plum liqueur-like nectar, bramble and heather form a garden on the palate, where creamy, round tannins are surrounded by notes of chocolate and oak. **92**



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Jon McDaniel

FOUNDER AND CEO OF SECOND CITY SOIL, CHICAGO, IL

by Michelle Metter

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOMMCON



Jon McDaniel is a sought-after wine consultant who helps his diverse roster of clients—from producers and trade organizations to importers and marketers to restaurateurs—find success. We chatted with him about his company and its evolution during the coronavirus pandemic.

Q How are you adjusting your business during the COVID-19 crisis?

Second City Soil started three years ago to promote the Chicago wine community. I am usually that first call from wineries and industry organizations asking, “How do we do better in Chicago?” That has expanded globally into creating innovative campaigns for about 50 clients. [This year I] started

off already struggling with tariff threats, but [the pandemic] has completely shut down my on-premise channels. I am 90% down on traditional business. [But I’m] 40% up on new opportunities and working even harder to help clients engage with the end consumer. Ironically, I started a [multimarket consulting] company called The Vine Hive, which is Second City Soil 2.0, two weeks before this crisis hit the U.S.—so new things are coming.

Q What advice do you have for sommeliers who need to reinvent themselves in a post-virus world?

Sommeliers need to realize that their abilities go beyond just opening wine tableside. Realize that to continue in restaurants, you must prove your value through revenue and profit creation. Show you are a leader and manager who is focused on economics. Look at ways to engage with wineries and suppliers [and] aid them in creating opportunities. Restaurants may be closed, but the wine industry is definitely still in business.

Q You teamed up with an all-star group of sommeliers to create the United Sommeliers Foundation. How is that going?

When the United Sommeliers Foundation started, we didn’t know if we were going to be taken seriously. Brands like Patrón donated \$1 million to the Bartenders’ Guild, but the wine industry works on very different margins, and the USF started only a few weeks ago. Since then, [though,] the outpouring of support from the entire wine world has been inspiring. I get to work with an incredible team of sommeliers, with our board and committees—all volunteers. We have seen donations from companies like Kobrand, Skurnik, and Staglin and received hundreds of phenomenal wines for our auction through Acker Wines. United Sommeliers Foundation has helped hundreds of sommeliers thus far, raising over \$250,000, but [it] has long-term goals to aid [them as well]. The work is just beginning. (For more on the USF, see page 44.)

Q You have ten minutes and one glass of wine. Who are you with and what are you drinking?

I travel 125 days a year, so I miss the friends and clients that I am fortunate enough to travel for each year. [I’d like to] be in the Piazza della Erbe in Verona with a bottle of Champagne Philipponnat Clos des Goisses. Whoever wants to show up, help me finish the bottle! ■■



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A Q&A with Rachel Doueck

DIRECTOR OF SALES—SPIRITS, WINE & BEER DIVISION, FORCEBRANDS

Rachel Doueck is the Director of Sales for the spirits, wine, and beer division at ForceBrands, the leading recruiting firm for consumer brands. As one of the company's first recruiters, Doueck knows that people are a company's greatest asset, and she applies this philosophy as she helps build the teams behind some of the world's most recognized (or soon-to-be recognized) alcoholic beverage brands. We took advantage of her expertise to learn how beverage-industry hiring practices are evolving in these challenging times.

ForceBrands: How has the industry changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Rachel Doueck: While COVID-19 has had a severe economic impact globally, we are incredibly fortunate to be in an industry that has largely remained recession-proof. This is not to say that the industry is not feeling the effects of the current climate, but it's learning to adjust to this new normal. And there are some positive narratives being written in the alc-bev world. Off-premise retail and direct-to-consumer (DTC) sectors have surged since mid-March. Many consumers are buying products in bulk, a departure from what we've typically seen. While these may not be premium products [due to the fact that] consumers are becoming more [economically] conservative, they're still stockpiling, so sales are strong.

FB: Given the current climate, how should beverage companies be structuring their teams to set themselves up for success later?

RD: Beverage companies need to consider the long-term impact of consum-



ers' behavior, as that will dictate and drive the future of the industry. They should start prioritizing their need for a sufficient DTC route to market if they don't already have one. This means ramping up their marketing and sales teams in order to effectively manage and amplify it. The need for cost accounting and specific finance roles has risen . . . to help keep pace with the economic impact of COVID-19.

Additionally, if the volume of purchases continues, inventory levels will need to increase. This means ramping up from a supply-chain perspective. The health and the safety of all employees will remain paramount for companies, [so] they should ensure that they have proper [procedures] in place.

FB: What roles are companies actively hiring for? Where are the opportunities?

RD: Over the course of these past few months, we've seen an increase in marketing, operations, and finance

roles. Many companies with established e-commerce platforms that have become critical revenue generators are also actively hiring.

FB: How can beverage companies tap into future growth opportunities post-pandemic?

RD: The future of the industry is still a big question mark for companies of all sizes. Growth opportunities will rely largely on the consumer—their financial impact and behavioral decisions—as well as [on the] actionable steps companies should take now to come out stronger on the other side of this crisis. Companies that remain agile and reevaluate their growth strategy now will be better positioned for long-term success. This means becoming digital-first, strengthening DTC and e-commerce channels, and optimizing team structures so that they're as high-performing as possible in this climate. ■■

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Milestone Brands CEO Eric Dopkins summarizes Dulce Vida's new You Are What You Drink ad campaign, which aims to draw 250 million impressions from May through July, as "Nike meets tequila."

You Are What You Drink

DULCE VIDA TEQUILA KEEPS THINGS "PURE AND SIMPLE" WITH ITS NEW SUMMER CAMPAIGN by Kate Newton

As the team behind Milestone Brands prepared to launch a new summer campaign for one of their flagship labels, Dulce Vida Tequila, they had no idea how prescient their messaging would be in an industry that's been completely redefined by the coronavirus pandemic.

summarizes as the "healthier movement" that's being embraced en masse by consumers, even more so as they shelter in place. "Obviously beverage-alcohol consumption is growing even faster now, but I think people are more thoughtful about what they're eating and drinking," Dopkins says.

rie counts "so that we're being truthful to what our product is," Dopkins says. The flagship Blanco tequila, for example, is made with certified organic Blue Weber agave and has 64 calories and 0 carbohydrates per 1.5-ounce serving, while the Lime, Grapefruit, and Pineapple Jalapeño expressions are all made with real fruit and feature 66 calories and 2.4 grams of carbs per serving. "Pure and simple" also applies to the ease with which Dulce Vida can be incorporated into cocktails without the need for sugary, high-calorie mixers—an asset the brand touts with a series of instructional videos on its website. "[Given] really simple ways to make flavorful cocktails with a couple of ingredients that everyone can do, [home bartenders] can take their tequila experience up a notch," Dopkins adds.



Dulce Vida is among the brands seeing sizable off-premise growth: April sales, per Nielsen data, were up 125% in California and 40% nationally. Milestone Brands CEO Eric Dopkins attributes Dulce Vida's appeal not only to the burgeoning popularity of tequila—the fastest-growing spirit category behind RTD beverages for two years running—but also to what he

Cue You Are What You Drink, the aforementioned campaign that aims to position Dulce Vida as one of the most quality-driven low-cal/low-carb options on the market. Incorporating advertisements on billboards, television, radio, and in-store merchandising as well as in digital, print, and social media from May through July, it has a goal of 250 million impressions, with a focus on key markets like Dallas, Houston, Austin, San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. While alcoholic-beverage ads typically focus on themes of gathering with friends and family, the new Dulce Vida TV spots are particularly timely in that they depict people engaging in solo activities like dribbling a soccer ball or doing yoga alongside what Dopkins calls the "brand's rallying cry": "Tequila, pure and simple."

Featured prominently alongside this slogan are the products' carb and calo-

He also notes that although RTD products like seltzers have become popular because they're low-cal/low-carb, they're overwhelmingly lacking in flavor: "Comparing Dulce Vida to the seltzer category where you're getting 5% ABV, these are truly 70- and 80-proof spirits, but you're getting the same outcome from a calorie and carb perspective . . . and so much more flavor," he says. "There's not another tequila on the market I've seen that does what we do, that's truly using real fruit, adding limited sugar, and giving the alcohol content [and] the quality of 100% agave, [then] delivering that at an affordable price." ■■

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A VERTICAL TASTING OF **DOMAINE DE LA ROMANÉE-CONTI LA TÂCHE** STUNS EVEN THE MOST SEASONED OF WINE WRITERS

story and photos by Anthony Dias Blue



The “mystery flight” at the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti tasting consisted of La Tâche 1988 and 1986.



The view from Nobu in Malibu, CA, where the tasting was held.

Richard Torin, the owner of Clarets Fine and Rare Wines, specializes in bottlings from the reigning royalty of the kingdom of Burgundy: Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. On Leap Day of this year, Torin, ably abetted by the ubiquitous Don Schliff (see page 28), staged a grand tasting luncheon at Nobu Malibu that paired a 14-vintage vertical of La Tâche with a seven-course feast for 16 lucky guests.

One of the crown jewels of the DRC stable, La Tâche has been producing exceptional Pinot Noir from its 12.5 acres since at least 1631, when evidence of its greatness appeared in print. Today the Grand Cru vineyard has its own AOC appellation, which yields an average of 1,600 cases each year. Torin provided a price list for the featured wines: Most go for around \$4,000 each, though a few are substantially more.

Seven flights of two wines each were organized from the youngest to the oldest vintages. The first consisted of the 2015 and the 2012. While the lovely and youthful 2015 was nowhere close to achieving its potential, it was spectacular nonetheless—dark and rich with a lush black-cherry nose and flavors including hints of spice, game, ripe berries, toasty oak, and vanilla. Clearly it’s a great vintage, destined to last 50 years (98 points). The ripe, silky, and floral 2012 was more delicate and restrained; showing minerals and spice, it was a charming wine with finesse (96 points).

Next up were the 2005 and the 1999. The younger expression was rich and meaty, with deep cherry and hints of licorice and mint. While brilliant (97 points), it was yoked to the best wine of the tasting: The monumental 1999 had great intensity and power, yet it was elegant and complex, showing violets, berries, and plums (100 points). The duo was followed by the 2003—deep, fleshy, dark, and luscious with racy acidity and great length (96 points)—and the elegant 2001, which was tangy, floral, silky, and long (95 points).

The 1998 was merely great (92 points), but its teammate was the crisp, juicy, and satisfying 1989 (94 points). After that came the 1991, which showed what a fully evolved La Tâche can provide: depth, finesse, concentration, minerality, and rich fruit (95 points). The 1990 was another home run, almost to the level of the 1999—a 30-year-old wine with a juicy, fresh palate defined by spice, earth, licorice, and minerals (98 points).

A “mystery flight” was revealed as the 1988 and the 1986. The former was another stunner, showing dried flowers, spices, berries, and tobacco (96 points), while the latter was floral, racy, and mature, with a long, balanced finish (94 points).

Finally came the 1985 and the 1971, both of which stood the test of time. The first was a study in restraint and grace that was equal parts silky, lush, layered, and charming (96 points). And at nearly 50 years old, the seamless 1971 was magnificent: dense and rich, youthful and long, with years yet to go (97 points). What an indelible experience, especially now that I am sequestered at home writing this in my pajamas. ■■

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Doing Sommmthing About It

Necessity, they say, is the mother of all invention. As the economic effects of COVID-19 began to strike the hospitality industry, most beverage professionals quickly found themselves either unemployed or underemployed, accepting drastically reduced hours and pay cuts.

Faced with this harsh reality, wine educator Cristie Norman and Master Sommelier Chris Blanchard jumped into action, forming the

THE UNITED SOMMELIERS FOUNDATION RAISES FUNDS TO SUPPORT HOSPITALITY PROFESSIONALS

by Michelle Metter

we would have with our donors in raising over a quarter of a million dollars.”

Establishing a foundation and devising an application process in only eight weeks’ time has not come without its challenges, however. “We

did we have any sort of blueprint to guide us.”

At press time, the USF had issued approximately 527 grants to sommeliers in need—but its fundraising work continues as most USF board



Cristie Norman and Chris Blanchard, MS, co-founded the United Sommeliers Foundation and serve as President and Treasurer, respectively.

United Sommeliers Foundation (USF) alongside a cadre of other well-known professionals, including Master of Wine Geoff Labitzke, SOMLYAY LLC’s Erik Segelbaum, Wheeling Forward’s Yannick Benjamin, Second City Soil’s Jon McDaniel (see page 34), Master Sommelier Jackson Rohrbaugh, and Empire Distributors’ Eric Crane. The response to the nonprofit initiative, which provides grants to out-of-work sommeliers, has been incredible: As Blanchard puts it, “When Cristie and I founded this organization over text message less than two months ago, I had no idea the acceptance and success

needed a completely blind, objective voting process to select grant award-ees, so the board [would be] unaware of the candidate’s name, place of work, and location during voting,” explains Norman, who’s serving as USF President. “We must have spent over a week just defining the criteria [and] another week creating a point system; we had to request resubmissions with the updated application and have a non-wine-industry team member anonymize applications before each round of funding. I had no idea how much time and effort it would take just to get us to the voting process, nor

When Cristie and I founded this organization over text message less than two months ago, I had no idea the acceptance and success we would have with our donors in raising over a quarter of a million dollars.”

—Chris Blanchard, MS

members, including McDaniel, predict difficulty for the foreseeable future. “I think that we can all agree that the logistics of hospitality will never be the same,” he says. “High-volume restaurants with four-time mark-up wine lists and communal dining are going to be things of the past. Each member of this industry will have to truly show their value to their employer. We will all have to justify why investments should be made in each of our skills [by explaining] how those skills can bring dollars to the bottom line. The one thing that will never change is that people who love being a part of hospitality will continue to bring that level of service . . . [so] long as the guest brings their own level of empathy to hospitality.” ■■



United Sommeliers Foundation

Many Sommeliers, One Community

Founded during the COVID-19 crisis in response to the nationwide shuttering of businesses, the United Sommeliers Foundation aims to provide immediate financial assistance to sommeliers who are experiencing a pause or termination of their employment due to circumstances beyond their control.

**YOUR GENEROUS SUPPORT IS URGENTLY NEEDED.
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Down the AISLE

In Down the Aisle, the editors at *The Tasting Panel* rate retail beverages based on a combination of elements that can affect off-premise potential, including packaging, branding/credibility, value, and user friendliness.

“Talkies” are the little cards appended to retail shelves that educate the consumer through tasting notes and, sometimes, ratings. They are an invaluable tool when there isn’t a knowledgeable employee available and/or the customer is too intimidated to ask for help. For this reason, we are **nixing the traditional rating system in favor of our “Talkie” rating system to assess retail wines/spirits/beers** based on the aforementioned factors—and, of course, taste!

1 TALKIE

Clear, legible label; solid branding. Good overall for retail.

2 TALKIES

Eye-catching label and memorable branding. Very good for retail.

3 TALKIES

Creatively inspiring in both packaging and branding. Great for retail.

4 TALKIES

A near work of art and meaningful branding. Excellent for retail.

5 TALKIES

A masterpiece in packaging and a new benchmark in branding. A must-have for retail.



Caposaldo 2018 Chianti DOCG, Tuscany, Italy

(\$11) This entry-level Chianti overdelivers, from its earthy cherry perfume to its level of acidity and fresh and focused fruit. **89**

KOBRAND



Bouvet-Ladubay 2016 Trésor, Saumur, France

(\$22) Made from 80% Chenin Blanc and 20% Chardonnay, this Saumur Brut sees some oak, but it’s soil, not wood, that dominates its profile on the nose and palate—all stony minerality along with fresh honeydew and lemon and lime zest. An extremely fine bead and soft mousse put it on the gentle end of the bubbly spectrum, where it could lead you easily from apéritif hour to a seafood course of, say, coquilles Saint Jacques. **90**

KOBRAND



Cuvaison 2016 Brut Rosé Méthode Champenoise, Los Carneros, Napa Valley

(\$50) Part of Cuvaison’s Small Lot tier, this traditional-method bubbly combines estate-grown, co-fermented Pinot Noir (70%) and Chardonnay (30%) to luxurious effect. Light copper in the glass, it gives off aromas of raspberry–white chocolate swirl and lemon beeswax; the mouthfeel is remarkably round and soft against bright notes of Gala apple, yuzu, and lychee, met by balanced but lingering acidity. **93**

FREDERICK WILDMAN



Qupé 2018 “Y” Block Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County,

(\$22) The “Y” Block is a 15-acre site off of the Bien Nacido Vineyard that was planted exclusively for Qupé in 2005. Barrel-fermented in French oak and aged on the lees for seven months, this wine rests in stainless steel before bottling. Rich aromas of chamomile and earthy slate lead to a palate of lemon verbena, oregano, and salted pear. A little Viognier and Marsanne are blended in for extra body. **90**

VINTAGE WINE ESTATES



Scarlet Vine 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Maipo Valley, Chile

(\$20) Barrel-aged for ten months in French oak, this is an especially easy-drinking red. Irresistible aromas of wild cherry, mocha, and cedar give way to concentrated layers of black raspberry, dark chocolate, and a hint of mint on the palate. Adding dimension to the juicy mouthfeel, the tannins are relaxed and perhaps a bit grainy. The grapes were sourced from a century-old high-elevation vineyard whose soils are 70% rock. **91**

DELICATO FAMILY WINES



Westwood 2017 Pinot Noir, Annadel Gap, Sonoma County

(\$52) Lilac, plum, and wet earth are just the first set of aromatics to grace the nose delivered by this luxe red. The palate is equally charged with flavor and perfume, from sweet molasses and wild cherry to savory mushroom. The texture is chewy, even fleshy, and the finish sparks with black pepper, spiced cedar, and saffras. **94**



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Anthony Dias

BLUE *REVIEWS*

Presented by  **BLUE** LIFESTYLE

In each issue, Editor-in-Chief Anthony Dias Blue selects a wide range of the best wines and spirits from among the more than 500 he samples over the course of a month. The reviews are subjective editorial evaluations, made without regard to advertising, and products are scored on a 100-point scale:

85-89: VERY GOOD

90-94: OUTSTANDING

95-100: CLASSIC

Once products are selected for publication, producers and importers will be offered the option of having their review accompanied by an image (bottle photo or label art) for a nominal fee. There is no obligation to add an image, nor does the decision affect the review or score in any way.

 The "twisty" icon indicates wines sealed with a screwcap closure.

For additional Blue Reviews, go to bluelifestyle.com.

Prices are for 750-mL bottles unless otherwise noted.

DOMESTIC

95 Yamhill Valley Vineyards
2015 Tall Poppy Pinot Noir,
McMinnville, Willamette Valley,
Oregon (\$75) Soft, fresh notes of cherry
on both the nose and the ripe and succu-
lent palate. Elegant and balanced, with good
length and bright acidity. 

94 Halleck Vineyard 2019
Gewürztraminer, Calandrelli
Vineyard, Russian River Valley (\$45)
Rose-petal aromas; lush texture; and an
off-dry, lavish style. Why aren't there more
examples of this lovely, aromatic variety? Is it
because people can't pronounce it? No mat-
ter the reason, this is a glorious, beautifully
smooth, and stylish rendition.



HALLECK VINEYARD

93 Halleck Vineyard 2019 Little
Sister Sauvignon Blanc, Rus-
sian River Valley (\$39) Silky, tangy, and
luscious, with lovely notes of lime and peach.
Elegant, refreshing, and long—all of the ele-
ments are seamlessly integrated.



92 Anarchist Wine Co. 2014 Con-
spiracy Theory, North Coast
(\$36) A smooth and rich blend of 41% Syrah,
14% Grenache, 13% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11%
Pinot Noir, 8% Malbec, 7% Cabernet Franc,
and 6% Petite Sirah, with notes of plum, ber-
ries, spice, and earth; dense, long, and balanced.

92 Anarchist Wine Co. 2014 The Philosopher, Napa Valley (\$42)

This complex and deeply colored blend of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Syrah, 7% Malbec, 6% Merlot, and 4% Petit Verdot shows depth and style. Plum and blackberry appear on the jammy and spicy palate.

95 The Wine Foundry 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon, Broken Rock Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$115)

Deep garnet color, lush plum nose, and berry notes on a smooth texture. Juicy, balanced, concentrated, and beautifully structured; long and elegant.

CAPE CLASSICS

95 The Wine Foundry 2016 Cabernet Franc, Stagecoach Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$110)

A generous and intense example of an underappreciated variety from one of Napa's great vineyards. Refined and lush, with alluring plum and berry notes.

CAPE CLASSICS

92 Belden Barns 2017 Estate Grüner Veltliner, Sonoma Mountain (\$28)

Clean, silky, and charming, with a firm core of citrusy acidity. The first Grüner to emerge from Sonoma, it's a great success—and it makes you wonder whether others will follow.

94 Testarossa 2018 Diana's Chardonnay, California (\$77)

Golden color and a soft vanilla nose; elegant and lush, with density, finesse, and a velvety texture. Layered and complex but seamless and generous.

94 Testarossa 2018 Doctor's Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County (\$70)

Smooth berry nose; crisp, tangy flavors of cherry within a refined structure; balanced with depth and classic length.

94 Testarossa 2018 Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sta. Rita Hills (\$68)

A stunning, elegant wine from one of California's greatest vineyards. Lovely raspberry nose and a silky texture; juicy, fresh, structured, and long.

91 Ponzi Vineyards 2016 Chardonnay Reserve, Chehalem Mountains, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$42)

Soft vanilla nose; bright and refreshing, with light, stylish notes of new oak. Smooth and tangy, long and elegant.

93 Morgan Winery 2018 Double L Pinot Noir Clone 777, Santa Lucia Highlands (\$65)

Silky, fresh, and juicy, with tangy cherry and lively acid structure; racy with a lasting finish.

94 Morgan Winery 2018 Boekenooogen Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands (\$65)

Medium ruby color and a sweet cherry nose; succulent yet crisp and invigorating, with bright acidity, lovely style, and good length.

92 Blagden Wines 2016 Pinot Noir, Sangiacomo Roberts Road Vineyard, Petaluma Gap (\$58)

Deep ruby color and aromas of cherry and vanilla; juicy, fresh, and bright, with flavors of cherry and toasty new oak.

92 Blagden Wines 2016 Chardonnay, Sangiacomo Vineyard, Sonoma Coast (\$48)

Golden hue and a gentle nose of pear and vanilla; silky and elegant, with bright acidity and toasty elements. Balanced, long, and rich, with considerable finesse.

93 Black Kite Cellars 2017 Pinot Noir, River Turn Block, Anderson Valley (\$62)

Dense ruby color and aromas of sweet cherry and spice that carry over to the lush palate of toasty oak, soft vanilla, and hints of earth. Long, silky, and balanced.

95 Priest Ranch Winery 2014 Coach Gun, Napa Valley (\$80)

A luscious and lavish blend of all five Bordeaux varieties in almost equal proportions, with a rich nose, generous charm, and lovely depth. Fresh, layered, stunning, and ready to drink.



93 Hawk and Horse Vineyards 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills, Lake County (\$75)

Deep garnet color and a lush nose of berry and oak. Smooth, juicy, and tangy, with crisp berry flavors and bright acidity; long and charming.

96 Somerston Estate 2015 XCVI Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$123)

A classic, unencumbered Cabernet, with a deep garnet color and a smooth plum nose. Silky, dense, and pure, with elegant flavors of sweet plum and berries and hints of spice, toasty oak, and licorice. Amazing now, but give it a couple years.



93 Pike Road 2018 Pinot Noir, Meyer Vineyard, Dundee Hills, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$50)

Lush ruby color; smooth and rich, with deep and lively flavors of berries and tangy black cherry. Lovely notes of wood and earth lead to a vibrant and long finish. ☺

BLUE REVIEWS



94 **Jeremy Nickel Cellars** 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Atlas Peak, Napa Valley (\$75) Deep garnet color and a gentle nose of plum and spice. Flavors of ripe, rich plum plus a dense, lovely structure; balanced, fresh, and generous.



94 **Elk Cove Vineyards** 2018 Five Mountain Pinot Noir, Chehalem Mountains, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$60) Medium crimson color and a fresh cherry nose; silky and bright, with good length and complexity. Balanced and well rounded, generous and stylish.

94 **Ridge Vineyards** 2018 Rockpile Zinfandel, Botticelli Vineyard, Sonoma County (\$36) This celebrated Zinfandel incubator has crafted another stunning wine. Smooth and lush, with bright, mineral-inflected fruit; complete, long, and juicy.

95 **Ridge Vineyards** 2017 Klein Cabernet Sauvignon, Monte Bello Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (\$87) Another dazzler from Monte Bello. Luscious and rich, with lovely notes of vanilla imparted by new American oak; broad, long, and balanced.

94 **Ridge Vineyards** 2015 Lytton Estate Syrah, Dry Creek Valley (\$48) Deep and dark, with a smooth texture and ripe blackberry flavors. Lush and rounded due to co-fermentation with a small addition of Viognier; minerally and dense, with good length.

IMPORTED

92 **Logos Conde de Artoiz** Vermouth de Garnacha, Navarra, Spain (\$28) Deep color reminiscent of brick; floral notes appear on the nose as well as on the juicy and bright palate. A rich Spanish vermouth with a lovely, silky texture and bright, nuanced flavors—try it in a Negroni. ☺

93 **Champagne Palmer & Co.** Brut Champagne Reserve, France (\$60) Stylish and elegant, with juicy acidity and bright fruit. Charming, fresh, and immediate, this bubbly has length, finesse, and lovely layers of complexity.

93 **Champagne Palmer & Co.** Blanc de Blancs Champagne, France (\$90) Bright, crisp, and racy, this is just what a Blanc de Blancs should be. Elegant, bracing, and perfectly balanced, with a long, tangy finish and an underlying complexity.

92 **Alta Vista** 2017 Terroir Selection Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina (\$30) Dark and richly colored, with a smooth texture and lush, dense berry flavors. Juicy and generous; earthy and rich; classic.

94 **Domaine J.A. Ferret** 2017 Pouilly-Fuissé Le Clos Tête de Cru, France (\$56) Racy citrus nose; tangy and crisp, with pure, juicy Chablis style and lush underpinnings; minerally and long.

KOBRAND

92 **Château des Jacques** 2017 Gamay, Morgon, France (\$27) Bright aromas of raspberry; deep and rich, with succulent berry notes. Racy, dense, balanced, and exciting—no wonder Morgon is everyone's favorite Beaujolais cru.

KOBRAND

92 **Pierre Sparr** 2017 Gewürztraminer Grand Cru Mambourg, Alsace, France (\$50) Creamy and lush, with sweet flavors of rose petal and honey; intense and smooth, rich and long.

WILSON DANIELS

VALUE

89 **Château Signac** 2018 Côtes du Rhône Pliocène, France (\$16) A Grenache-dominant blend with a bright plum hue and a spicy nose. Smooth and lush, with vanilla and spice; fresh and tangy. Kosher.

KOBRAND

92 **Yamhill Valley Vineyards** 2019 Rosé of Pinot Noir, McMinnville, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$18) Vivid pink color; rich, ripe, and tangy, with juicy notes of apple and citrus as well as good length and balance. Estate grown. ☺

93 **Scott Family Cellars** 2017 Reserve Mohr-Fry Ranch Zinfandel, Lodi (\$20) Smooth, juicy, and tangy, with lively acidity, a lasting finish, good balance, and finesse.



KOBRAND

91 **Scotto Family Cellars 2017 Reserve Tannat, Silvaspoons Vineyard, Alta Mesa, Lodi (\$20)** Deep and dark yet tangy and crisp, with a silky texture and a lengthy finish. It's nice to see an example of this underutilized variety.



88 **River Road Vineyards 2019 Unoaked Chardonnay, California (\$14)** Smooth and creamy, with luscious and slightly sweet fruit notes; long and clean. A great value. ☺

91 **Château d'Aqueria 2019 Tavel Protégée Mis en Bouteilles au Château, France (\$19)** Deep pink color; lush and silky palate. This rosé is slightly off-dry, giving it a lovely roundness.

KOBRAND



92 **Piper Sonoma Brut, Sonoma County (\$22)** Creamy and lush, with clean, ripe, and balanced flavors of rich, dense fruit as well as a fine mousse. This domestic Brut shows considerable depth of flavor yet is still bright and refreshing.

92 **Simonsig Wine Estate 2017 Pinotage, Stellenbosch, South Africa (\$18)** Deep garnet color and a luscious nose; well rounded, with depth and style. This variety—a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsault—has gotten a bad rap in the past, but it's really quite pleasant; this one is particularly attractive, not to mention a good value.



QUINTESSENTIAL WINES

90 **Concannon 2017 Petite Sirah, Livermore Valley (\$17)** This winery has a long history with Petite Sirah. Deeply colored; silky and bright, with dense berry flavors and good length. ☺



89 **13 Celsius 2017 Pinot Grigio delle Venezie, Italy (\$15)** Crisp and clean, with tangy acidity and a velvety texture; juicy and well balanced. A great value. ☺



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2018 Chardonnay Clarksburg SRP \$20	2018 Chardonnay Carneros SRP \$40	2017 Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills SRP \$30
92 points	94 points	94 points
tastingpanel	tastingpanel	tastingpanel
LLOYD		PREScription

LloydCellars.com | PrescriptionVineyards.com

BLUE REVIEWS

91 Pike Road 2019 Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$16) Ripe nose; juicy and balanced, with a clean, racy style; tangy, long, and smooth. 🍷



91 Love Noir 2017 Satin Red, California (\$16) Lush cherry color and a ripe nose of berry and vanilla; fresh flavors of black cherry, blackberry, and plum, plus a hint of toasty vanilla. A delicious value wine. 🍷

94 Royal Tokaji Wine Company 2017 Late Harvest Furmint, Tokaj, Hungary (\$21) Scents of orange blossom; fresh and bright, with a creamy texture and crisp flavors of apricot and orange. Sweet but balanced, with just enough tangy acidity.

WILSON DANIELS



92 Oberon 2019 Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$18) Succulent and bright, with lovely, dry flavors of peach and great finesse; classic, long, and elegantly stylish. 🍷

91 Elk Cove Vineyards 2019 Estate Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley, Oregon (\$19) Smooth pear nose; fresh and tangy, with a full, luscious style and good balance. I would venture to say that this charming wine meets the highest expectations for its variety. 🍷

91 Head High 2018 Pinot Noir, Sonoma County (\$22) Aromas of baked cherry and earth; lush, juicy, and round, with dense fruit, a smooth texture, considerable depth, and a lasting finish. 🍷



92 Stave & Steel 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$20) Lush color and a deep, intense nose; pure and juicy, with ripe plum and an impressively layered style; expressive, long, and refined.



SPIRITS

94 Benjamin Chapman Small-Batch Whiskey, Canada (\$39) Bright amber color and a sweet, toasty nose; lush and creamy, with soft, seamless flavors of spice, wood, and honey. This is perhaps the best Canadian whisky I've ever tasted, with a mellow elegance that persists through the long finish.

3 BADGE BEVERAGE CORP.

95 Glenmorangie The Cadboll Estate Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Scotland (\$85) A refined oak nose leads to flavors of toasted barley, sweet oak, pear, and citrus. An instant classic from Scotland's northernmost distillery, it's smooth and mellow yet still possesses abundant depth and intensity.

92 Slo de Vie Carrie Nation Vodka, USA (\$24) This nicely balanced vodka is distilled from grapes grown on California's Central Coast. Soft vanilla on the nose goes dry on the palate, where it's wrapped in a silky texture accompanied by a bit of heat.

93 Kilbeggan Single Pot Still, Ireland (\$45) Light amber color; with rich, toasted barley appearing on the nose and palate; creamy and complex, with sweet oak, spice, and a gentle yet lasting finish.

92 Humboldt Distillery Organic Vodka, USA (\$19) An organic and nicely priced expression from beautiful Humboldt County in Northern California. Smooth, lush, and balanced, with velvety notes of vanilla and clean flavors, a delicate texture, and a generous finish.

92 Miramar Rakia Modern Brandy, Bulgaria A unique spirit with an interesting nose of spice and a smooth, soft texture; mellow and dry, with charming notes of rose petals and pepper.

MIRAMAR SPIRITS



95 Acre Cenizo Mezcal Artesanal Joven, Mexico (\$60) This remarkable mezcal claimed a double gold medal at the 2020 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. A nose of agave and earth gives way to a creamy texture overlaying a smooth, elegant palate of pepper, spice, and toasty agave; rich, lush, and very long.



94 Highclere Castle London Dry Gin, England (\$45) Incredible in cocktails, this is a very special gin made with citrus and botanicals that are all grown on the producer's estate. Lovely nose of orange, juniper, and lavender; creamy, refined, and dry, with lush, smooth notes of vanilla.

HIGHCLERE CASTLE SPIRITS, LLC

95 **Rhum Barbancourt Réserve Spéciale Aged 8 Years, Haiti (\$28)** Long, complex, and outstanding, this is a true classic that's been made since 1862—drink it on the rocks. Medium amber color; dry and silky-smooth, with toasty elegance derived from just the right amount of French oak aging.

CRILLON IMPORTERS



93 **Loch Lomond 18 Year Old Highland Single Malt Scotch, Scotland (\$60)** Sandalwood nose; toasty and lush flavors of treacle, caramel, vanilla, spice, and dried fruits. Rich and balanced, with grace and good depth.

95 **Aultmore of the Foggie Moss 18 Year Old Single Malt Speyside Scotch Whisky, Scotland (\$115)** What a stunning product—I'm embarrassed to say I'd never heard of it before now. Absolutely beautiful and impossibly smooth, with honey, butterscotch, vanilla, and toffee on a creamy and refined palate that lacks the faintest hint of smoke; the finish is long and superb.

94 **Airem Organic Vodka, Spain (\$35)** Soft vanilla nose, silky texture, and a clean and dry yet lush style. This lovely, complex, and balanced sipping vodka for connoisseurs is made with organic wheat.



94 **Absente Absinthe Refined Liqueur, France (\$50)** Bright greenish-yellow color and a soft nose of licorice that extends to the lively palate alongside anise. Silky and off-dry, with an elegant, rich style; lovely and, despite its high proof, smooth and delicious. ■■

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Well BORN

FROM BIEN NACIDO ONWARD, PROVENANCE
AND PRESCIENCE ARE PART AND PARCEL
OF THE MILLER FAMILY HERITAGE

BY DEBORAH PARKER WONG

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MILLER FAMILY WINES

Multigenerational
grower-producers
Marshall, Stephen,
and Nicholas Miller.



Multiple generations of the Miller family gather for a portrait.

Much of the California

vineyard land that is so prized today was established on tracts granted by the Mexican government to its military leaders, who became the state's earliest settlers. Among them was Tomas Olivera, who was granted the 9,000-acre Rancho Tepusquet in what is now Santa Maria Valley in 1837.

Olivera later sold the property—which took its name from the Chumash word for “fishing for trout”—to his son-in-law, Juan Pacifico Ontiveros. The first record of grapes being planted there dates to 1857, the year Ontiveros completed the adobe that still stands on the land.

Rancho Tepusquet had been reduced to about 2,800 acres by the time the Miller family purchased it in 1969. But from that seminal moment forward, the ranch and its owners began to play an instrumental role in the evolution of the California wine industry, serving as protagonists in a story that continues to unfold today.

While wine lovers the world over know the iconic Bien Nacido Vineyard, the Millers' legacy in California agriculture began long before the family planted it on the Tepusquet site. They trace their heritage to Yorkshire native William Richard Broome, who settled in Santa Barbara. In 1871, Broome purchased the vast Rancho Guadaluca, eventually bequeathing a large portion in what is now southern Ventura County to one of his three children, Thornhill Frances Broome. Thornhill was a talented businessman with diversified holdings, and his heirs have followed suit in forming Thornhill Companies, of which his daughter Elizabeth's son, Stephen Thornhill Broome Miller, is CEO and President.



**Miller Family Estate Wines from
Blen Nacido and Solomon Hills.**

Miller's sons Marshall and Nicholas represent the fifth generation to farm the property now known as Thornhill Ranches, cultivating blueberries as well as the lemons and avocados their forebears grew. (The name Rancho Guadalasca survives as a popular trail at Point Mugu State Park, where Thornhill Broome Beach commemorates the family's ancestor.)

THE BIRTH OF BIEN NACIDO

Despite their long history of farming, the Millers are relatively new to grapes. When Stephen Miller and his brother Robert sought to diversify their crops to include wine grapes, they settled on the site at Rancho Tepusquet, which was thought by many at the time to be unsuited to viticulture.

Inspired by its striking maritime climate—attributable to the juxtaposition of the San Rafael Mountain and Transverse Ranges to the Pacific coast as well as to its chalky, sandy loam soils—they named it Bien Nacido, which means “well born” in Spanish, and planted it in 1973.

For 30 years, Bien Nacido held the distinction of being a major nursery for varietal budwood as part of the California Grapevine Registration & Certification Program. Most of its original plantings were cool-climate varieties from stock grown by the University of California, Davis, including Santa Barbara County's first Gewürztraminer and three Pinot Noir clones: Dijon, Martini, and Wädenswil. Though the Millers no longer grow budwood, according to Nicholas, “there's now a Syrah clone that is referred to as Bien Nacido.”



The legendary Bien Nacido Estate in Santa Maria Valley.

Beyond that, the vineyard's initial fame was won by Central Coast winemakers, including Qupé's Bob Lindquist and Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen. They produced single-vineyard designates of such high caliber that, for some time, the Miller family was content to work behind the scenes as growers, supporting the nascent industry that was emerging in the region.

In 1988, they opened Wine Services in Santa Maria, offering a consolidated warehousing, bottling, and barrel-aging facility; California Certified Organic Farmer (CCOF) certified, it now has an impressive 10,000-ton crush capacity. Seeing the rapid emergence of the industry in Paso Robles, they next opened Paso Robles Wine Services

in 2005, and their presence there has contributed to the region's status as the fastest growing in the state.

“We've been gratified by the success of the wineries we've worked with over the years,” Stephen says. “They've entrusted us by putting Bien Nacido and our other single-vineyard names on their labels.” He attributes the company's success to its ability to build strategic relationships with the winemakers, characterizing it as an “interactive process” that led him to a watershed moment: “We received a letter from a consumer about how much they enjoyed wines made from Bien Nacido grapes; it was then we realized that consumers were trusting in our vineyard.”

The Millers' French Camp Vineyard in the Paso Robles Highlands.





Nicholas and Marshall Miller walk the Bien Nacido Vineyard in Santa Maria Valley.

FROM GROWERS TO VINTNERS

When Stephen's sons Marshall (who handles operations for Thornhill Companies) and Nicholas (who spearheads marketing and sales) joined their father in the business in 2006, they knew that it was the right time to put their name on a label. "I applaud the next generation's effort to lead the company forward," says Stephen. "Becoming vintners has opened the aperture of what we do as a business."

In 2007, the Miller family began bottling their own vineyard-designate wines from Bien Nacido as well as Solomon Hills Vineyard, the westernmost site in Santa Maria Valley, which they acquired in 1999. Notable Bien Nacido bottlings include The Captain

Pinot Noir, Old Vine Pinot Noir, and XO Syrah, all of which are among the Central Coast's highest-scoring wines.

Marshall, meanwhile, is keenly aware of the myriad factors that are forcing changes in the wine industry. "Labor costs and the availability of labor, combined with rising minimum wage, is an ongoing concern," he says, adding that he's made huge strides with respect to vineyard mechanization at the company's French Camp Vineyard in the Paso Robles Highlands, about one-third of which is CCOF-certified. "We're highly automated at French Camp, and we have a good understanding of what works well and what doesn't," he explains. "But mechanized farming is a bit like using

a PC from the 1980s; 20 years from now, we'll be seeing the hybridization of mechanization and optical recognition applied across the board. The goal is to find the places where automation can be used most effectively to assist hand labor."

FUTURE IN THE MAKING

Like son, like father: Stephen is similarly focused on the what's next for the family enterprise. "Now more than ever," he says, "we are looking at all aspects of the business and applying creativity with the goal of reaching beyond solving immediate problems to advancing the industry."

Sustainability measures are a key example: Bien Nacido is certified by both the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance and SIP to ensure the preservation of the terroir so beautifully reflected in the wines of the Miller family—whose long-held dream of a winemaking legacy looks to be in good hands, thanks to the fourth and fifth generations. ■■



This adobe has stood on what is now Bien Nacido since 1837.



In each issue, Tasting Panel Publisher Meridith May selects her favorite wines and spirits of the moment. Check here for the latest arrivals in our offices, the hottest new brands on the market, and an occasional revisited classic.

Publisher's PICKS



Meridith May with her Australian Cattle Dog, Porter.

WINES



Cline Family Cellars 2018 Old Vine Zinfandel, Lodi

(\$11) This juicy, expressive, and food-friendly red is one of the best value Zins on the market. On the nose, aromas of sassafras wash over ripe plum. Black cherry, mocha, cedar, and sweet tobacco define the plush mouthfeel before rhubarb and a delicate dash of white pepper linger on the finish. **91**



Bonterra Organic Vineyards 2018 Chardonnay, California

(\$14) Winemaker Jeff Cichocki has crafted an especially aromatic white with a jazzy perfume of jasmine as well as sugar-dusted apples and almond shortbread. Seventy percent of the juice is fermented in a combination of French and American oak; the other 30% is fermented in stainless steel. After an initial creaminess, the palate's crispness centers around a focused core of fresh citrus. On the finish, ripe pineapple nips the tongue, solidifying this wine's food-pairing potential. **90**



FETZER VINEYARDS



Montes 2019 Classic Series Sauvignon Blanc, Aconcagua Coast, Chile

(\$13) This wine exudes lean, vibrant scents of grapefruit peel and vanilla-kissed white flowers. Sparkling acidity vibrates on the palate, which is edged in stony notes of lemon. **90**



KOBRAND



Milbrandt 2019 Pinot Grigio, Columbia Valley, Washington

(\$15) Peach and honeysuckle on the nose give way to a luscious nectar of peach and melon. Tangerine blossom keeps things aromatic on a finish of rock candy with a pinch of salt. **91**

Worthy of a smooch.

French-style double bizou.

Wildly infatuated.

Seriously smitten.

Head over heels in love.



Noble Tree 2018 Grenache, Sons & Daughters Ranch, Chalk Hill, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$18)

This single-vineyard Grenache spent seven months in French oak and offers a light-bodied mouthfeel. Aromas of cinnamon, cranberry, rose petal, and bacon fat lead to flavors of wild strawberry and rhubarb. The wine's savory character is punctuated by dry tannins and notes of olive and dried herbs. **90**



TAUB FAMILY SELECTIONS



Mt. Beautiful 2017 Riesling, North Canterbury, New Zealand (\$22) A perfume of beeswax and key lime with meringue makes for a fine start to this creamy white. The luxurious mouthfeel offers a lean acidity, keeping richness at bay. Salted pear and tarragon sizzle on the mouthfeel. **92**



Mt. Beautiful 2017 Pinot Gris, North Canterbury, New Zealand (\$20) Intensely aromatic, with fragrances of custard, melon, fresh corn, and jasmine. The palate feel of this heavenly wine is gorgeous: Toffee and pear slowly melt on the back of the tongue as honeydew and macadamia nut sidle up to a kiss of lilac. **93**



Head High 2018 Pinot Noir, Sonoma County (\$26) From grower Bill Price of Three Sticks fame, this bright and cheery red is made with grapes from such well-known vineyards as Durell and Gap's Crown. Aromas of cherrywood and leafy, earthy notes intrigue on the nose and palate, the latter of which is lined with black-tea tannins and spiced cedar. A thread of leather shows power and grace. **91**



Gehricke 2017 Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$29) The first impression of this wine is a deep, rich perfume of black coffee, dark chocolate, and black plum. As black cherry weaves through granite, a touch of white pepper and anise springs into action on the palate. It's dynamic from start to finish. **93**



3 BADGE ENOLOGY



Santa Ema Amplus One 2017 Carménère, Peumo, Cachapoal, Chile (\$30) Aged in French oak for 12 months, this red is equal parts bright, concentrated, juicy, and vivacious, with a tremendous seasoning of spiced cedar, violets, and mountain brush. Aromas of heather and rhubarb synchronize with scents of tobacco leaf as clean, direct notes of wild raspberry combine with an underlying animale quality and supple tannins. **93**



PACIFIC HIGHWAY WINES



Schug 2018 Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$30) White-peppered cherries and clove-dotted cedar make their mark on the nose and palate as sweet tobacco and wild raspberry go hand in hand with tip-top acidity. As this lovely wine opens up, aromas and flavors of forest floor emerge on a brambly finish tinged with cherry cola. The result is poised and delicious. **91**



Folly of the Beast 2018 Pinot Noir, Central Coast (\$19) Aged in 30% new French oak for 12 months, this sinewy and complex 100% Pinot Noir offers an exotic perfume of Asian spices, boysenberry pie, mocha, and espresso. The ripe palate is a charmer; with brown sugar, cedar, baking spices, and an inherent freshness that heightens with each sip. Fennel and roasted coffee beans enter midway, where they're layered with black plum. **93**

WINC



Unshackled 2018 Red Blend, California (\$30) From The Prisoner Wine Company, this blend of Zinfandel, Malbec, Petite Sirah, Syrah, and Grenache spent ten months in 30% new French and American oak. It's a more affordable version of its older sibling, The Prisoner, with fruit sourced from Sonoma County, Redwood Valley, and Lake County. Rich and textured, with concentrated red, blue, and black fruit tinged with spices, it's an easy drinker even in its youth. Crushed berries, clove, and cinnamon define the finish. **90**

CONSTELLATION BRANDS

Publisher's PICKS



Silverado Vineyards 2018 Estate Grown Chardonnay, Carneros (\$35)

After fermenting in both stainless-steel tanks and French and Hungarian oak, this sleek white aged seven months in barrel. Tropical aromas of pineapple and gardenia carry through to the creamy palate, where they're joined by vanilla, jasmine, and salty cashew brittle as well as vivacious acidity. The finish is redolent of lemon drop and cinnamon. **93**



Silverado Vineyards 2016 Mt George Merlot, Coombsville, Napa Valley (\$40)

A cool climate and gravelly soils lend character to this ripe Merlot from an estate vineyard named for an ancient volcano. Aromas of rhubarb, slate, and lavender are kind and pleasing on the nose. Bright acidity and vibrant black cherry weave through bittersweet dark chocolate on the mid-palate before giving way to black pepper, soy sauce, thyme, and a satin carpet of berries on the finish. Aged 17 months in predominantly French oak with a small percentage of Hungarian oak. **94**



Aniello 2016 Trousseau, Río Negro, Patagonia, Argentina (\$40)

This grape originated in Jura in northeast France, between Burgundy to the west and Switzerland to the east; it's also grown in Spain and Portugal, but we were thrilled to taste this graceful version from the Southern Hemisphere. Made with estate fruit grown in vineyards planted in 1932, it wowed us with aromas of orange peel and cherry pith that lead to a willowy palate on a firm foundation. Grenache-like in color and texture, it offers up flavors of an earthy, leafy nature, with white-peppered cranberry taking the reins. A kiss of rose petal appears on the nimble finish. **93**

GLOBAL VINEYARD IMPORTERS



Milbrandt 2017 SVS Clifton Hill Cabernet Sauvignon, Wahluke Slope, Washington (\$42)

This wine displays restrained power: Dried herbs and mountain shrubs show off on the savory nose before black-olive tapenade and coffee tannins contribute depth on the palate. Black fruit and fruit skin leave a dustiness behind that mingles with dark chocolate. **92**



Black Kite 2017 Chardonnay, Soberanes Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County (\$48)

Scents of brush and herbs as well as caramel, peach, and melon make for a special bouquet. Following a gorgeous entry of exotic fruit, racy acidity makes an entrance alongside a balanced richness. White melon and tangerine blossom are marked by more herbs on the finish. **93**



Shamwari 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$50)

Meaning "friend" in the Bantu language Shona, Shamwari shows the elegance of Sonoma County through this vintage, which balances acidity with power. Aromas of earth laden with cinnamon, nutmeg, and boysenberry lead to a silky, generous palate with grainy tannins. Dark chocolate and cherry melt a path for spiced cigar leaf and black fruit. **93**



Westwood Estate 2018 Sangiacomo Vineyard Chardonnay, Annadel Gap, Sonoma Coast (\$55)

Exuding an alluring perfume of kiwi, pineapple, and custard, this textured white—a project with Philippe Melka—is crisp and bright, with a cut-glass effect on the first sip. The mouthfeel morphs as slate leans into the creamy body, relaxing the richness level. Just-ripe pineapple aligns with pitch-perfect acidity. **94**



JUSTIN Winery 2017 Savant, Paso Robles (\$50)

A blend of 65% Syrah and 35% Cabernet Sauvignon aged for 21 months in 53% new French oak, this magnificent expression of both varieties stakes a claim on the unique character of Paso Robles. It's bold, approachable, and lush, demonstrating structure as much as it does a seductive quality. Intense and pleasurable aromas of coffee, blackberry, and black bean intermingle with bold notes of cedar, grilled meat, leather, and black fruit that fill the mouth. **95**



Lorenzi Estate Vineyards 2017 Clone 474 Syrah, Temecula Valley (\$65)

Great news arrives from Temecula in the form of this bold, creamy red. Breathe in deep: Blackberry, blueberry, and vanilla are vibrant on the nose, intertwining with persistent scents of violets. The palate showcases a plush texture, with depth and seamless tannins as well as flavors of dark chocolate, roasted coffee bean, fig, new leather, and balsamic. Luxurious! **93**





Black Kite 2017 Chardonnay, Gap's Crown Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, Sonoma County (\$62) Aromas of lemon curd, dill, and chamomile pave the way for bracing acidity. An underlying richness of brioche and custard lends a nice mouthfeel as lemon is seasoned with tarragon and a distinct saltiness. Aged 16 months in one-third new French oak. **92**



Zinke 2016 Kimsey Vineyard Reserve Syrah, Ballard Canyon, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County (\$68) From one of my favorite vineyard sites in the Santa Ynez Valley, this stunning certified-organic red spent 30 months in once-filled puncheons (68%) and neutral barrels (32%). Glorious in its depth, the sumptuous liquid shows a well-defined character of white pepper, violets, cherry liqueur, and just the right balance of oak. **94**



The Vineyard House 2017 Chardonnay, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$75)

The 2017 vintage marks the fourth release of this estate Chardonnay from H.W. Crabb's Hermosa Valley Vineyard, which was renamed in honor of the Napa Valley grape-growing pioneer who once owned a portion of the estate. Prepare to be wowed by lively aromas of salty pear, chamomile, butterscotch, and lychee as well as a palate supercharged with acidity and lemon verbena. Aged 16 months in French oak (60% new), it's opulent yet lifted and full of energy; midway, a subtle creaminess emerges with honeyed lemon, tea leaves, and brioche. **95**



Priest Ranch 2014 Coach Gun, Napa Valley (\$80)

Hailing from the expansive Somerston Estate, which rises to elevations of up to 2,400 feet, this blend of 23% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot, 19% Cab Franc, 19% Malbec, and 19% Petit Verdot is named for a double-barrel shotgun—and it fires off flavors and aromas with impact. Scents of black plum and roasted coffee lead to chewy tannins and mouthcoating flavors of licorice while blackberry cream and dried violets stay sensuous from start to finish. This red is bulletproof. **95**



Goldeneye 2017 Pinot Noir, Split Rail Vineyard, Anderson Valley (\$86)

Fog and wind drifting off of the Mendocino coast lengthen the growing season on the cool western edge of the Anderson Valley, where this diverse vineyard—in which nine clones of Pinot Noir are planted across 16 blocks—is located. Scents of ripe wild strawberry with a hint of mushroom rise from the glass. The dense, creamy palate offers potted soil, copper, iron shavings, cinnamon, and rose petals, and the spicy finish leaves you wanting more. Aged 16 months in 60% new French oak. **96**



DUCKHORN PORTFOLIO



Craggy Range 2016 Le Sol, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand (\$103)

The nose of this showy Syrah expresses scents of blackberry, tar, dark chocolate, and espresso. Violets abound on the spicy and peppery palate as bright acidity leaves a cranberry tartness on the tongue. It's elegant and relatively light, with an ABV of 13%. **93**



KOBRAND



Viña Montes 2017 Montes Alpha M, Colchagua Valley, Chile (\$105) This charming single-vineyard red from Montes' Apalta estate blends 80% Cabernet Sauvignon with 10% Cab Franc, 5% Merlot, and 5% Petit Verdot. Aged 18 months in new French oak, it's one of the country's most revered wines. It thoroughly engages the senses with a nose of graphite, licorice, and blackberry as well as a focused palate of spiced blue fruit and violets. **96**

KOBRAND



Tenute Silvio Nardi 2015 Vigneto Manachiara, Brunello di Montalcino, Tuscany (\$115)

Second-generation producer Emilia Nardi oversees the 45-year-old Sangiovese Grosso vines in the vineyard for which this wine is named. It's berry-forward, with aromas of cherry liqueur and dark chocolate that work themselves into the muscular palate with verve. Plum, cinnamon, and espresso mingle with spiced earth. **97**



KOBRAND



The Vineyard House 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$225) As mentioned in the Vineyard House Chardonnay review, the estate vineyard this wine hails from was renamed to honor H.W. Crabb and the tenth anniversary of The Vineyard House Cab. Some Cab Franc and Petit Verdot were added to the blend, which spent 24 months in French oak (50% new); it was then bottle aged for 14 months before its debut last December. Classic aromas of cedar, dark blue and black fruit, graphite, and violets are noteworthy on the nose, and the creamy and dense palate is packed with muscle. It's structured but ultimately graceful, with a finish of forest floor. **97**



Don Melchor 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Puente Alto Vineyard, Maipo Valley, Chile (\$120)

Created in 1987 by the Guisilasti family of Concha y Toro, Viña Don Melchor marks its 30th anniversary with this vintage; as of last year, the winery is independent. The statuesque, broad-shouldered red (98% Cabernet Sauvignon and 2% Cabernet Franc) offers up an impressive nose of tar, chocolate, and espresso. The body is ultra-plush, with notes of cedar and broad, generous strokes of violets, black olives, and black pepper. It's a great example of sophistication and power. **97**



SPIRITS



Drake's Organic Premium Vodka, USA

(\$22/1 liter) A warming wave of vanilla wafer and white-peppered baked pear spreads across the palate of this 12-times-distilled spirit: Creamy from start to finish, it's gluten-free, vegan, kosher, non-GMO, and certified USDA organic. The Drake's Organic Bloody Mary Combo Pack, which includes a liter of Drake's vodka and a liter of the brand's Organic Bloody Mary Mix, also retails for \$22. **92**



Ole Smoky Peanut Butter Whiskey, USA (\$25)

Scents of dark chocolate and apricot nectar surround a wonderful whiff of peanut brittle. A hint of cedar and smoke warms the mouth while sweetening the senses. Notes of roasted coffee bean filter through before the finish arrives, delightfully accompanied by the spirit's namesake flavor. **92**



Bradshaw Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, USA (\$40)

From NFL legend and sports commentator/analyst Terry Bradshaw, this 103.8-proof bourbon opens up with aromas of caramel apple, saddle leather, and milk chocolate. Broad waves of butterscotch, apricot, cedar, and hay stream in on the palate. **89**



SILVER SCREEN BOTTLING COMPANY



The Whistler Beekeepers Select Irish Whiskey & Honey Liqueur, Ireland

(\$30) Honeyed tangerine peel, jasmine, and vanilla bean make for compelling aromas. This 66-proof spirit is even livelier on the palate, with flavors of white pepper and orange zest coated in a fine layer of honey and beeswax. The sweetness is restrained enough to not mask the whiskey. **91**

PRESTIGE BEVERAGE GROUP



Blue Angel Ultra Premium Vodka, USA

(\$17.50–\$18.50) This 80-proof spirit, distilled six times to remove congeners, exudes vibrant aromas of blueberry and vanilla cream. Round, elegant, and ultra-smooth on the palate, it's one of the more texturally enjoyable vodkas on the market. **94**



Bozal Mezcal Artesanal Cenizo Single Maguey, Mexico

(\$80) Grown at high altitudes of up to 8,500 feet in Durango, the wild agave sourced for this 94-proof joven spirit is known as Durangensis. It's as rich in flavor and aromatics as it is exotic: Scents of clay are layered with agave, earth, and delicate smoke. As it crosses the palate, lime coincides with a garden of wildflowers. Salty minerals leave a trace on the tongue as cumin and chili powder linger. **97** ■

3 BADGE BEVERAGE CO.

Standouts from the Iberian Peninsula

AFTER RECEIVING HUNDREDS OF WINE samples from Spain and Portugal for a report on the two countries in our sister publication, *The SOMM Journal*, we thought we'd share some of our favorites with you. From the Gran Reservas of Rioja to exciting indigenous blends from the Dão and Douro, these bottles represent exceptional value as well as world-class terroir:

SPAIN

Red Skirt Sparkling Rosé Sangria, Spain (\$11) This sangria was a standout among the Spanish expressions, largely due to its delightful nose of exotic flowers, bright cranberry, and red licorice. The palate is dry but the flavors pique the taste buds: Soft bubbles wash over the tongue in tandem with rose petals and raspberries. **90**

MERCADO WINE PRODUCTS



Maior de Mendoza Sobre Lías 2018 Albariño, Rías Baixas
The vineyard sources for this wine, located near the Atlantic Ocean in the Salnés Valley subzone, were planted long before the DO's creation; they're sustainably farmed without herbicides or pesticides and harvested entirely by hand. Aromas of honeysuckle, oregano, and lime give way to salted cashew with a dollop of lemon meringue on the palate. The slick and lean acidity cuts through. **90**



M IMPORTS

Portia 2018 Verdejo, Rueda (\$19) Salted white flowers join lemon on the nose before sparkling acidity buzzes across the palate with cashew and chamomile. White grapefruit zest appears on the finish. **90**

PACIFIC HIGHWAY



Bodegas Naia 2018 Naia Verdejo, Rueda (\$15) Sourced from vineyards 25–35 years old, this 100% Verdejo fermented in stainless-steel vats (85%) and French oak tanks (15%) that hold over 2,600 gallons; it aged on the lees for four months. Pretty aromas of orange blossom and papaya give way to zingy acidity on the palate with a hint of anise and dried herbs. **92**

AVIVA VINO

Condado de Oriza 2015 Reserva Tempranillo, Ribera del Duero (\$15) With intense tannins and a robust body, this heady wine takes you for a wild ride. Notes of forest floor and dried fruits join gamey and savory flavors threaded with lean acidity. **91**

FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS



Bodegas Portia 2016 Prima La Encina, Ribera del Duero (\$43) Aged 15 months in French oak, this sturdy, highly approachable 100% Tempranillo opens up luxuriously. Cedar-kissed notes of chocolate and blueberries match up well with its Old World acidity, as do persistent flavors of toffee and ripe cherry. **93**

PACIFIC HIGHWAY



Bodegas Faustino 2006 Faustino I Gran Reserva, Rioja (\$40) From what was considered to be a very good vintage in Rioja, this blend of 86% Tempranillo, 9% Graciano, and 5% Mazuelo aged 26 months in American oak followed by an additional three years in bottle. On the palate, teeth-coating tannins encounter red-peppered red fruit, cinnamon-spiced rose petals, and tobacco before a hint of peppermint cools the mouth. A glorious red that has flawlessly endured the passage of time. **95**

PACIFIC HIGHWAY



MAP COURTESY OF THE WINE SCHOLAR GUILD

**Bodegas Campillo 2009
Campillo Gran Reserva, Rioja**

(\$50) From Grupo Faustino, this single-vineyard red (90% Tempranillo and 10% Graciano) aged 30 months in French oak, whose presence is apparent on the nose alongside toffee, wild cherry, and cedar. It's a bright, elegant, and white-peppered beauty with balanced acidity. **95**



PACIFIC HIGHWAY

Monteleiva 2011 Reserva, Rioja (\$20)

Aged 18 months in American oak and 12 months in bottle, this blend of 90% Tempranillo and 10% Mazuelo macerated for 25 days with daily pump-overs. Spiced cedar and coffee bean persist on the nose, while the palate carries flavors of vanilla, red plum, and cigar leaf. It's a dignified wine with pizzazz, reined-in power, and a finish of white pepper. **92**



THE SPANISH VINEYARDS

Roqueta Origen Gacha Garnacha 2018 Catalunya (\$14)

This 100% Garnacha is sourced from vineyards planted along the Ebro River on calcareous clay. (The Roqueta family of Barcelona owns the winery and has been linked to Spanish winemaking for more than eight centuries.) Clear-cut aromas of rhubarb, root vegetable, and white-peppered cedar give way to bright fruit balanced with Old World acidity. Cherry, kirsch, and a hint of clove emerge with textural denseness, resulting in a chewiness that makes this wine all the more interesting. **92**



M IMPORTS

Segura Viudas Brut Rosé DO Cava,

Penedès (\$12) Strawberry and pink grapefruit perfume the glass of this gorgeous Cava rosado, a blend of 90% Trepato and 10% Garnacha that aged for 12 months. Defined by decisive flavors of cherry pith, grapefruit zest, and grenadine, it possesses a subtle richness thanks to its refined mousse and textural complexity. **93**

FREIXENET MIONETTO USA

**Segura Viudas Reserva Here-
dad DO Cava, Penedès (\$30)**

This winery's equivalent of a *tête de cuvée* was three years in the making: It's a refreshing and elegant blend of 67% Macabeo and 33% Parellada made from nine different wines, each of which was vinified in separate tanks and spent 30 months on the lees. Aromas of brioche and lemon verbena intertwined with brine, tarragon, and honeysuckle keep you enthralled before the first sip. Persistent bubbles pave the way for a parade of florals and light, airy flavors touched with smoke. Minerality ensues on the mid-palate, where it's joined by notes of bread dough, lemon, lime chiffon, and vanilla. **94**



FREIXENET MIONETTO USA

Red Skirt 2017 Red Blend,

Jumilla (\$11) Aged four months in American and French oak, this blend of organic Syrah and Monastrell is one of the best values to emerge from Jumilla. Vibrant aromas of cocoa-dipped blueberries precede a palate of dried herbs, tart orange peel, raspberry, and plum, which come alive thanks to vivid acidity and a juicy mouthfeel. Vanilla and toasted caramel make waves on the finish. **92**



MERCADO WINE PRODUCTS

Pio del Ramo 2014 Alont,

Jumilla (\$25) A top-notch blend of Monastrell, Syrah, and Cabernet Sauvignon with scents of black plum and balsamic. Showing abundant black plum, the palate is generous, satiny, and ripe. Notes of roasted coffee bean, cinnamon, slate, walnut, and black olive merge on the lengthy finish. **93**

MERCADO WINE PRODUCTS



Altos de Luzón, Jumilla (\$19)

This stellar and spirited blend of 50% Monastrell, 25% Tempranillo, and 25% Cabernet Sauvignon hails from vineyards on a high plateau surrounded by mountains in northern Murcia. Its intense perfume shows fresh notes of blueberry, coffee, tar, and slate. The mouthfeel is exquisite, and great acidity makes it a perfect match for grilled meats. **93**



AVIVA VINO

Prospero Brut, Castilla La

Mancha (\$12) A blend of Chardonnay, Airén, and Viura with a low ABV of 11%, this Spanish sparkler is a great value. The merry array of aromas includes Newtown Pippin apple, white flower petals, and an herby thread of lemon. The bubbles dissipate quickly, charming the mouth with fine acidity and notes of honeyed cashew and Asian pear. **90**



FÉLIX SOLÍS AVANTIS

PORTUGAL

**Quinta das Apegadas 2014
Quinta Velha Reserva, DOC**

Douro (\$29) Aged 17 months in French oak, this blend of Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz (aka Tempranillo), and Touriga Nacional hails from a property in Peso da Régua that originally sold its grapes to Port houses. Aromas of violets, anise, and ripe blackberry leap from the glass. The palate is ripe and rich, with a creamy middle that's edged out by a hint of minerality and cherry pith. Structured and elegant, it's one of the best expressions in its category. **93**



DINIZ CELLARS

**Quinta do Portal 2017
Reserva, DOC Douro (\$32)**

A blend of 45% Touriga Nacional, 40% Tinta Roriz, and 15% Touriga Franca, with notes of chocolate-covered cherries that give way to a deep well of cedar and espresso. Grainy tannins, tree bark, and tilled soil add complexity while imparting a pleasurable mouthfeel. **92**



M IMPORTS

Rede Reserva Tinto 2014

Douro, DOC Douro (\$15) From the cool subregion of Baixo Corgo, this stunning blend of Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, and Tinta Roriz shows vivid flavors of coffee bean and wild cherry. Its persistent aromas of heather and leather take it from savory to floral and back again. A deep earthiness is sweetened by a finish of molasses and cedar. **92**



M IMPORTS

Boas Quintas 2018 Fonte do

Ouro, DOC Dão (\$13) From one of Portugal's oldest established wine regions, this lovely white blend of 70% Encruzado and 30% Arinto was grown in granite-based loam soil and aged in stainless-steel vats. On the heels of generous aromas of white tea, papaya, and lime, lithe yet flavorful notes of pineapple, mango, and white flowers are encompassed in great acidity. Minerality emerges on the finish. **89**



M.S. WALKER

Duquesa Maria 2017 Superior,

DOC Alentejo (\$14) A blend of 40% Aragonez, 30% Alicante Bouschet, 20% Touriga Nacional, and 10% Trincadeira, with beautiful scents of lilac and vanilla that are mirrored on the palate. Pansies, jasmine, and spiced clay add to the bouquet as high acidity imparts freshness on the fleshy texture. Salted raspberry dots the middle of the tongue on the finish. **91**



DINIZ CELLARS

Dona Maria 2014 Grande Reserva, DOC Alentejo (\$44)

This ripe and satiny single-vineyard blend of Alicante Bouschet, Petit Verdot, Touriga Nacional, and Syrah features well-integrated tannins; dynamic aromas of blackberry preserves, espresso, tar, and slate; and some minty astringency on the palate. Flavors of coffee bitters, tobacco, and blackstrap molasses are lathered in blackberry. Big-shouldered and impressive, it fermented in ancient marble *lagares* (tanks) and aged one year in French oak. **94**



M.S. WALKER

Ruelas 2018 Red Reserva, Lisbon (\$11)

Vinified in stainless-steel tanks, this blend of Syrah, Touriga Nacional, and Tinta Roriz tastes like it should cost double or triple the price; the grapes were grown on the renowned Quinta do Gradil estate in the western foothills of the majestic Montejunto mountain range. Aromas of olives, soy sauce, and espresso are deep and savory, and on the palate, fruit pops atop a pillow-light texture. Inherent spice persists throughout, melding with dried blue flowers, fennel, and bright acidity. A deep core of minerality makes this wine a perfect match for food. **91**



M.S. WALKER

Casa Ermelinda Freitas 2018 Vinha da Valentina, Península de Setúbal (\$13)

A deep, dark, and delicious blend of Syrah, Castelão, Aragonês, and Alicante Bouschet that aged six months in French and American oak; aromas of tilled soil and vanilla lead to a lush palate of cocoa, anise, and spiced figs. Among the many, many expressions we tasted, this was a standout. **93**



M.S. WALKER



MAP COURTESY OF DINIZ CELLARS

TAKING INVENTORY YOUR BUSINESS, YOUR VOICES

HOW HAS YOUR RETAIL BUSINESS CHANGED, FOR BETTER OR WORSE, IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC AND SUBSEQUENT SHELTER-IN- PLACE ORDERS?

MIRIAM YOO

Owner, Flask & Field, Los Angeles, CA

It's been a ride. As soon as closures started happening, we pivoted, getting every single item that we have in our store on our website. We always had a site, but it was basically a landing page—we've mainly been a brick-and-mortar, not an e-commerce business. There's no warehouse fulfillment center—we don't even have a land line [laughs]. But we stayed there day and night, getting everything online, and started pushing on Instagram. That's been our saving grace—I don't know if we would have survived without it.

All the rules are out the door; I've made sales by direct message, by text. We also do Zoom and FaceTime. We're just having to make it up as we go. Fortunately we have a really great group of local customers who've been so supportive and continued to purchase wine and spirits and gifts from us week after week; we tripled our wine club membership in the first two weeks. And we're doing virtual tastings every Friday and Saturday. They started for us to have something to do and feel like we were connecting with our sales reps—they drop off samples and do Zoom calls with us—but it's really [about] continuing that conversation with our customers and helping to take some of the stress out of their lives.

We feel very lucky to have been able to keep going and provide what people need, but we also understand that this isn't a celebration; people are drinking because they're stressed. I had to cut half my staff, and that was really hard. So we're in this weird purgatory—all we can do is focus on fulfilling orders, managing customers as best we can, and helping our team.



Introducing
RUMCHATA LIMÓN!

*Caribbean Rum,
Real Dairy Cream,
Rich Vanilla,
and Sunny Lemon!*

Available March 1st! Order now!



KIMBERLY SCOTT

Owner/operator, *The Wine Bottega*,
Boston, MA



We were early adopters before the mandatory order came through. I have friends who are virologists and people who are immunocompromised in my circle . . . and I felt a real responsibility to the two people who work with me to create a safe environment. So we decided to co-quarantine effectively: We shared our safety process, how we were bringing groceries into our home, mask procedures—we went over all that with each other because we were going to be in close proximity.

And then we launched this online [ordering] form that people have been incredibly supportive of, and we've been incredibly busy. Instead of creating an online store, we ask them for wine style, price, and quantity; we've always had a culture of care and education and personal attention, discussing things with customers and helping them pick things out, and we're trying to keep the level of service we used to have in the physical space [through the questionnaire] and with a follow-up call to go over the details. So in that way, things aren't that different. But there's a certain level of cognitive dissonance to being busy during a pandemic. I told [my employees], "If there's ever a moment where you just need to stop and go to a corner and cry, you're more important than this business operating at peak efficiency."

The other main thing we're doing is our Friday night tastings, which were a big tradition [in the shop. . . . Now] we go live on Instagram every Friday at 7:30 and do a little presentation. We each pick a wine and talk about it, and we get to be ourselves, which is pretty geeky—we'll teach you what *selection massale* means, but then we'll start talking about *Star Wars*.

To be frank with you, I don't think we're out of this until the end of winter. I don't mean to politicize [the crisis response], but it has not been handled well. So we're going to keep operating the way we are now until we know it's safe; it doesn't serve anyone if we don't use caution. Our guests have been 99.9% understanding—and we're also just incredibly honest: "We want to be safe; we want you to be safe." And they're like, "We're just glad we can still get good and cool wine!" [Laughs.]

COLY DEN HAAN

Owner, *Vinovore*, Los Angeles, CA

I work with a lot of winemakers in Italy, so I was getting an idea of how serious this was way before the shelter-in-place order. We were already implementing some of the practices, wearing masks and gloves, and [a colleague] pretty much built an e-commerce website in three days—just didn't sleep and got it done—which has made everything a lot easier.

We were also already on Caviar; it's a necessary evil. But we've recently started delivery [using] our own employees. We've given them the option to work or not work, but we're doing surge pay, increasing their hourly by 25%. They take [safety] a little more seriously than some of the [third-party] drivers. And we try to make orders as uplifting as possible, adding playing cards, chocolate, bath salts. We know how heavy this is for a lot of people. We've also ramped up [a selection of provisions]: more cheese and crackers, tinned fish, pantry staples, and we partner with restaurants for pasta kits. And I'm doing online tastings called Winesplaining; I partner with female somms who don't have jobs right now and we get a winemaker involved, which has been a lot of fun.

It's intense. I'm not the most computer-savvy person; there's so much learning on the back end [of the website], and so much of my time is spent taking photos of things that I've become a master iPhone photographer [laughs]. On the flip side, we've done all this work. I've been able to track things better—I see, oh, this person has ordered this [wine] four times, this person came [to my site] from this site. All this data is more accessible. In a way it's making us a better business. So it's been terrifying, but overall the coin has landed in my favor this time around. ■■



PHOTO COURTESY OF WHITE OAK COMMUNICATIONS

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Packaging for a **Better Planet**

AN INSIDE LOOK AT **SMURFIT KAPPA'S**
WASTE-REDUCTION INITIATIVE, ONE YEAR IN

by Santiago Escobar Escrucera,
Smurfit Kappa Marketing and
Communications Manager

Waste pollution is one of the biggest challenges facing the world today. Consumers worried about climate change are demanding new products with minimal environmental footprints. In response, companies are taking action—and as a leader in sustainable packaging, Smurfit Kappa is fully committed to helping them succeed. Through the Better Planet Packaging (BPP) initiative it launched last year, the company aims to reduce the waste that ends up in oceans and in landfills around the globe.

Smurfit Kappa is driving innovation throughout its extensive product portfolio, developing paper and packaging solutions that are fit for purpose, efficient, renewable, recyclable, and favored by customers. But we recognize that we can't do this on our own. BPP is intended to go beyond the company, which is using its industry expertise to engage partners and facilitate meaningful actions in service of more sustainable package design and use.

IMAGES COURTESY OF SMURFIT KAPPA



Paper-based packaging is now a USP.

Smurfit Kappa Better Planet Packaging

75% of shoppers now prefer paper-based packaging over plastic*. Talk to us about how we can help your brand.

Find out more at smurfitkappa.com



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Smurfit Kappa
Open the future

*Studies were performed for a well-known brand on 2,000 consumers across Europe.

Smurfit Kappa
Better Planet Packaging

NorGrip, keeping the planet and the consumer happy

The NorGrip is the daring solution to bundle bottles into one consumer pack. The fully recyclable packaging combines excellent product visibility with consumer convenience.

Replaces unsustainable stretch film

100% recyclable and plastic free, no glue is used



Smurfit Kappa | NorGrip

Ads touting Smurfit Kappa's various packaging solutions (above and on facing page).

Those actions include improving product design to enable more recycling, enhancing the functionality of paper and packaging designs, and inspiring employees and customers alike to play a role in addressing the global issue of waste pollution. Smurfit Kappa is working with them and many other stakeholders to deliver innovative solutions to markets across the globe. These include:

NorGrip

Part of a line of products designed to replace shrink film, NorGrip securely bundles products together into consumer units. It's suitable for a wide range of products that typically come in large bottles, including soft drinks, cooking oils, water, and detergents. NorGrip was put through a series of rigorous tests to ensure it was robust enough to carry loads throughout all aspects of the supply chain. What's more, its corrugated material is an excellent base for high-impact printing that allows brands to stand out in stores.

Bag-in-Box®

Bag-in-Box is designed to extend the shelf life of liquids, semi-liquid food, and industrial products. Its outer box is made from corrugated cardboard or solid board that provides exceptional

product protection; the inner bag, meanwhile, is constructed to preserve the liquids inside by ensuring they stay uncontaminated by air, which is prevented from entering the packaging during dispensing by a range of taps. High-quality printed packs use color and graphics to attract consumer attention in the retail environment, leading to increased sales.

AgroPaper™

AgroPaper enables efficient and eco-friendly mulching by replacing plastic in agricultural applications with a renewable alternative. It's made with long pine fibers from sustainably managed forests, a material that allows air to move easily, ensuring that the paper does not overheat crops the way polythene mulching does. It's also fully compostable, creating organic material that enriches the soil while guaranteeing lower handling costs.

Recycling Improvements

For Smurfit Kappa, the ideal packaging is made from renewable raw materials and requires limited water and energy to produce; it also prevents food waste, is lightweight enough to save transport costs, and is recyclable.

Our team keeps this in mind as they utilize their expertise in paper-based

packaging, their knowledge of the supply chain, and their insights into customers to continually improve the functionality of paper and the recyclability of their product designs.

Through these solutions and improvements in waste collection at its recycling facilities, the company is able to repurpose more than 90% of its used packaging in a closed-loop business model.

Inspiration and Collaboration

To fully succeed, the BPP initiative requires collaboration on ideas that encourage change. Smurfit Kappa is now actively looking to partner with companies across and beyond the packaging industry, recognizing that the solution to waste pollution must involve a wide range of perspectives and skills. Internally, the company has launched an initiative called BPP Starts with ME, which is designed to ensure not only that its team members understand the role that the company aims to play in addressing this global problem but that they are working toward removing plastics in their daily lives, both at work and at home.

We invite you to join Smurfit Kappa in its quest to drive packaging waste into extinction. ■■

Hustle and HOPE

OAKLAND'S CHEFS AND BEVERAGE PROS SURVEY THE CURRENT CULINARY CLIMATE

story and photos by Clara Rice

Oakland, California, is an innovative and resilient city. The locals behind its dynamic food-and-beverage scene—which seemed almost oversaturated with competition before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis—have put on a brave face while striving to stay afloat during the shelter-in-place mandate, employing a wide range of tactics with varying degrees of success. I spoke with three local business owners to learn more about their experiences since March 2020.

Cosecha's mezcal Paloma kits include housemade grapefruit cordial.



Dominica Rice (second from left) with Cosecha employees in their PPE.

COSECHA

Chef Dominica Rice owns Cosecha, a Mexican restaurant in the middle of Oakland's financial district; she made a few attempts at takeout before closing down for a few weeks to regroup. "We felt the unsafe working conditions, because we're part of an open food court that leads to more exposure than your average restaurant," she explains. After testing her staff for the coronavirus, Rice opened back up with funds from a grant authorizing Cosecha to provide meals for 90 nurses and 30 semi-homeless neighbors four days per week. This has also enabled her to maintain relationships with her usual suppliers, including the farmers market at the Berkeley Ecology Center. "We've been working with five different farms for about nine years," she says, "and have been able to continue purchasing through spring."

Cosecha has made additional headway with to-go cocktails such as red sangria and Margaritas as well as mezcal Paloma kits featuring housemade grapefruit cordial: "Those are our three bestsellers, and we want to see how far we can go with that," Rice says. In the meantime, she's continuing construction on a new project—a Latin fusion restaurant with a mezcal bar called Bombera—but "in the future, I don't know," she admits. "Maybe that bar can be open during the summer months? But [the pandemic] is anticipated to start again next winter, so I have to have that in mind."



Co Nam's Trung Nguyen shows off a vacuum-sealed cocktail.

CO NAM

Co Nam, a Vietnamese restaurant with locations in San Francisco as well as Oakland, is run by the forward-thinking Trung Nguyen and his wife, Vy Lieou. His most successful pivot has been an array of fundraising cocktail kits called Tender Loving Boxes, or TLB. “The purpose of the TLB is twofold,” he says. “First, it allows us to deliver quality products and value to our customers. Second, it harbors goodwill, meaning that instead of creating a GoFundMe page for staff donations, we created a fundraising product that we knew our guests and community would support, enjoy, and gain value as well as knowledge from.” The boxes come with housemade mixers, shrubs, and bitters in addition to liquor, including whiskey provided by Suntory at a reduced price to help raise Co Nam’s profit margins. The restaurant is also doing to-go cocktails, shaken by hand and poured into vacuum-sealed plastic bags, as well as posting online content such as bartending videos; in keeping with Nguyen’s usual commitment to a high-quality product, they’re shot on multiple cameras and painstakingly edited.



Proceeds from Co Nam’s Tender Loving Boxes go to staff in need of support.



Minimo owner Erin Coburn.

MINIMO

At minimo, a natural wine shop and bar near Jack London Square, retail sales have been going strong. “From the beginning, we built out a customer base of people who trust us to pick out wines for them and who like to explore new things,” says owner Erin Coburn. “So when shelter in place went into effect, we adapted overnight.”

In fact, thanks to a strong Instagram presence and word of mouth, minimo’s audience has been expanding. “It’s phenomenal, the support—especially for local businesses,” she says. “And I think that because of deliveries, people are really seeking us out.” Their weekly tastings have moved online; customers can purchase the featured wine flights in advance and follow along during a live discussion. Recent examples included bottlings from Baja, Mexico’s Bichi and the Republic of Georgia’s Gotsa, whose winemaker joined the Zoom presentation.

As for reopening to the public at some point, Coburn echoes Rice: “I have no idea. We’re trying to think what a physical or virtual tasting program will be like, knowing that probably for a long time people won’t be able to gather. We are just taking this one day at a time.” ■■



Minimo is a natural wine shop in Oakland.

A GREAT TUMULT

BEYOND THE CARIBBEAN, RUM
PRODUCERS ARE SHAKING THINGS UP

It's said that the archaic word *rumbullion*, from which *rum* was derived, originally meant "a great tumult." The description seems applicable to a survey of eight brands that, together, represent an uprooting of the rum industry from its traditional home in the Caribbean.

At a time when armchair travel is the only way to go, these sugarcane spirits span the map from Florida to Fiji, Colombia to Mexico and Puerto Rico: Sip them straight or incorporate them into tiki drinks to take your taste buds on a whirlwind tour.



France Meets Fiji:

PLANTATION RUM

Maison Ferrand may be most closely associated with its eponymous Cognac, but spirit connoisseurs know that owner and master blender Alexandre Gabriel is every bit as passionate about rum, which he has been producing under the Plantation label since 1999.

His latest release reflects as much: Joining the Signature Blends tier, Plantation Isle of Fiji is the fruit of a special collaboration between Maison Ferrand and the Rum Co. of Fiji Distillery. Made from sugarcane that expresses the terroir of its namesake—volcanic soils, pristine waters, and all—the blend is double-aged first in bourbon barrels and then in Cognac casks to yield a rich, round sipping rum whose lush character is foretold by the bottle itself, its colorful label abounding with the flora and fauna of the islands.

Plantation Rum Isle of Fiji (\$25)

Aromas of charcoal-smoked pineapple land you in the tropics. A nutty, earthy base note follows, replicating the sunny warmth of this 80-proof spirit. Silky on the palate with sandalwood, fig, and salted caramel, it layers Macintosh apple and oatmeal with pecan for an exotic and complex finish. **94** —*Meridith May*

Setting Whole (and Wholesome) New Standards:

DRAKE'S ORGANIC SPIRITS



Drake's Organic Spiced Rum Proffering scents of clove, ginger, and butterscotch, this rum is luxurious on the palate, with no edge or bitterness. Delightful notes of caramel apple and mango plus a hint of coconut make for a splashy spirit. **92**
—M.M.

Drake's Organic White Rum Made with USDA Organic cane sugar and aged in American white oak, this white rum is filtered through coconut fiber. Aromas of vanilla bean and white flowers lead to an easygoing, sleek, and warming texture. Marshmallow and white pepper extend through the finish. **92**
—M.M.

Long before non-GMO products went mainstream, Drake's Organic Spirits founder and CEO Mark Anderson was convinced they would represent "not a fad" but a "lifestyle" that would make major waves in the food and beverage industry. Now, the former commodities trader turned serial entrepreneur has equipped his line of products with not only the non-GMO designation but four additional certifications: USDA Organic, gluten-free, kosher, and vegan. It's the first and only spirits brand to do so, making it a pioneer in the burgeoning health-and-wellness movement that's dramatically transforming the alcoholic-beverage market.

Launched in 2017, Drake's Organic Spirits grew into a multimillion-dollar business in less than a year, thanks to connections Anderson had made while building his previous venture, Captain Drake, into a global powerhouse that provided non-GMO sugar and citric acid to food and beverage producers. Launched alongside Drake's Organic XII Vodka, Drake's Organic White Rum and Drake's Organic Spiced Rum are both made with organic sugarcane; compelled to do the category justice after years of doing business in South America, Anderson appointed Rum University President Luis Ayala as master distiller, capitalizing on Ayala's 25 years of experience in rum production and marketing.

With a nose reminiscent of the freshly squeezed cane juice that forms its base, the 80-proof Organic White Rum won a gold medal at the Spirits Tasting Competition during the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America's 2019 Convention & Exposition. Its smooth and persistent finish is best showcased in a Hemingway-style Daiquiri, Cuba Libre, or Mojito.

The Organic Spiced Rum, meanwhile, draws its nose and palate from a spice rack that distinguishes it from its competitors. "Made with 12 organic spices, our spiced rum has a clean, smooth vanilla taste that is not syrupy or sweet and [is] not meant to be covered by Coke or orange juice like other brands," says Chief Marketing Officer Patrick Klingler. "It's a completely different profile than what most people think of when they think of spiced rum."

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted Drake's Organic Spirits to expand its portfolio further: Now manufacturing hand sanitizer, the company is matching purchases with donations to frontline workers and making bulk-purchase discounts available to eligible organizations. For more information, visit drakesorganicspirits.com.

Looking Toward the Light:

DON Q

by Ruth Tobias

Nearly 90 years ago, Puerto Rico's storied Destilería Serrallés launched a rum brand named for one of world literature's most famous dreamers. But for more than half that time—47 years, to be exact—Don Q has benefited from a far more clear-eyed perspective: that of Silvia Santiago, Senior Vice President of Manufacturing.

Santiago was in college with plans to enter the field of medical technology when, as she recalls, "some people from the distillery visited [the college], looking for someone who could work with yeast." As a student of microbiology, she thought, "OK, this is a great opportunity." The fact that she didn't know much about distillation didn't faze her; in fact, she says, "That helped me, because I was so curious. I spent so many long hours just looking through microscopes and learning about yeast, and I remember that I used to escape from the lab and go ask questions. [The distillery workers] didn't see me as a threat—they took their time explaining to me the process: 'Here's what's happening in this column, here's what's happening in that column.'"



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DESTILERÍA SERRALLÉS

Silvia Santiago is Senior Vice President of Manufacturing at Don Q producer Destilería Serrallés.

**Destilería Serrallés'
facility in Puerto Rico.**



Left, Don Q's lineup of flavored rums; right, its upcoming release, the Reserva 7.

Today, she's part of a team that includes sixth-generation rum producer Roberto Serrallés and master blender Jaiker Soto; together they oversee a portfolio that ranges from standard-bearers like Don Q Cristal and Gold to a quartet of flavored expressions—Piña, Limón, Coco, Pasión—and a special-edition tier. The latter is designed to showcase what Santiago describes as not only the company's "mastery in aging and blending" but also its ability to "keep tradition yet give the market something new"—be it double-aged rums like the Vermouth Cask Finish and Sherry Cask Finish or the Signature Release Single Barrel 2009. The latest addition to the lineup is also "something different," in her words: Don Q Reserva 7.

"We went to our warehouses, took samples, and sat down in the lab to do our most difficult work, which is tasting," recalls Santiago with a laugh, explaining that in order for a rum to carry an age statement, "the youngest distillate that we use must be that age. So [the blending components for] Reserva 7 must be seven years old [minimum]. It was quite a challenge—but we made it." And they're proud of the result. "The beautiful

golden color just gives you a hint of what you're going to find," she says. "When you smell it, you might think you are going to find something sweet, but it's more toward the dry side, with the smoky note that we call our DNA [and] nutty, slightly fruity notes."

The company had been all set to launch the new product when the coronavirus pandemic disrupted, well, everything. According to Santiago, Puerto Rico's shelter-in-place orders mean that there are "some constrictions on how many people we can have in our plant," but she predicts that "by July, Reserva 7 will be in the [U.S.] market." In the meantime, the distillery has been churning out disinfectant-grade alcohol for sanitation use by frontline organizations. "Once we knew the [local] hospitals were lacking in alcohol," she explains, "we said, 'Hey, we can help with the situation.' That same week we started making donations, and we are still helping 265 institutions, including policemen, firemen, hospitals. The necessity was all over the island."

The crisis also temporarily halted Don Q's plans to roll out new packaging, but soon enough stateside consumers will see the redesign on retail shelves. "Customers nowadays want to

learn from what they're drinking," she points out. "They want to learn history; they want to learn about the spirit." Hence label illustrations that depict the Serrallés hacienda as well as musicians playing traditional Puerto Rican instruments. "But we also want to give something new," she adds, so the figure of Don Quixote that appears on the bottle has morphed a bit: "You will see a Quixote that is more in motion. [He's] moving in the other direction, looking toward the light. It's a small change, but it's important, because it's more modern, more energetic."

Looking toward the light is something Santiago herself is inclined to do. "Being here for so long has given me the opportunity to see so many changes, most of them good," she says. "We Puerto Ricans are happy people; we celebrate everything. Lately we have seen very difficult times—the hurricanes, the earthquakes, now this. But we are part of these islands, and it's such a pride to be here with our people and to help them." To that sentiment, we raise our glass.

Honey Breeze



- ▶ 2 oz. Don Q Reserva 7 Rum
- ▶ 2 oz. coconut water
- ▶ ¼ oz. honey water
- ▶ 1-inch slice cucumber with peel, plus 1 slice for garnish

Muddle cucumber in a shaker. Add remaining ingredients and ice, then shake vigorously. Strain into a cocktail glass and garnish with a thin slice of cucumber.



Meet the Mesmerizing Rums of Mexico:

DEADHEAD, BONAMPAK, AND COZUMEL

In Chiapas—Mexico’s southernmost state—the climate is tropical and the soil is fertile. Bananas, mangoes, cacao, and coffee grow in abundance here; perhaps more surprisingly, sugarcane also flourishes. In fact, Mexico is a top producer of the crop—and though it’s best known for its agave spirits, the country is also home to rum distilleries like the family-owned Ronés de México, which has been making rum on the second-oldest sugarcane plantation in Chiapas for three generations, since 1948, receiving a multitude of awards for its efforts over the decades.

Recently, Ronés de México teamed up with California-based company Iconic Brands Incorporated to distribute three of the separately owned rum brands it produces: Deadhead, Bonampak, and Cozumel. The joint enterprise has successfully made them available in 25 countries.

Bonampak Rums are a blend of pot-distilled cane juice and column-distilled molasses. The brand’s sizable portfolio includes a Blanco, a three-year-old Añejo, a five-year-old Dark Rum, and a 13-year-old Gran Reserva, as well as three infused rums: organic coffee, organic cacao beans, and a

botanical blend of basil and ginger. Bonampak also offers a sugarcane-based aguardiente and is soon to release a pox (pronounced “posh,” the spirit originated with the Mayans as a ceremonial distillate of sugarcane and corn).

The Cozumel Mayan Rums lineup consists of four expressions: Mayan White, Mayan Aged, Mayan Extra Aged 12 Year, and Mayan Spiced Rum. These artisanal spirits are fittingly packaged in eye-catching limited-edition bottles made by a master glassblower. Varying slightly in shape and color, no two bottles are the same.

And speaking of packaging, the image of Deadhead’s bottles is likely indelible to all who’ve seen them. They pay tribute to the Shuar, an indigenous people of Ecuador and Peru who were known to collect the shrunken heads (*tsantsas*) of their vanquished foes, believing that the soul (*muisak*) remained within. While Deadhead’s vessels don’t contain souls, they do contain exceptional spirits: The Cask Aged Rum is aged for six years in toasted American and Chiapas oak barrels, and the recipe for the slow-roasted, cacao-infused Dark Chocolate Rum was inspired by ancient formulas used by Mayan emperors.

Rones de México takes full advantage of Chiapas’ agricultural bounty in sourcing its ingredients. Distilling, blending, and aging them is an art that Rones de México master blender Jorge Pérez Rafael—who holds a Ph.D. in Food & Spirits Science and Technology (with a research specialty in fermented and distilled spirits and natural extracts)—has perfected. For him, rum “is more than

an industry: It represents history and culture and great moments with family [and] friends.”

Iconic Brands CEO Kim Brandi brings up culture too. She says that her company, Rones de México, and the three rum brands they represent all “embrace a shared value of culture where they not only strive to enhance their economic success but also to advance the economic and social conditions of the communities in which they operate.” She adds that the partners are committed



PHOTO COURTESY OF COZUMEL RUM COMPANY

A Cozumel Rum bottle, made of handblown glass, goes into the fire.

to preserving and respecting the earth and the environment. For example, to minimize its carbon footprint, Deadhead has eschewed the use of plastic in favor of glass, and Rones de México “participates in fair trade . . . and is green industry certified,” according to Brandi. What’s more, the brands donate to local schools, health clinics, and the arts.

While rum will not likely supplant tequila and mezcal in Mexico, the country may well soon be an international player in the category—and it will have its most-awarded producer, Rones de México, and Iconic Brands to thank for that.

Cozumel Rum Company Mayan Spiced Rum, Chiapas, Mexico (\$86)

In shiny metallic mosaic, the bottle is one of the most magnificent collector’s items we have seen. The 80-proof liquid is also outstanding, with scents of ginger and succulent spiced apricot; on the palate, it’s exceptionally balanced, with notes of clove, orange peel, and cinnamon. Banana, peach, and vanilla musk pick up the pace through the finish. **95** —*M.M.*

Bonampak Botanical Rum Infused with Basil & Ginger, Chiapas, Mexico (\$45)

The namesake ingredients are not overpowering but rather gentle and refined on the nose. The zingy ginger warms the palate, softened by the basil, in this 70-proof rum with a billowy mouthfeel. **92** —*M.M.*

Bonampak 13-Year-Old Gran Reserva Rum, Chiapas, Mexico (\$79)

With its whiskey-style nose of stone fruit, grain, and maple syrup, this is an elegant 80-proof spirit. Brown sugar melts on the tongue, followed by sassafras and cigar leaf. Oatmeal and pecan drive more textural complexity. Leather and oak are magnificent on the finish, which shows pure depth of character. **96** —*M.M.*

Bonampak 3-Year-Old Coffee Rum, Chiapas, Mexico (\$45)

Aromas of roasted organic Chiapas coffee beans slathered in dark chocolate are wonderfully authentic. The deluxe mouthfeel further expresses the coffee flavor, which has sweet mocha, black pepper, and tobacco as running mates. A delight on the rocks. **94** —*M.M.*



Havana Heritage:

BIG 5 RUM

Finding a favorite spirits brand can feel like joining an exclusive club, and members of the Big 5 Rum fellowship get a five-for-one special: The label's name harkens back to 1950s-era Cuba and the golden age of Havana's social clubs, when the "Big Five"—the Vedado Tennis Club, the Miramar Yacht Club, the Biltmore Yacht & Country Club, the Havana Yacht Club, and the Casino Español—reigned supreme.

The reference is personal to Rene Armas, whose parents met at the Miramar; he and fellow first-generation Cuban American Carlos Carreras, a longtime friend, sought to honor their heritage from their home in Florida by founding Big 5 Rum. Their award-winning portfolio is made in New Port Richey with blackstrap sugarcane molasses sourced from South Florida growers. Four-times column distilled, this molasses base imparts a clean, subtly sweet caramel flavor that's robust yet refined on the palate.

Clocking in at 80 proof are Big 5 Silver Rum and Big 5 Gold Rum, which are versatile enough to appear in a variety of cocktails beyond, of course, the traditional Daiquiri. The brand's trademark caramel character is heightened in the Gold due to the addition of all-natural caramel flavor that's complemented by hints of toffee.

The 70-proof Coconut expression is also made with all-natural flavoring; best served over ice, it's pleasantly dry yet offers a touch of sweetness. Aromas and flavors of toasted coconut, powdered sugar, and honeydew melon on a crisp, light body give way to a graceful, lime-tinged finish, which shows notes of fresh coconut and coconut water. Also 70 proof, Big 5 Spiced Rum possesses a palate indicative of its five all-natural ingredients: allspice, clove, nutmeg, vanilla, and orange flavoring. Use it in a variety of rum-based cocktails like the Cuba Libre or to spice up drinks like crema de vie, a traditional Cuban beverage that's similar to eggnog.

Big 5 Silver Rum (\$23) This white rum makes a grand entrance with flair, exuding black pepper and a streamlined wash of cigar leaf and vanilla musk. While the vanilla notes sweeten and soften the edginess, the finish is clean and focused. **90** —*M.M.*

Big 5 Gold Rum (\$23) Following a subtle perfume of peach, caramel, and brown-sugared oatmeal, flavors of walnut, sassafras, and stone fruit dig deep. White pepper dots the tongue on the finish alongside compelling notes of orange peel and pineapple. **91** —*M.M.*

Big 5 Coconut Rum (\$23) Amid notes of tropical fruit on the nose, authentic coconut aromas emerge with grace. It's round and creamy on the palate, with a peppered bite of tangerine joining vanilla and a long, dreamy, fresh-tasting finish of coconut. **92** —*M.M.*

Big 5 Spiced Rum (\$23) A luxurious perfume of clove, cedar, and apricot nectar emerges from the glass. The ambrosia continues on the mouthfeel with a weightiness that's redolent of mandarin orange, cinnamon candy, and apricot. The mocha-and-cherrywood plushness on the finish is memorable. **93** —*M.M.*

Big 5 Cafecito Cuban Coffee Flavored Rum (\$23) This aromatic spirit is a hedonistic experience for lovers of dark chocolate with coffee. Sumptuous, generous flavors of candied coffee bean with a hint of tobacco embrace the senses. Whether it's on top of ice cream, in a cocktail, or on the rocks, pour me another! **93** —*M.M.* ■■

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A Virtuoso Performance

CHOPIN IMPORTS AND
THE ART OF BRAND
REPRESENTATION

by Dan Staskel

PHOTO: CAL BINGHAM



Chopin Imports' Tad Dorda is the founder of Chopin Vodka and Dorda Liqueurs.

Working for a spirits producer-supplier, you'll find it's much easier to establish a connection with buyers when your company is named for an internationally recognized brand. It's an advantage enjoyed by the likes of Bacardi Limited, Disaronno International, and Rémy Cointreau, to name a few. But such companies can also experience the downside of name recognition: They often become associated solely with their eponymous brand, not least by their own



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHOPIN IMPORTS

Chopin Imports' portfolio includes Benromach Scotch.

distributors. As a result, even the most knowledgeable members of the trade may be unaware that their portfolio extends beyond that singular product.

The companies that are most successful in solving that problem build their portfolios with synergy in mind, incorporating smaller labels that specifically complement their marquee brands in order to increase their value for wholesalers as well as retailers. A perfect case in point: Chopin Imports.



Third-generation tequila producer Felipe Camarena makes Terralta Tequila, which is imported to the U.S. by Chopin.

When Chopin Imports founder/CEO Tad Dorda set out to make the world's first ultra-premium vodka 25 years ago, he never dreamed it would become an internationally recognized brand—but it did. Produced at a Polish distillery that's over a century old and made with grains or potatoes sourced from small family farms, Chopin Vodka has served as the centerpiece of Dorda's portfolio for years.

When Chuck Kane' assumed the role of Chopin Imports COO in 2018, he immediately embraced Dorda's commitment to producing handmade spirits with locally sourced ingredients. They agreed that it was essential for the entire portfolio to abide by the same standards, so Kane' set out to find compatible producers; as he explains, "When we bring brands to Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits [Chopin's national distributor partner], we want

to check all the boxes and make sure they are like-minded in categories that offer solid margins and are scalable for long-term growth."

He didn't need to venture far: That same year, Chopin finalized a partnership with U.K. company Gordon & MacPhail, thereby gaining access to unique brands in some of the most popular categories. These include Gordon & MacPhail's Discovery and Connoisseur's Choice whiskies; special releases from the company's Private Collection and Generations Series; and spirits from the renowned Benromach's Distillery, which G&M acquired in 1993. (Among Benromach's marques is Red Door Gin, which launched in the U.S. in early 2020.)

"The Urquhart family has entrusted Chopin with representing not only a great lineup of products but also four generations of their family history," says

Kane'. "Moreover, Chopin has a great opportunity to build the Benromach brand across the United States."

An ongoing search for brands to bring under the Chopin umbrella also took Kane' into the heart of Mexico. After conducting extensive research into the best agave growers and producers, he finalized partnerships with Maguery Spirits, Koch El Mezcal, and Terralta Tequila last year. Much like the Polish farmers who experiment with different types of starches to develop various expressions of their terroir, these producers make use of agave plantings that span from the low deserts to the lush mountains to craft artisanal expressions informed by a sense of place and distinct production methods.

Chopin Imports has other exciting partnerships in the works with producers of South American rum, Irish whiskey, and Spanish vermouth; the company also plans to launch a liqueur line that includes an amaro, bitters, and elderflower and lemon expressions. The entry into premium rum and single malt is designed to take advantage of



A partnership with Maguery Spirits has brought Burrito Fiestero Mezcal (right) under the Chopin umbrella, where Koch El Mezcal (left) also resides.

these categories' expansive growth; as for the vermouth and liqueurs, Kane' explains, Chopin "wants to sell the whole cocktail, not just the base spirit."

So when you hear the name Chopin from now on, you'll know that its portfolio extends beyond its flagship vodka to artisan brands worth toasting to. *Na zdrowie!* ■■

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Mission

IMPOSSIBLE?

story by Lars Leicht / photos by Alexander Rubin

BLIND TASTING BAROLOS AND BRUNELLOS PROVES A WORTHY CHALLENGE

There's a memorable scene in the documentary *SOMM* in which future Master Sommeliers Ian Cauble and Brian McClintic compare notes on a wine from their first blind-tasting exam. "I was torn, dude," Cauble tells McClintic. "I first called it Barolo and I changed it to Brunello '95." McClintic had stuck with Barolo. Of course, we'll never know which it was—but the fact that two of the world's best tasters couldn't agree on the matter is telling.

Italian winemakers themselves, of course, shudder at the thought that these two iconic wines could be confused. As Giampiero Pazzaglia, Managing Director of ColleMassari and former coordinator of the Brunello di Montalcino Consorzio, told me, "It would be difficult, even incorrect, for an insider to not recognize one from the other. They are two wines of unmistakable charm."

So while mere mortals might be daunted by the challenge of achieving what Cauble and McClintic couldn't, the team at *The Tasting Panel's* sister publication, *The SOMM Journal*, wondered: Could it hurt to try?



The presenters of “Untangling Barolo and Brunello,” pictured from left to right: Hubert Fabre of Vineyard Brands, Adam Verona of Michele Chiarlo, Lars Leicht of *The Tasting Panel* and *The SOMM Journal*, John Irwin of Lux Wines, Federica Boffa of Pio Cesare, Sara Maule of Frederick Wildman and Sons, and Sharron McCarthy of Banfi.



At three separate events—SommCon San Diego in November 2019; the Culinary Institute of America’s Beverage Professionals Summit in Napa in March 2020; and the Florida Wine Academy’s Vino Summit in Miami, also in March—we challenged participating somms to a blind tasting of Barolos and Brunellos. Results varied from conference to conference, but there was only one instance in which 100% of attendees agreed on the wine before them. Consensus was the exception!

It’s not that the wines’ similarities aren’t noteworthy. Both are mono-varietal, made from grapes that are



Blind tasting at the Culinary Institute of America’s BevPro Summit in Napa, CA.



A tasting sheet from *The SOMM Journal's* blind-tasting series "Untangling Barolo and Brunello."

comparatively thin-skinned, color-shy, and tannic: Nebbiolo in Barolo's case, Sangiovese in Brunello's. Both endure lengthy barrel aging—a minimum of 18 months for Barolo and 24 for Brunello—and pre-release aging (three years for Barolo, five for Brunello). But the differences are far more striking. Barolo comes from the cool sub-Alpine region of Piedmont in northern Italy (Nebbiolo means "fog"), while Brunello hails from the mild, Tyrrhenian-influenced Montalcino zone in southern Tuscany. On the former's steep hills (or *brics*, to use the local term), soils are typically sandstone or calcareous, with clay deposits and alkalinity; the soils of Montalcino's softer, more rolling hills (or *poggios*) range widely, from limestone, schist, and clay to volcanic and galestro shale.

In general, Brunellos are rounder and fuller, Barolos tighter and more linear. But put individual vineyards and producers' styles into play, and all bets are off. "There are production techniques [that] tend to standardize—or internationalize—flavors, covering varietal characteristics to the point where you can't tell anymore if it is a Barolo or a Brunello," Podere Ruggeri Corsini's Nicola Argamante—who is also President of the I Vini del Piemonte consortium—told me, giving the use of new oak and certain vinification methods as examples. He also cited the presence of Brett and even an overreliance on natural winemaking as potential factors in masking varietal character and terroir, adding, "It's no wonder there's confusion!"

Let's consider some of the producers featured in our comparative tastings.



Sara Maule is an Italian Fine Wine Specialist at importer Frederick Wildman and Sons.

FATTORIA DEI BARBI

Regardless of where it fell in the lineup of our tastings, Barbi Brunello di Montalcino could have been elected "most likely to be mistaken for Barolo." But that didn't seem to bother Sara Maule, Italian Fine Wine Specialist for Barbi's importer, Frederick Wildman and Sons.

"First of all, we tasted a 2013, which was generally lighter in color and could easily be mistaken for a Nebbiolo," she noted. "Brunello Fattoria dei Barbi is only aged in older oak casks, [and] it's very elegant and earthy, clean, and minerally—all characteristics that Brunello has in common with Barolo." That character, she said, comes in great part from the position of Barbi's 64-acre estate, located in a wooded area just southeast of the town of Montalcino. Soils are predominantly gravelly, with small amounts of clay and alluvial sands. The vineyards sit between 820 and 1,000 feet above sea level—relatively high ground for Brunello. As a result, Barbi Brunello always shows great minerality and acidity.



As in Burgundy, the grapes are chilled with dry ice until they reach about 40 degrees Fahrenheit. After a 48-hour cold maceration, the wine is fermented in pressurized Ganimede tanks for about two to three weeks; then it's aged for a few months in small and medium Slavonian oak barrels before being transferred to larger casks for two years. Finally, it undergoes lengthy bottle aging prior to release.

The 2013 vintage shows vivid ruby color along with aromas of berries and maraschino cherries plus hints of licorice. The palate is full but refined, with notes of clove and tobacco leaf.

Barbi is one of Montalcino's most historic producers. The Cinelli Colombini family proprietors, who have been landholders here since the Middle Ages, founded the estate in 1817; its cellar still holds bottles of Brunello from 1892, and the label designed by Giovanni Cinelli Colombini in 1958 for its iconic flagship wine, Blue Label, is still in use. Fattoria dei Barbi is today run by Stefano Cinelli Colombini, who represents roughly the 20th generation of the dynasty.



John Irwin is National Program Manager at Lux Wines.

RATTI

Ratti's single-vineyard Marcesasco Barolo was correctly identified by a majority of our tasters, but a quarter to a third of each group thought it was Brunello.

"I can certainly understand why," said John Irwin of Lux Wines, Ratti's importer. "The wines of Ratti, and of La Morra as a whole, are well balanced even in youth, so the high tannin may not be as obvious. Elegance is the hallmark of Marcesasco."

A firm believer in site expression, Renato Ratti was the first person to map the vineyards of Barolo; with Marcesasco, he was also among the first to designate a single-vineyard wine in 1965. And as president of the Barolo consortium in the early 1980s, he spearheaded the modification of regulations that resulted in Barolo's coveted DOCG status. His son Pietro has kept the dream alive since 1988, following Ratti's untimely death.

Today, Marcesasco is a blend of three crus in La Morra's prized Annunziata subzone, where the cultivation of Nebbiolo dates back to the 12th century. The soils are predominantly Tortonian blue marl, which is mainly calcareous mixed with sand. This yields soft, fruit-forward, and uniquely aromatic wines.

The 2016 vintage that we tasted underwent temperature-controlled fermentation for 15 days, reflecting Ratti's practice of shortening the traditional periods for maceration, fermentation, and oak aging. After malolactic fermentation in stainless-steel tanks, it was aged for two years in a mix of Slavonian oak casks and smaller French oak barrels. The result is balanced, polished, and full-bodied yet graceful. It shows refined aromas of red fruit with hints of licorice and finishes with dark cherry, plum, and savory herbs.



ARGIANO

Argiano Brunello di Montalcino tended to stump tasters. Though about 80% of the audience at the CIA BevPro Summit identified it correctly, they may have been influenced by the lineup, as only in that session did it follow a very classic Barolo; our SommCon and VinoSummit audiences, by contrast, were split nearly 50/50.

"It was interesting, but not surprising, to see so many confuse Argiano Brunello for Barolo," said Irwin. "I think a lot of sommeliers will look for those flower aromas and tannin and think, 'Nebbiolo,' but Brunello from higher elevations with calcareous or marl soils, like Argiano's—or the Brunellos from northern Montalcino—can be just as floral and nearly as tannic."

The Argiano estate is in the southwestern part of the Brunello zone, which is usually associated with full-bodied, richly colored wines, said Irwin. But the vineyards sit on a high ridge that, beneath a surface layer of clay, is essentially a bed of limestone marl, with good permeability. This imparts a strong sense of elegance in the wines. They're also lightened by a note of salinity attributable to easterly breezes from the Tyrrhenian Sea, which have unimpeded access to this westerly, lower-altitude subzone. The vineyards sit in the shadow of Monte Amiata, a tall, extinct volcano that shields the vineyards from rainfall and blocks torrid winds from the south, making for a moderate microclimate.

Even so, typicity is not lacking in the Argiano Brunello, which shows characteristically deep flavors of plum and good structure. Opening with a complex floral, herbal, and earthy bouquet, it also offers juicy notes of cherry and blackberry with subtle hints of leather, anise, and cigar box. The fruit undergoes a cold soak followed by spontaneous fermentation and a two-week maceration; after it's fermented in stainless-steel and cement tanks, it's aged in large French and Slavonian oak casks.

Dating back to the Renaissance, Argiano is one of the oldest estates in Montalcino and is a founding member of the consorzio. Today, it avoids the use of synthetic chemicals in its certified-organic vineyards.



Adam Verona is the North American Ambassador for Michele Chiarlo.

MICHELE CHIARLO

Michele Chiarlo's Cerequio has the honor of being the only wine to achieve unanimous consensus in any of our blind tastings. This happened at the BevPro Summit, but roughly 70% of the participants in San Diego and Miami recognized it as a Barolo as well.

That certainly made sense to Adam Verona, North American Ambassador for Michele Chiarlo. "The soils in Cerequio are some of the most ancient in Langhe," he said, "and it is considered one of the most prestigious crus of Barolo."

Michele Chiarlo started making wine from top parcels of land in 1956 (the company is run today by his sons Alberto and Stefano). According to Verona, it was always Chiarlo's objective to bring out the unique character of each vineyard plot—all hand chosen for him by his father, Pietro, who "taught him that the best vineyard sites are those where the snow melts first," Verona explained. "The southern exposure is what is best for making this unique wine." Cerequio is so warm, he said, that some call it the "Riviera of the Langhe."

The cru's namesake wine comes from a 2.5-hectare plot located over 1,000 feet above sea level, with 35- to 50-year-old vines planted in soils formed during the Tortonian period approximately 9 million years ago. Composed of calcareous clay marl, they have a high mineral content; magnesium and manganese in particular give the wines austerity but also great balance, structure, and elegance. The Cerequio vineyard is known for producing wines with a distinctly floral and delicately fruity profile, boasting harmonious tannins even at four to five years old.

The 2013 vintage was fermented on the skins in 55-hectoliter oak vats for 20 days, then aged for two years in medium-sized oak casks. The nose has notes of mature fruit, herbs, and spices; on the palate, it's structured and balanced, with a tight weave of fine tannins.



Sharron McCarthy is Banfi's Vice President of Wine Education.

CASTELLO BANFI

Castello Banfi developed its Poggio alle Mura as the ultimate expression of Brunello from the warm southwestern boundaries of the appellation, so it was a little disconcerting when more than half of the SommCon audience guessed it might be a Barolo. (Let's chalk it up to afternoon doldrums.) Fortunately, the crowds at the BevPro Summit and VinoSummit were more tuned in, with about 80% identifying it correctly.

Sharron McCarthy, Banfi's Vice President of Wine Education, detailed the nearly two decades of analysis that went into the Poggio alle Mura vineyards. "We started with clonal research," she explained, "and found over 650 variations on Sangiovese in Montalcino alone. We narrowed [them] down to 180, which we planted in an experimental vineyard, microvinified, and judged over years to identify [the] 15 best suited for Brunello. Then we selected three for our own microclimate."

Next came soil studies to identify the estate site best suited to Sangiovese, settling on the area around Castello Banfi itself—an ancient fortress restored as a hospitality center. New polyclonal Brunello vineyards were planted there in a cru that was given the castle's original name: Poggio alle Mura, meaning "walled hilltop."

The 2015 vintage was fermented for 12–15 days in hybrid wood-and-stainless-steel tanks developed by Banfi. It aged for a minimum of two years in 60% French oak barrels and 40% large French oak casks, then spent at least a year in bottle before release.

Deep ruby in color, the wine shows aromas of violets, red fruit, and a hint of spice, as well as concentrated flavors of plum, black cherry, blackberry jam, cigar box, and pipe tobacco.



Federica Boffa is the fifth-generation family proprietor of Pio Cesare.

PIO CESARE

About 60–70% of all participants correctly identified Pio Cesare as a Barolo. Though Pio Cesare makes two single-vineyard Barolos, Ornato and Mosconi, we tasted its flagship wine, a blend of eight vineyards across five subzones.

“This wine has always been traditionally produced by our family with grapes coming from different parts of Barolo,” said fifth-generation family proprietor Federica Boffa. “This was the practice of historic Barolo families—to produce a wine [that] embraces and combines each of the unique characteristics of the different vineyards and terroirs of this area.”

Boffa’s father, Estate Director Pio Boffa, is adamant that the wine is special despite the lack of a vineyard or subzone designation. He’s even put that sentiment on the label in both Italian and English: “Please, don’t call it ‘regular.’”

The 2015 vintage was vinified in stainless steel, undergoing 25–30 days of maceration. It aged for about 30 months, predominantly in large casks of French oak, but it also spent time in barriques. It’s a classic Barolo, with great structure and elegance. Soft tannins and balanced fruit make it very approachable—a quality that may have convinced some tasters it was Brunello—but it has considerable aging potential.

Pio Cesare was founded in 1881 by Cesare Pio, who handed it down to his son Giuseppe. Giuseppe’s only child, Rosy, married Giuseppe Boffa, who then ran the winery and passed it on to his own son, Pio. The estate is in the historic city center of Alba, with a network of cellars that reveal the foundations of Alba’s birth as an ancient Roman settlement.



Hubert Fabre is the Executive Vice President of Vineyard Brands.

CAPARZO

Judging by our vote tally, it would be fair to say that Caparzo is convincingly Brunello. Like the Pio Cesare Barolo, Caparzo Brunello di Montalcino is sourced from four vineyards across the appellation. In fact, Caparzo boasts of being one of the few producers in Montalcino to own vineyards throughout the zone.

“The different vineyard locations allow Caparzo to draw the most from the varying microclimates and terroirs present in Montalcino,” said Hubert Fabre, Executive Vice President of Vineyard Brands, Caparzo’s U.S. importer. “The grapes harvested from each area lay the foundation for a complex wine that brings together all of the characteristics that make Brunello one of the world’s most sought-after wines.”

Varying in height from 220 to 300 meters above sea level, the vineyards also differ in terms of exposures and soils. Northernmost Caparzo has sandy-clay soils, as does San Piero–Casello to the east; La Caduta in the southwest contains loosely packed, stony, arenaceous schist, and southern Il Cassero has a mix of sand, stone, schist, and clay.

During primary fermentation, said Fabre, special attention is paid to the seeds, which are removed if not fully ripe in order to avoid green tannins in the wine. The 2014 vintage fermented for seven days, spending an additional ten to 15 days in contact with the skins. Its aroma is complex with wild berry fruit; the palate is warm and full, making it a great example of the power and firmness of Brunello. ■■



Change of Tack

NEW JERSEY-BASED **GARY'S WINE & MARKETPLACE** WEATHERS THE STORM OF COVID-19 AT ITS NEW NAPA VALLEY LOCATION

by Kyle Billings

Chris Poulos is Beverage Purchasing and Sales Manager for Gary's Wine & Marketplace in St. Helena, CA.



In October 2019, the highly respected and successful East Coast retailer Gary's Wine & Marketplace opened its first outlet on the West Coast in St. Helena, California, adding to its four locations in New Jersey. With an extensive background in the wine trade, Chris Poulos was hired in February as the new store's Beverage Purchasing and Sales Manager; on March 13, Poulos described his vision for the business.

"There's a couple of factors in play," he said. "[One is] the sheer size of the store. We're [built] to carry well over a thousand SKUs. [Another is] the fact that wine lovers from all over the world are passing by every day—every hour, frankly—and wanting to see what we're up to. And [then there's] the fact that there was also a very successful wine business there before, Dean & DeLuca. In their heyday they were doing tremendous business in that location." No wonder that Poulos was "really excited about the opportunity to grow this business," as he told me, adding, "I think the sky's the limit."

What a difference a few months make. Daily routines have since changed dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and foot traffic in the market, as in the surrounding wineries, has halted. As a result, Gary Fisch, eponymous owner of the company, has had to confront some sobering realities regarding the Napa venture. "A month ago we were hiring people; as of yesterday we furloughed everybody but seven people," he said on March 31. Poulos, along with other senior management who remain on staff, took a voluntary pay cut.

Meanwhile, the company's business model has changed by necessity in the short term, revolving around curbside pickup and delivery for not only liquor but prepared foods and groceries such as organic chicken, grass-fed beef, and local produce. Gary's is also partnering with local wineries to support each other in a variety of ways, from donations to cross-promotions for online delivery, member clubs, and virtual tastings. Fisch compares the pivot to a losing boxer finally putting his hands up to protect himself, but he remains cautiously hopeful about the return of business to Napa Valley.

"I've always said I'm probably one of the most optimistic people in the world," he said—so despite having "gotten one blow too many in the head with this one . . . I believe that there will be a new normal. I believe Napa Valley in particular is resilient and people will want to come."

It's a hope shared by many in the community, as evidenced by the flood of local well-wishers offering assistance. "Everybody wants to help one another," Fisch said. "It's refreshing in a challenging world." With time and luck, the sky may yet be the limit for him and Poulos. ■■



Winemaker Chiara Soldati poured La Scolca Gavi dei Gavi from gold bottles commemorating the estate's 100th anniversary during the 19th annual South Beach Wine & Food Festival.

Drinking Well, Doing Good

IN FEBRUARY, THE 19TH ANNUAL **SOUTH BEACH WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL** RAISED FUNDS FOR FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT story and photos by Irene Moore

On February 20, 2020, the invitation-only Director's VIP Welcome Happy Hour kicked off the 19th Food Network & Cooking Channel South Beach Wine & Food Festival (SBWFF), presented by Capital One. Over the next few days, more than 60,000 attendees would participate in everything from dinners hosted by such culinary celebs as Giada De Laurentiis and Andrew Zimmern to walkaround tastings, cooking demos and workshops, and wine seminars.

Greeting his guests, SBWFF founder and Director Lee Brian Schragger spoke about the success of the festival, with tickets nearly sold out and a total of 114 events planned. He announced that SBWFF "has raised over \$31 million to date, with 100% of the net proceeds benefiting the Florida International University Chaplain School of Hospitality and Tourism Management."

The happy hour was set in the garden overlooking the infinity pool at the iconic Shore Club, located in South Beach's famed Art Deco District. It was a quintessential February afternoon in Miami, with a mild ocean breeze wafting through swaying palm trees and sunlight filtering through tropical foliage. Adding to the afternoon's celebratory spirit, Piedmontese winemaker Chiara Soldati of La Scolca was on hand with generous pours of her Gavi dei Gavi from a limited-edition gold bottle commemorating the estate's centennial. "We decided to share this special wine on this special occasion," said Soldati, noting that the company has been organizing events around the world as "a tribute to all lovers of La Scolca, both young and old, who love to get together and toast the achievement of this extraordinary product from the Gavi region in Italy."

Cocktail stations were also situated throughout the garden, serving Mules made with Liqueure Strega; Gin & Tonics featuring Fifty Pounds Gin; Ron Barceló-based Daiquiris; and frozen Palomas with JAJA Tequila and Kelvin Slush Grapefruit Mix. To pair with them, Diez y Seis, the Shore Club's contemporary Mexican restaurant, prepared chicken mole, carnitas tacos, and chorizo quesadillas on a *comal* (a smooth, flat griddle used in various parts of Latin America). Guests savored the chance to relax with colleagues as much as they did the delicious food and wine at what may, sadly, turn out to be one of the year's only major culinary festivals. ■■

For more information on SBWFF, visit sobewff.org; for more information on the Florida International University Chaplain School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, visit hospitality.fiu.edu.

Unexpected PLEASURES

**WHITE WINES
FROM ISRAEL**
ARE THE HIDDEN
GEMS OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN

by David Gadd

Israel's wine culture dates back to biblical times, with 5,000 years of tradition to build upon—yet it wasn't until 1890 that the country's modern wine industry got its start with the founding of Carmel Winery by Baron Edmond de Rothschild. Today, Israel is undergoing another, more expansive renaissance, one that Wines of Israel—a very active marketing campaign jointly financed by member producers and the government—aims to highlight.

The group's slogan, "Where the Mediterranean Begins," reflects its commitment to move Israeli wines beyond the sacramental identity they'd had for so long and to place them squarely on the international stage. Today's producers emphasize high quality and stylistic diversity rather than adherence to dietary laws, explains sommelier and Wines of Israel spokesperson Erik Segelbaum, who adds that much of their output is "kosher by coincidence."

Diversity is a key word. While enophiles may know Israel for its reds (including the signature Bordeaux-style blend from Carmel, which hasn't missed a harvest since its founding), its whites deserve more attention. Israeli vintners have been extraordinarily successful in producing wines from Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Gewürztraminer; Mediterranean varieties such as Roussanne and Viognier, meanwhile, are promising up-and-comers.

The Ein Zivan Vineyard in
the Golan Heights.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WINES OF ISRAEL

Winemakers are also increasingly keen to explore the potential of Israel's indigenous varieties, including white grapes such as Dabuki and the ancient Marawi (aka Hamdani), which is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, a religious text dating to the third century A.D. In the search for ideal terroir, vineyardists continue to seek out higher elevations for cool-climate plantings in areas like mountainous Galilee to the north and the Judean Foothills between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Traditional practices such as native-yeast fermentation are often combined with an experimental approach to blending. And all of these factors help make Israel's whites an adventurous choice for wine lovers. As Segelbaum puts it, "There are very few regions in the world that can compete with Israel's heritage [and] diversity of flavors, varieties, and stylistic options."

Gewürztraminer has been particularly successful in Israel: Carmel's aromatic Appellation Gewürztraminer, to take one example, is made in a semi-dry style reminiscent of Alsatian wine.

Rhône grapes have also proved exceptionally well suited to the country's dry Mediterranean climate. Grown in Galilee, Tabor Winery's expressive Adama Roussanne is a powerful expression of its namesake variety. Part of the newest generation of Israeli producers, MAIA Winery was founded in 2012 to specialize in Mediterranean varieties—the name is an acronym for Mediterranean Approach, Israeli Art—and winemaker David Bar-Ilan emphasizes the food-friendly nature of the winery's offerings, including the quaffable Mare White, which blends Marsanne with French Colombard.

New York restaurateur turned Israeli vintner Jacques Capsouto of

potential to make really well."

In short, says Segelbaum, "International varieties will always maintain a strong foothold in Israel. Expect a sharp uptick in varieties suited for Mediterranean climates, with an increase in plantings of grapes common in southern France, Portugal, Greece, Spain, and Italy."

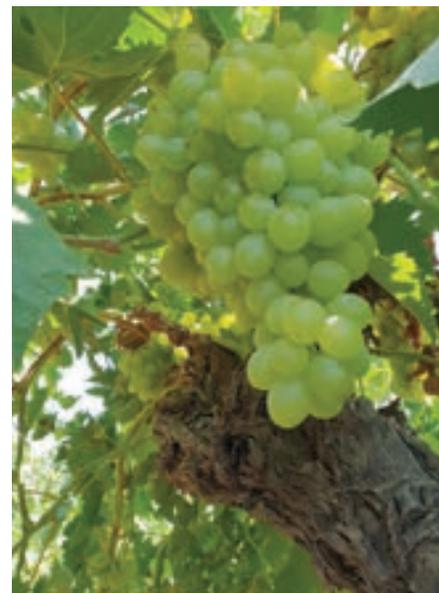
LOOKING TO THE HILLS

Winemakers worldwide have discovered the appeal of high-altitude viticulture, and Israel is no exception. "Israel has many cool-climate and high-elevation wine regions that are well suited to white winemaking," Segelbaum notes. "In these regions, acid retention and freshness come naturally, making them perfect for expressing grapes like Riesling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and more."

Rhône stalwart Viognier thrives in Yatir



Grenache Blanc from the tank at Jacques Capsouto Vignobles, which specializes in Rhône varieties.



Indigenous white grape Dabuki on the vine at Jezreel Valley Winery.

INTERNATIONAL GRAPES MEET ISRAELI KNOW-HOW

Predating Carmel, Israel's first commercial winery was founded in 1847 in the Old City of Jerusalem by the Shor family, whose most recent venture is Hayotzer. French-born winemaker Philippe Lichtenstein crafts artistic wines such as the Hayotzer Virtuoso Chardonnay; aged for six months in French oak, it's an exemplar of the country's work with international varieties.

Jacques Capsouto Vignobles offers a more traditional Rhône-style blend of 65% Roussanne, 30% Clairette, and 5% Marsanne in his Cuvée Albert, one of the wines that has earned him fame as the "Kosher Rhône Ranger." General Manager Doron Rand says that "Jacques firmly believes in Mediterranean varieties as being more suitable for Israel's climate, and [he] believes Southern Rhône-style blends are the wines that Israel has the

Winery's Negev vineyards, located from 1,900 to 3,000 feet up the hillsides of the semi-arid region in southern Israel; it's blended with Chenin Blanc in the Yatir Creek White. "Higher elevation brings cooler temperatures, both during the day and especially at night," says Yatir winemaker Eran Goldwasser. "In a warm climate like Israel's, it has been shown that cooler temperatures increase the concentration of aroma compounds and natural acidity in the mature grapes."



Old-vine Chenin Blanc at harvesttime.

Another high-elevation success is the Dalton Estate Pinot Gris, grown in northern Galilee at an altitude of 2,460 feet on a steep, northeastern-facing slope. Dalton was the first Israeli winery to release Pinot Gris commercially; winemaker Guy Eschel emulates the Alsatian style via whole-cluster pressing and partial barrel fermentation. “I try not to finish bone-dry and [to] have some residual sugar, which helps balance the high acidity,” he explains.

On Mount Meron in Upper Galilee, at elevations of 2,750–2,900 feet, Lueria Winery’s vineyard soils are a rare combination of basalt, terra rossa, and chalk. This distinctive terroir is ideal for fresh, modern wines such as the Lueria Unoaked Chardonnay, fermented in stainless steel. Another high-elevation wine, the Five Stones Nobility 215a White, is grown in the Judean Hills on the peaks surrounding the Elah Valley, the site of the legendary battle between David and Goliath. Winemaker Sasson Ben-Aharon blends 95% Chardonnay with 5% Sauvignon Blanc, then ferments and ages the wine for eight months in barriques from Burgundy.

The vineyards of pioneering producer Golan Heights Winery are situated on a volcanic plateau that rises 1,300–3,900 feet above sea level. Receiving snowfall in winter, this is the coolest viticultural area in the country. The terroir shows beautifully in the crisp, sparkling Yarden Blanc de Blancs, made entirely from Chardonnay in the traditional *méthode champenoise*.

EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION

While honoring traditions established by European precedent, Israeli winemakers show their New World side by continuing to innovate. At Tulip Winery in the Mount Carmel region, for example, the Net Sauvignon Blanc is fermented at two different temperatures to impart as much complexity as possible. Galilee pioneer Segal Winery, meanwhile, experiments with native yeasts in its Wild Fermentation Chardonnay. Fifteen-year-old boutique winery Or Haganuz in Upper Galilee creatively blends Chardonnay with Sauvignon Blanc in its Amuka Blanc, which in turn offers an intriguing mix of citrus and stone-fruit flavors. “Israel’s appellation laws lack grape restrictions, allowing Israeli winemakers to explore and experiment with new varieties and unique blends,” notes Segelbaum.

Varietal blending reaches new frontiers at Gva’ot Winery in the Shomron Hills, where enologist Shivi Drori produces the audacious Gva’ot Gafna Reserve Chardonnay–Cabernet Sauvignon. “This is indeed an unusual blend,” admits Drori. “In 2005 we had fermented a beautiful Chardonnay, which was aging in new barrels. At the same time, I was attempting to produce a [still] blanc de noirs [from] Cabernet.” The experimental wine, while “amazing at first,” eventually started to “lose aromatic charm” but still had a good body and “felt like it wanted to be blended.” Drori found that melding it with the Chardonnay increased its



Tasting Notes

Dalton Estate 2019 Pinot Gris, Galilee (\$20) This unoaked white hails from red, stony clay soils at high elevations. Apricot and peach are lovely on the nose; the palate is round and creamy, with enough acidity to keep it lively and food-friendly. Floral notes and candied vanilla appear on the finish. **91** —*Meridith May*

ALLIED IMPORTERS

Recanati Winery 2018 Reserve Mawari, Judean Hills (\$35) Mawari is an indigenous white grape that Recanati grows in its own Biodynamic vineyard in the Upper Galilee, the first of its kind in Israel. While aromas of kiwi and white flowers make a delicate first impression, the succulent notes of white melon, white raspberry, and papaya that follow are exotic and chiffon-like. **93** —*M.M.*

PALM BAY INTERNATIONAL

Recanati 2017 Special Reserve White, Galilee (\$49) This blend of 60% Roussanne and 40% Marsanne comes from Israel’s Hefer Valley, where Recanati is one of the country’s most technologically innovative wineries. Chief winemaker Gil Shatsberg is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, wine program. With eight months of French oak aging and no malolactic treatment, the wine is lithe and graceful, sparked with good acidity and bordered with minerality. Aromas of tangerine and honeysuckle precede flavors of citrus and apple. **94** —*M.M.*

PALM BAY INTERNATIONAL



Gva'ot 2017 Reserve Chardonnay Cabernet, Shomron Region (\$50)

Made from a unique blend of 83% Chardonnay and 17% Cabernet Sauvignon, this mouth-filling white is unctuous with flavors of apricot and custard; lemon tart accents the aromatics. It spent eight months in oak, lending it creaminess and a vanilla-floral finish. The rugged Shomron region boasts elevations up to 2,200 feet and a coastal Mediterranean climate. **91** —*M.M.*

ALLIED IMPORTERS

Golan Heights Winery Yarden 2011 Blanc de Blancs, Golan Heights, Galilee (\$33)

This 100% Chardonnay is Golan Heights Winery's flagship sparkler under the Yarden label. With a low 11.5% ABV, it offers a delicate perfume of white flowers mingled with Asian pear and a hint of salinity. Lemongrass and tarragon release from delicate bubbles, and lingering flavors of meringue and cashew are pleasing. **92** —*M.M.*

Golan Heights Winery Yarden 2018 Sauvignon Blanc, Galilee (\$16)

Fresh, bright, and crisp, with lively citrus and snappy acidity; clean, long, and balanced. **89** —*Anthony Dias Blue*

Barkan Winery 2016 Special Reserve Winemakers' Choice Chardonnay, Judean Hills (\$22)

Fresh and juicy, with racy acidity; silky and smooth, with clean, bright flavors. **91** —*A.D.B.*

ROYAL WINE CORP.

Carmel Winery 2017 Riesling, Kayoumi Vineyard, Galilee (\$25)

Soft petrol nose; smooth, floral, and dry; juicy, tangy, and fresh; long and charming. **90** —*A.D.B.*

ROYAL WINE CORP.



Gva'ot Winery's vineyards in the Shomron Hills.



Harvesting Sauvignon Blanc at Carmel Winery.

complexity: "From that year on, it became a tradition."

One small but fascinating part of Israel's uncharted future lies in its own indigenous grape varieties. Teperberg Winery's Inspire Famitage is a blend of 55% Dabuki with 25% Sauvignon Blanc and 20% Gewürztraminer. Widely grown in Israel as a table grape, Dabuki can also be harnessed into service for wine production via controlled irrigation and restricted yields. Recanati Winery has found success with a much rarer native grape: Marawi. With its crisp acidity and distinct minerality, this

ancient variety is beautifully expressed in the Recanati Reserve Marawi, which winemaker Gil Shatsberg calls "a pure, ancient, and candid expression of the Israeli terroir."

"The idea of wines made with the same grapes of biblical times, though certainly not as sweet as biblical-era wines, is appealing on many levels," says Segelbaum. "Plantings are still sparse and there are only a few commercially available expressions, but groundbreaking research and increased cultivation of indigenous varieties continues. Expect more of these soon."

THE ON-PREMISE POTENTIAL OF ISRAEL WHITES

“Israeli wines offer so much diversity in terms of style and selection that they should be a no-brainer for any international wine list,” Segelbaum asserts. Take chef Michael Solomonov’s James Beard Award–winning modern Israeli restaurant Zahav in Philadelphia. According to Wine Director Jeff Bartash, “Israel’s white wines lend themselves incredibly well to our vegetable- and spice-forward menu. I look for wines with balance, texture, and acidity, such as the Recanat Marawi and the Jacques Capsouto Cuvée Albert.”

But it’s not only somms at Middle Eastern restaurants who should look for Israeli wines. “For Asian, Indian, and Middle Eastern cuisine, Israel delivers aromatic whites such as Riesling, Gewürztraminer, and Chenin Blanc, or blends based on those grapes,” says Segelbaum. “For Mediterranean and Latin American cuisines, Israel offers wonderful Mediterranean white grapes and blends, with those based on Marsanne and Roussanne taking center stage. Italian and French cuisine play well with Israel’s indigenous white varietals such as Marawi, as well as international styles of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc that beautifully balance acid and texture.”

So while Israel may continue to be better known for red wines, it’s undeniable that the country’s ever-expanding range of whites—from traditional to experimental, from international to native, from single varietals to blends—are essential parts of the mosaic that makes Israeli wine a fascinating pursuit. ■■





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