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# Jim Hiller's Wine Club

## The Other California

Think of going on a wine tour in California and I'll bet that you think of Napa and Sonoma right away. So do a zillion other people - which is why traffic on Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail through the Napa Valley is virtually bumper to bumper most weekends and many native California wine geeks make a fetish out of avoiding the tourists and searching instead for 'undiscovered' wine regions, a phenomenon well-dramatized recently in the movie *Sideways*.

California has many gorgeous wine growing regions well worth visiting. (Have you noticed that wine grapes, golf balls, and trout all tend to live in really pretty places?) In fact, of the 160 some odd viticultural areas that have been established in the United States by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, more than 90 are in California. Even if you don't plan a wine tasting vacation to the state, I encourage you to discover some new areas when you next buy wine. Good wine should taste of its origin, should be an expression of the unique characteristics of the vines, soil and climate from which the grapes emerged. A wine with a "California" AVA on the label can be made with juice from anywhere in the state. Although there is no quality guarantee, a more delimited AVA is more likely to reflect its distinct origin.

For this edition of the Wine Club, I've assembled a grab bag of wines from some of my favorite areas that are not Napa/Sonoma/Mendocino. Most are from the Central Coast, which extends from Santa Cruz in the north to Santa Barbara in the south, but there are a smattering from the Sierra Foothills, Lake County, and Lodi. There's no particularly coherent pattern here, just a

chance for me to reminisce a bit about the thirty years I spent as a California 'cork dork' looking for those undiscovered gems.

## What are AVAs?

In the late 1970s, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms decided to allow viticultural areas to be used as appellation of origin on wine labels. Fully implemented in 1983, American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) are "delimited grape growing areas" distinguishable by soil, climate, and/or history - elements that can lend characteristics to an area's crop and impart identifiable attributes to the grapes grown under those conditions. There are currently 160 BATF approved AVAs that range in size from the 150 acre Cole Ranch AVA (in Mendocino County, California) to the Ohio River Valley AVA that spans 4 states and exceeds 16 million acres. Some AVAs reside within other larger AVAs, for example, California's Napa Valley is an AVA that encompasses 12 other AVA's. Napa County also includes part of the Los Carneros AVA, whose area spills over into Sonoma County, which has 11 additional AVAs within its borders. An American AVA is defined strictly by a geographic area, whereas within the French AOC system or the Italian DOC system, regulations also identify the grape varieties that may be grown in a geographic area, the maximum production per acre, the minimum level of alcohol required for wines produced in the area, and so forth. In the U.S., a winemaker is allowed to use the name of an established AVA on his label only if 85% of the wine comes from that particular area. In terms of quality, there is no guarantee that a wine labeled with a viticultural area is any better or worse than wines that don't bear such information. But like other forms of intellectual property, AVA recognition

is valuable and wineries try very hard to develop that value.

## Tasting Notes

### Taster's Table Whites

#### 2002 Travis Riverview Vineyard Monterey Chardonnay

This unoaked Chardonnay has a clean, bright, and lean flavor profile so completely unlike the stereotypical buttery California Chardonnay, it's a revelation. Having never seen oak cooperage nor malolactic fermentation, the pure Chardonnay characters shine through on a medium-bodied wine elegant enough to accompany lighter warm weather meals or serve as an aperitif, yet rich enough to pair up with a shellfish stew or fleshy ocean fish. The nose shows clean apple, pear, and tropical fruit aromas with an undercurrent of minerality while the palate delivers smooth and persistent peach and apple flavors. A nice velvety texture and a balancing acidity leads into a long and delicious finish. This is an unfiltered wine, so if it is very cold, it may show a bit of cloudiness, but that is a winemaker's choice, not a fault.

#### 2004 Peirano Estate Vineyards Lodi White Wine, 'The Other'

The blend for the 2004 version of The Other consists of 70% Chardonnay, 20% Sauvignon Blanc and 10% Viognier. Each varietal is fermented and aged separately, then blended and sampled in various proportions till just the right balance is found. One is immediately struck by the vibrant color of this wine. The aromas of apples, pears and peaches are complemented by subtle spice and oak notes. On the attack the palate shows a wave of green apple, ripe pears and peaches, with a hint of oak, leading to a long, seductive, finish. All the fruit is estate grown from the heart of the Lodi appellation

#### 2004 Vinum Clarksburg CNW (Chard No Way)

Vinum Cellars is a collaboration of Richard Bruno and Chris Condon who first met as enology students at UC Davis who shared a common interest in

Chenin Blanc and other obscure grape varieties. In 1997, they formed Vinum Cellars and currently work with 9 grape varieties. White wines are barrel fermented slowly and aged *sur lie* in small older French oak barrels to allow varietal fruit expression. (Older barrels are more neutral and thus impart fewer oak characters.) The Chard No Way shows a brilliant straw color. Pineapple, guava and mango aromas fill the glass with floral nuances. The palate is bright with tart apple, lemon and passion fruit flavors leading to bone-dry finish. This is the ideal summer white with its tropical profile and zingy acidity.

#### 2005 Firestone Central Coast Riesling

Fruit from Firestone's estate vineyards in Santa Barbara County's Santa Ynez Valley impart ripe, classic Riesling flavors and textural richness, while a balance of fruit from cooler Monterey County adds crisp acidity and appealing citrus accents to this lovely wine. Delicate aromas of pear, honeysuckle and violets continue on the palate along with bright flavors of melon and peach. Accents of honey, citrus and flint complement the core fruit. A lingering sweetness is exquisitely balanced by firm acidity for a refreshing off-dry finish achieved by halting fermentation just prior to dryness. Recommended pairings include southeast Asian fare, smoked salmon, green salads with caramelized walnuts and grilled chicken with ginger lime marinade.

#### 2003 Liberty School Central Coast Chardonnay

The maritime breezes off the Monterey Bay that flow into the vineyards of the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey County help produce lush, ripe fruit with classic tropical flavors balanced by bright acidity. The Liberty School Chard shows pineapple, lemon-lime, and mango aromas with highlight of nutty spice characters. In the mouth the citrus and melon flavors continue on a nicely extracted, full-bodied frame. With a bit of Viognier blended in, floral nuances give the wine depth and elegance. Pair it with summer roasted chicken or cream-sauced shellfish. Liberty School is a second label of Treana Winery of Paso Robles.

#### 2004 Cycles Gladiator Chardonnay

The label of the Cycles Gladiator wines reproduce a 'Belle Epoque' Parisian art poster of the 1890's commemorating the invention of the modern bicycle. The connection of the poster to the wines seems bit tenuous, but the wines themselves, are quite good. This is a full bodied, fruity chardonnay that is buttery smooth in the mouth and long on the finish. The nose has aromas of honeysuckle, peach and pineapple. The palate tastes of lime, vanilla, lemon peel, pineapple, and roasted nut. Nicely balanced and refreshing, it can serve nicely as an aperitif or paired with fish, chicken or veal

### Taster's Table Reds

#### 2004 Peirano Estates Petite Sirah

In an era in which red wines have become progressively softer and easier to drink, the classic Petite Sirah shows all the subtlety of a chainsaw. But what a mouthful of flavors the best can have! Velvety and rich; blue-tooth Specials; no wine for wusses. The Peirano Petite has a deep blue-purple color and a pungent nose of ripe, dark berries. The palate is filled with ripe blackberry, dark cherry and firm tannins that persist into a jammy blackberry finish. Peirano Estate Vineyards was founded in the early 1880's, making it one of the first vineyards in the Lodi area which lies just to the east of the San Francisco Bay and enjoys a classic Mediterranean climate.

#### 2003 M Trinchero Merlot

The 2003 Trinchero Merlot features fruit from some of the California's top, cool-climate, coastal appellations in Monterey (79%), Lake (9%), Santa Barbara (7%) and Napa (5%). This rich, complex, deeply fruited Merlot offers aromas of wild cherry, red plum and cassis fruit mingled with scents of cedar, herbal spice and oak toast. The softly textured palate features spicy cherry and plum flavors with hints of cinnamon and vanilla. Remarkably smooth, dark, rich, and lush, it delivers the approachable mouth-filling character one associates with this noble grape.

### **2001 Burgess Cellars Lake County Zinfandel**

This wine was produced from “old vines” grown on a well-drained, gravelly vineyard located on an alluvial fan at the northern side of the mountains in south Lake County. This gravelly site is ideal for Zinfandel grapes as it concentrates the flavors by lowering the yield. The color, nose, and body of the Burgess all show that concentration. The color is deep purple red. Jammy berry and spice aromas are enhanced by earthy, exotic mocha notes. There is a modest level of sweet oak from barrel aging to add a level of complexity and elegance, a generous mouth feel full of dark fruit flavors and a long and lasting finish. This wine will be a perfect accompaniment to Mediterranean-style foods.

### **2002 Montevina Sierra Foothills Zinfandel**

The first post Prohibition winery to open in the Sierra Foothills, Montevina for years sold the bulk of their Zinfandel to Sutter Home to be made into oceans of white zin. Now Montevina is owned by Sutter Home, has been extensively modernized and expanded, and half of the estate vineyards are now planted to Rhone and Italian varietals. But the other half is still Zin and Montevina does Zin as well as anybody. The SFH shows the classic aromatic profile of robust raspberry, blackberry, bramble, and clove. The wine is of medium weight with potent fruit flavors, moderate tannin and excellent balance. Sierra Zinfandel is a pure joy of a wine, not complex but piercingly fruity, perfect with pizza or spaghetti with a tomato-based sauce, sublime with barbecued ribs.

### **2004 Liberty School Central Coast Cabernet**

Liberty School’s 2004 Cabernet offers upfront aromas of ripe blackberry, chocolate, and cassis, with hints of vanillin. Similar deep berry flavors are enhanced by elegant tannins and a rich full finish. Its fruit-driven, approachable style makes food pairing easy: a good choice for grilled braised or roasted meats, and semi-aged cheeses. The fruit is sourced from

family farmers throughout Paso Robles, a region with a solid reputation for growing exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon.

### **2004 Cycles Gladiator Central Coast Syrah**

This Syrah blends fruit from Monterey and fruit from Paso Robles. The Monterey Syrah is grown in a cool climate and is intense with plum and pepper flavors marked with a solid acidity. The Paso Robles Syrah is warm and jammy with soft tannins and acids. So the combination of cool/warm climates produces a wine that is layered with characteristics of both. A combination of raspberry and plum aromas is framed by fresh pepper and pretty oak notes. The mouth is decidedly rich and spicy with big red fruit flavors layered over spice, tobacco, and blueberry. The mouthfeel is full bodied with soft tannins that melt into a medium thread of acidity. The gamey components of this wine make it a perfect match for duck and other wild fowl or lamb in a red wine reduction.

### **Collector’s Club Whites**

#### **2003 Mount Eden Vineyards Wolff Chardonnay**

Jean-Pierre Wolff farms 55 acres of chardonnay vines in the bucolic Edna Valley, outside of San Luis Obispo. Originally planted in 1976, this vineyard is one of the oldest in the entire Central Coast of California. A rich, opulent, exotic style, lush tropical fruits dominate this wine from the outset. Complex and heady on the palate, it’s full of fresh, fruit, green apple and buttered popcorn flavors.

#### **2005 Babcock Santa Rita Hills Chardonnay**

The Babcock family is one of the original wine grape growing families in the Santa Rita Hills. After years of producing highly sought-after grapes, the Babcocks decided to create a winery. Today, they produce award winning wines under the winemaking direction of their son, Bryan. The 2005 Chardonnay shows aromas of white pear, green apple and apricot enhanced by a fresh minerality. The flavors have a

mildly creamy, apple character that is both racy and rich at the same time.

### **2001 Thomas Fogarty Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay**

Full disclosure: Dr Thomas Fogarty, Stanford University Medical Center faculty member, cardiac and vascular surgeon, inventor, holder of some 63 surgical instrumentation patents, and all around good guy was also a regular patron of a restaurant I once ran in Woodside, California just down the road a piece from the Fogarty Winery. Notwithstanding that personal connection, this Chardonnay is as sublime as cool climate Chardonnay can be. A ripe pear and green apple nose with hints of mint and minerals leads to peach and citrus flavors on the palate, finishing with a creamy nectarine aftertaste. Burgundian, serious, and absolutely delicious.

### **2002 Murietta’s Well White Meritage**

As good, perhaps better than the wine itself, the story of Murieta’s Well springs from the legend of Joaquin Murieta, the notorious "Robin Hood of El Dorado," an infamous vaquero who roamed California throughout the Gold Rush era. Legend has it that Murieta and his men often stopped to water their horses at the artesian well that marks the entrance to the winery named in his memory. Phillip Wente brought the historic winery back to life with the objective of producing "old world" style field blends from the plantings that thrived in the gravelly soils of the estate. Those vines originated from Bordeaux’s famed Chateau d’Yquem and were brought to the Livermore Valley in the early 1880s. Today, over 80% of the vineyards planted in Sauvignon Blanc in California are derived from these Wente family estate historic vineyards. The wine opens with honey, fresh apples, melon, and fig aromas in the nose, shows citrus fruits, pears, cloves and oak in the mouth, and fig on the long, lingering finish.

### **2005 Bridlewood Estate Winery Reserve Viognier**

Bridlewood is a small “artisan” winery located in the Santa Ynez Valley north of Santa Barbara. Fruit sourced from

six vineyards scattered across the Central Coast is de-stemmed but not crushed; gentle pressing avoids inclusion of bitter skin components. After cold settling, the juice is racked, fermented and aged in stainless steel. Aromas of honeysuckle and citrus blossoms accompanied by peach, melon, buttered toast and rich tropical fruits swirl through the bouquet. Flavors of tart mango, peach, and grapefruit fill the palate in a texture big and rich, yet soft and supple. Moderate acidity and full fruit flavors make this perfect for rich shellfish, chicken, tart salads, or fresh fruit.

**2002 Renwood Lodi Viognier**

Viognier flourishes in the soil and climate of the famed Rhone Valley of France, and has found its place in California. This delicious, well-balanced wine is a wonderful example of how well this variety can grow in Lodi. It has a rich, creamy pear and lemon entry. On the pallet, the wine displays fresh apricots, fig, and melon with underlying vanilla tones. The spicy and exotic aromas of bright melon fruit and spring flowers round out the lingering finish.

**Collector’s Club Reds**

**2003 Mt Vernon Monarch Mine Vineyard Syrah**

This Placer County Syrah tastes remarkably like an Hermitage or a St Joseph, the classic Syrah based wines of the northern Rhone valley in southern France: rich, meaty, concentrated and smoky. The fruit is sourced from the Monarch Mine Vineyard near Auburn at 2300 ft elevation in the Sierra Foothills. Only 400 cases were made in 2003, which was the first time winemaker Ryan Taylor used fruit from Monarch Mine, but he has since bought all he can get his hands on, so successful was the product. Deep in color, lushly aromatic and full-bodied, the peppery, smoked meat and red fruit profile makes this a great partner for stews, roasted meats, or grilled vegetables.

**2002 Martin Ray Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon**

Martin Ray is a legendary figure in the wine business whose eponymous winery was established in 1943 in the Santa Cruz Mountains. His mission was to make 100% varietal wines in California that could rival great French Bordeaux and Burgundy wines. This Cabernet, from mountaintop vineyards cooled by morning and evening fog certainly attains that goal. The 2002 harvest was one of the finest growing seasons in the last decade with average rainfall, moderate temperatures and consistent weather patterns throughout the year creating the perfect scenario for the fruit to ripen and reach full maturity. These idyllic conditions lengthened the growing season, allowing the grapes to reach maturity with deep color and concentrated flavors. The result is a Cabernet with beautiful balance and solid structure. Inviting, elegant aromas of vanilla and spice lead to lush flavors of blackberry and plum, finishing with a lingering whisper of toasty oak.

**2004 La Fond Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir**

The Santa Rita Hills AVA was officially designated only in 2001. To many connoisseurs of California wine, SRH is synonymous with Pinot Noir. Its fog chilled climate makes it a Region I growing area, the coolest of California's five regional climate classifications – perfect for the slow ripening, fickle Pinot Noir grape. La Fond’s deep ruby color hints at the intensity of aromas and flavors to follow. The nose is a rich, sweet berry, forest floor, spice box, and briery-scented perfume with a hint of oak in the background. The opulent palate is full of berry flavor balanced by an underlying acidity that provides a refreshing zest. This would be a wonderful match with savory foods and a classic with grilled salmon or mushrooms.

**2001 Pietra Santa Cienega Valley Sassolino**

Approximately 25 miles inland from the Monterey Bay lies the Cienega Valley. The hillsides surrounding the valley are rich with limestone deposits and the subsoil in the valley contains substantial amounts of limestone and granite. Thus the name Pietra Santa or “holy stone.”

The Sassolino (“little stone”) is winemaker Alessio Carli’s version of an American Super Tuscan. If you appreciate deep-hued wines of Tuscan ancestry and California reds dripping with fruit, you’ll love this beauty. Primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, a bit of Sangiovese in the blend adds richness and soft tannins. The wine is full of ripe raspberry and blackberry flavors with hints of cinnamon, allspice and vanilla.

**2004 Hahn Estates Central Coast Meritage**

The 2004 Hahn Estates Meritage is a blend of 42% Merlot, 38% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Petit Verdot, 7% Cabernet Franc, and 6% Malbec. Inky and intense, the nose shows aromas of cherry, chocolate, and cedar. In the mouth overripe blackberry and raspberry flavors up front expand and develop into notes of plum and spice. This is a layered wine, with perceptible changes every few minutes or so. The oak forms a pretty frame for the ripe but soft tannins and subtle acidity. Try this wine with the classic combination of filet mignon wrapped in bacon, or steak fajitas with chipotle.

**2003 Monteveina Terra d'Oro Amador Zinfandel**

If you haven’t yet discovered that Zinfandel and barbecue is one of the great wine/food marriages ever conceived, don’t miss your chance to fire up the barbie before this year’s grilling season is over. *The Wine Enthusiast* agrees: “With just a trace of raisins, this wine flirts with being overripe, but wisely comes down on the side of balance. It’s dry, full-bodied and rich, with deep chocolate and black raspberry flavors. This beautiful wine is a natural with barbecued beef or chicken.”

**Did you know?**

That Eric Novak, the director of Jim Hiller’s Wine Club, is available to conduct private wine tasting parties in your home? Call Eric at 248-355-2122 for more information.