

# Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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## A Potpourri of Wine

Autumn is a great time to be in the wine business. Nearly all wine and spirits distributors schedule their biggest trade shows of the year early in the fourth quarter holiday shopping season so that those of us who get to buy wines for a living have a chance to revisit many old friends and become acquainted with many new arrivals in the market. (*Insert mandatory cliché here. Ed.*) It's a tough job, but someone has to do it. However much fun it may be, we do have to try an awful lot of mediocre and sometimes just plain bad wine so that our customers needn't. November and December are also when the major wine magazines present their annual year-in-review issues: *The Wine Spectator's* Top 100 Wines, *The Wine Enthusiast's* Top 100 Values, *et cetera*. So for this edition of the Wine Club we'll follow the pattern and focus simply on the wines in our Club's price ranges that most impressed us in the past year. (*End the editorial we here. Ed.*) \* No other theme intentionally organized the selections than that to my personal taste, these stood out as particularly exceptional wines.

Unintentionally, however, I notice as I look over the list of my selections, I might almost have tried to pass off this collection as an exemplar of "New World" wines. Although there are several Italians and Spaniards, a couple Greeks and Frenchmen, even a German in the bunch, the European selections here are atypically highly extracted and fruit forward, which qualities tend to be associated more with the so-called "New World" style, if indeed there is such a thing, than with the "Old World" style typified by elegance rather than power, low alcohol instead of high, balanced and subtle wines, not fruit bombs. Clearly my preference is for wines whose aromas jump out of the glass and whose palate let you clearly know that wine grapes are first and foremost fruit. Not that these

wines lack complexity. I think them remarkably multi-layered and interesting, especially given the relatively modest prices. At the end of the day (or year!) my bottom line for judging wine is what is called the quality to price ratio. I love to find a ten dollar wine that tastes as if it ought to sell for twenty or thirty, a twenty buck wine that I feel worthy for laying down in my cellar so that some years down the line I'll serve it at dinner and my guests will say with astonishment, "You paid how much for this?"

\* My favorite quote on the subject of nosism: "Only kings, presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial 'we'." Mark Twain

## Tasting Notes

### Taster's Table Whites

#### 2006 Umani Ronchi Verdicchio de Castelli di Jesi DOC

From the Marche along the eastern coast of Italy, bordering the Adriatic sea, lies the city of Osimo and the Umani Ronchi winery. The best way to picture its location is to visualize the upper calf of the Italian boot. Umani Ronchi year after year produces fine, fairly priced reds and whites. Medium-bodied and luscious, the texture here is unexpectedly rich and viscous in the nose and mouth. Golden in color with a bouquet of melon, fig, apricot and tropical fruit, it is very modern in style: clean, fresh and bright. Flavors of ripe fruits, particularly peach and apple on the palate lead to a spicy, nutty impression on the finish.

#### 2006 Skouras Zoë

One of the most beautiful wines I've ever seen, the first thing that came to my mind when I first saw its brilliant ruby color was a memory of early 1960's Hollywood decadence-of-Rome extravaganzas in Cinemascope and Technicolor in which flagons of wine of an almost psychedelic intensity of color were poured by an endless procession of

nubile maidens into the silver goblets of smarmy Emperors and assorted hangers-on. Rosé is simply a red wine that has been left in contact with the grape's skins for a shortened period of time. The juice can then be vinified into any degree of sweetness, from bone dry to sickly sweet. (Ugh!) Well made dry rosé is a delight, with all the complexity and depth of a rich red and the refreshing thirst-quenching power of a crisp white. Made from Roditis and Aghiorgitiko, two native Greek wine grapes, Zoë, which means "life" in Greek, shows pungent raspberry, strawberry and watermelon notes in the nose, earthy tobacco and raspberry flavors on the palate, and aftertastes of fig and dried cherry on the finish. Delightfully thirst-quenching, this wine is great as an aperitif, solid with fish, shellfish and salads, and would be wonderful for Thanksgiving turkey or with your Christmas ham.

**2006 Villa Maria Private Bin Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc**

*The Wine Enthusiast* just named Villa Maria the New World Winery of the Year in their Wine Stars of the year edition. Their Private Bin has consistently been, to my mind, the best value in Kiwi Sauv Blanc for years. It is bursting with ripe gooseberry, citrus lime, tropical melon and exotic herbal aromas without being over the top as so many are. It is a fresh and ripely flavored wine with fantastic intensity, finishing with crisp and racy acidity. Enjoy chilled with fresh seafood, shellfish, salads and vegetable dishes or simply on its own.

**2005 Cat's Meow Central Coast Chardonnay**

No oak, no additives and light filtration allows the wine to maintain a crisp fruitiness and a firm balance of acid and fruit so that this Chardonnay works with many different styles of food. Try with Chinese, roasted chicken, grilled vegetables, pork tenderloin and pretty much anything from the sea. There are many "critter" labels on the market, most of which have little to commend them other than the cutesiness. The Cat's Meow may be cute but the comparison to other "critter" brands stops there. The wine is a quality, hand-crafted, balanced

wine true to varietal character and quite serious.

**2006 Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt "RK' Riesling Qualitätswein**

With vineyards situated amid the serpentine bends of the river in the heart of the Moselle, Saar and Ruwer regions, Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt has perfect microclimates for Riesling. The secret of German Riesling lies in the stony, slate soils that dry quickly and absorb the warmth of the sun. South-facing, steep sites with a slope of up to 70%, the river as a heat reservoir, and a long growing period are the prerequisites for top flight Riesling. The RK is made of 100% Riesling grapes and represents what makes these wines so attractive at many price points and levels of sweetness. Lively and appealing, it shows fragrances of white peach, apple and grapefruit wonderfully harmonizing with a fresh, mineral texture. Racy and juicy, it has a perfect balance of sweetness and acidity, with a dry finish, underlined by a remarkable slate minerality. Serve the RK as aperitif or as a companion to tapas, scampi, roasted fish or Thai cuisine.

**2006 Colombelle Côtes de Gascogne**

A local cooperative from Gasconge, Producteurs Plaimont, produces the Colombelle. This is a refreshing white wine composed of 70% Colombard and 30% Ugni Blanc (the primary grape of Cognac). More than a light summer sipper, which role the Colombelle can play admirably well with chicken and veggies on the grill, it is also quite good for light seafood and sauced poultry dishes. Serve with a first course of your Thanksgiving dinner and it will slide effortlessly into the turkey course for those who want to stay with white. A pale golden color and a vibrant nose of flowers and peach and a grace note of honey give way to a crisp entry with flavors of grapefruit, peach, and pineapple. Light bodied but very well-balanced, the wine has good acidity, which makes it refreshing and palate cleansing, and a long citrus finish with hints of herbs and spice. A nice alternative to the usual white varieties such as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

**Taster's Table Reds**

**2004 d'Arenburg The Love Grass McLaren Vale Shiraz**

Shiraz has been the leading variety grown in McLaren Vale since the first plantings in the mid 1800's. Over the years, as the region has matured, other varieties have emerged and are often used by winemakers in their Shiraz blends such as The Love Grass which includes a small percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Grenache, Petit Verdot, Tempranillo and Pinot Noir. Much the same way as the native Love Grasses in many of d'Arenburg's vineyards stick to socks, these other varieties cling to the Shiraz to produce wines that are interesting and expressive blends but are still true to the McLaren Vale style. I love the winemaker's tasting notes: "As the wine opens up it reveals plum and cherry juice with lifted violets, cloves and summer flowers. As it opens further more complex flower and bright red to black fruit characters appear due to the array of other varieties coming into play. The palate is juicy with weighty, red-fruited Shiraz dominated by plums, rhubarb, cherries, strawberries, mulberry, smoked bacon, white pepper and flower characters then a level of black currants and fragrant spice from the Cabernet and Petit Verdot appear. On the second sip a lovely mulberry tar-like character of Merlot starts to fill the palate with vivid, deep-red cherry flavours mixed with a hint of sage leaf, cloves and turmeric from the Petit Verdot which fans out across the palate with a grippy but polished finish."

**2004 Domaine la Montagnette Côtes du Rhone**

The vast appellation Côtes du Rhone contains over 100,000 acres of vineyards and has long been the source of some of France's greatest red wine bargains. Mostly blends of Grenache, Syrah and Carignane, Côtes du Rhones are produced by both ambitious small estates and bigger winemakers known for prestigious bottlings from other areas such as Cornas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. A parcel of old-vine Cinsaut purchased in 2004 adds a spicy kick to the meaty, berry-rich Montagnette. The 2004 is a 38% Grenache, 32% Syrah, 25% Cinsault

and 5% Mourvedre blend that just begs to be enjoyed with hearty foods. For warm weather, it is great with gourmet burgers on the grill, or barbeque chicken or pork. It is plenty big enough for a big thick steak; slather on the sauce, the flavors are big enough to handle it. In the fall, enjoy this with cool-weather roasts and stews. It is versatile and can even be enjoyed with rich seafood dishes, especially if tomatoes are involved. "A big step up . . . brimming with ripe stone fruits - peaches and cherries - accented by chocolate and spice. Silky tannins ease the flavors effortlessly across the palate, while the finish lingers elegantly." *The Wine Enthusiast*.

#### **2006 Cesari Due Torri Pinot Noir della Venezie IGT**

Most of us don't immediately associate Pinot Noir with Italy, but perhaps we should. It is little known but true that the best selling Pinot Noir in America is Cavit sourced from northern Italy, as is this Cesari Due Torri. Very extracted with a deep ruby color, this is a glass full of fruity black cherries, currants and raspberries with some earth and tar notes. Quite full-bodied for a Pinot, this has the guts to match up to filet mignon, tender meats, lamb, hearty chicken and sauced seafood dishes.

#### **2006 Garnacha de Fuego Old Vines**

Made from 100% Garnacha (the same grape that is called Grenache in France) from 60 to 80 year old vines, this fruit bomb from importer Jorge Ordonez shows why Spanish wines are among the best bargains on the planet. Even with the recent weakness of the dollar *vis a vis* the euro, Spanish labor and land costs are so much lower than those of other European countries and there is so much land under vine in Spain that the relative value of Spanish wine is stunning. The Fuego is a dark magenta color with aromas of plums, jam, sweet raspberries, and cherries, the same flavors following on the medium-bodied palate and flowing into a long, deep, dark fruit finish.

#### **2003 Care Crianza Cariñena**

A business blunder dropped this wine in our lap. The producer was visiting the U.S. to talk with the distributors who handled the first export of his wines. As

he was taking notes on which wines were doing what in which markets, he noticed that none of the American distributors had anything to report on how the Crianza was performing. After a few pointed questions, he discovered that the wine was languishing in a New York warehouse, having been "lost" in the transition from boat to truck. As the producer was anxious to bring in another load from Spain, he had no choice but to heavily discount the 2003 in order to make room for the next boat load. Thus we came by the best buy we made all year. This wine seriously tastes as if it were a \$30 bottle. It's dense, rich, and complex with layers of black currant, plum, blackberry, roasted nut and butter toffee aromas. In the mouth it is full-bodied and intensely fruity with coffee and spicy notes from the oak aging on a frame of smooth, supple tannins, good acidity and a fine minerality. A long finish of pronounced dark fruit flavors wraps up an elegantly rich package. Grill a steak and crack open one of these for a perfect evening.

#### **2002 Posis Montepulciano d'Abruzzo**

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is a deeply colored, full-bodied red wine made from, not surprisingly, the Montepulciano grape in the southern Italian region of Abruzzo (also not surprising). It should not be confused with *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, which is another full-bodied red wine made in southern Tuscany. Montepulciano is also used in other areas of Italy as well but does best in warmer climates. *The Wine Spectator* named this an Editor's choice and understated, "Lots of pretty blackberry and fresh leaf aromas. Medium-bodied, with light tannins and a fruity finish." A terrific match for any Mediterranean style food.

#### **Collector's Club Whites**

#### **2006 IL Triple Overtime Lake County Sauvignon Blanc**

Igor Larionov, the future National Hockey League Hall of Fame inductee, has leant his name to a stunning array of fine wines. This 100% Lake County Sauvignon Blanc shows aromas of fig, pear, and melon. The palate is full-bodied with mineral notes, grapefruit,

and holiday spice, the finish driven by a yeasty spice taste combined with bright citrus and a kiss of nectarine. Lake County, by the way, lies just to the north of Napa/ Sonoma and is increasingly becoming known for the excellence of its Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

#### **2005 Cinnabar Monterey Chardonnay**

Tropical fruit and honey fragrances give rise to flavors of ripe mango with touches of citrus, toasted oak and minerals. Full mouthfeel, bright acidity and a clean, lengthy finish. Serve with New England clam chowder and warm crusty French bread for a perfect winter's evening meal.

#### **2005 Moris Farms Vermentino**

A brilliant straw gold color and a bouquet of lemon chiffon pie that gives way to notes of apricot, apple, peach and almond announce this as a very special white wine. The palate carries through with this intense fruitiness on a crisp entry, good balance and body and a persistent finish of pear, pineapple, and apple flavors. Fermenting and ageing only in stainless steel gives the wine nothing but pure fruit expression.

#### **2006 Domaine Sigalas Santorini**

*The Wine Spectator* awarded this beauty 90 points saying, "A rich, exotic-tasting white with aromas and flavors of beeswax, apricot, tropical fruits and spice. Very creamy, this is filled with custard notes which extend on the mineral finish." The volcanic island of Santorini is the best place to grow Greece's great white variety, Assyrtiko, and Domaine Sigalas is its most important producer. Assyrtiko is a variety with good acidity that makes bone dry wines with citrusy aromas and earthy, mineral flavors. This is dry, crisp, fresh, and flavorful, a spectacularly food-friendly wine at its best, as you might expect, with seafood.

#### **2006 Joel Gott Monterey Chardonnay**

The Monterey appellation is one of the most diverse and climatically cool grape growing regions in California. The fog and cooling air from Monterey Bay slow maturity and allow the grapes to develop classic varietal characteristics, and a natural balance between sugar and acidity

by harvest time. This environment has produced a Chardonnay that has flavors of citrus, pear and jasmine with bright acid structure. To preserve these characteristics and retain the purity of the fruit, stainless steel tanks were used for fermentation and aging, and no malolactic fermentation was allowed. This is simply a clean, crisp, delicious Chardonnay unfettered by toasty oak or buttery lactic acid flavors.

**NV Erbaluce di Caluso Brut D.O.C.**

At 2005 VINITALY, the largest wine event of Italy, this Erbaluce di Caluso was voted the number one sparkling wine. The color is a full straw yellow with greenish reflections and excellent brilliance, with very fine perlage (which is the \$5 word for tiny bubbles). Intense fruity aromas of golden apple and peaches with bread crust and yeast notes introduce lively flavors of fresh exotic fruits, with very good sweet-acid balance, long lasting aromatic persistence and a delicate finish. Erbaluce is an ancient Roman grape that had gone relatively unnoticed for hundreds of years. Its revival was due in large part to the demise of the typewriter, of all things. The Olivetti typewriter company was for many years the economic driver of Caluso in the Piedmont region; the disappearance of that technology however, led to the felicitous rediscovery of a grape that had once been the toast of Roman Emperors.

**Collector’s Club Reds**

**2005 IL Triple Overtime Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel**

This is classic Dry Creek Valley Zin with explosive flavors of raspberry, blackberry and a touch of sweet vanilla from new French oak leading to a long silky finish. Sonoma County’s Dry Creek Valley is famous for its Zinfandels that typically exhibit a profile of ripe dark fruit characteristics including blackberry and black cherry aromas and flavors with a peppery spiciness, and good body with fine tannins. Probably the finest expressions of California Zinfandel are those from Dry Creek Valley and the Sierra foothills.

**2005 Fetish Winery The Watcher**

This is a remarkable wine that was the #2 Wine Spectator under \$20 red wine of the year. 100% Barossa Vally Shiraz with complex fruit aromas, soft tannins and a long finish, the wine is rich, ripe, and dense with blueberry jam, plums, currants, violets, and hints of black pepper, cinnamon and coffee on the nose. Big jammy dark fruit flavors on the palate are finished off by subtle spices and soft tannins. This wine is a New world fruit bomb with elegance – the best Australian Shiraz I tasted this year. The Wine Spectator seems to agree - they gave it 91 points. Decant or allow at least 30 minutes from opening before you have your first taste-it is tight and needs some time to open. But the wait is well worth it.

**2005 Filus Mendoza Malbec**

This is a single vineyard Malbec from the Lunlunta Valley in the Mendoza Region at the edge of the foothills of the Argentine Andes. A rich bouquet of ripe plum, mulberry, and mocha cream leads to rich dark fruit and cocoa flavors in a full-bodied, dense wine with sweet tannins and delicate balance.. The man behind this winery is Fred Franzia, the *infant terrible* of American winemaking, who was sued by the Napa Winegrowers Association for producing wine under the Napa Ridge label made with non-Napa fruit (he finally lost in the Supreme Court), who bought the Charles Shaw brand and turned it into “Two Buck Chuck,” who, as head of Bronco Wines produces more wine under more labels than anyone but Gallo. Say what you will about his business practices, he gives you unbelievable value for the price. This wine could compete very well against many so-called first growths from around the world at four or five times the price. You won’t find Franzia’s name anywhere on the bottle, but what’s in the bottle speaks loudly for itself.

**2005 Canavese Rosso DOC**

This is a wonderfully complex blend of 50% Nebbiolo, 35% Barbera, 15% Freisa and Neretto. Just 100 kilometers north of the Piedmont’s Barolo region, this shares the brooding intensity and density of texture typical of its southern neighbor. Clean, defined aromas of cherry,

blackberry, and blackcurrant in the nose are framed by hints of hay and pepper. A light vanilla note in the palate frames the lush fruit and firm tannins. The long finish goes on and on with lingering flavors of raspberry jam.

**2005 Joel Gott California Cabernet Sauvignon**

100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley, Lake County, and Lodi grapes, it spends 15 months in oak (25% New French, 75% 2-4 year old barrels). Purple and ruby red in color with aromas of blueberry, cassis and mocha. The entry on the palate is rich and fruit forward with jammy flavors, good structure and acidity. Sweet, balanced tannins leave an elegant finish.

**2005 Don Vincenzo Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio Rosso**

The Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio DOC is in Campania (front laces of Italy’s boot). The name means “tears of Christ” and there are many variations of the legend that gives rise to the name, e.g., Christ cries as he looks on the beauty of the Bay of Naples beneath him, *versus* His weeping as he looks on the wickedness of Lucifer and his minions who fell from heaven with such a crash that they formed the Bay of Naples, *versus* Lucifer grabbing a piece of Heaven as he was cast out and dropping it into the Bay and Christ, noticing the loss, weeping. In all the versions, however, His tears land on Mt Vesuvius on which spots, the first vines on earth grew. This gloriously complex wine is made from 85% Piediroso and 15% Aglianico. Ruby red in color, it exhibits an intense bouquet of ripe cherries and violets. In the mouth, black cherry, cranberry, and chocolate flavors explode on a well-rounded frame of youthful tannins and vibrant acidity.

**For Wine Lovers on Santa’s list Hiller’s has a limited number of autographed bottles of Igor Larionov’s Triple Overtime Wines. We also have 6 bottle Spanish wine and Tapas Samplers (from the same producer as the Care!)**