

Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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H.R. 5034

Last April U.S. Representative William Delahunt of Massachusetts introduced to the 111th Congress H.R. 5034, the Comprehensive Alcohol Regulatory Effectiveness (C.A.R.E.) Act of 2010, ostensibly to reaffirm the primacy of the states' authority to regulate the sales of alcohol. The bill attracted over 150 Republican and Democrat co-sponsors, and was referred to the Judiciary Committee, which held hearings and heard testimony in September. No vote on the bill was taken and it is unlikely to be taken up during this lame-duck session of the 111th, especially since the current Speaker, California's Nancy Pelosi has shown little interest in bringing it to the floor. However, the 112th Congress may be another matter. Although at least 40 of those co-sponsoring congressmen failed to get re-elected or retired, the presumptive new speaker, John Boehner of Ohio, has been a strong supporter of the wholesaler's lobby, which according to *The Wine Spectator*, essentially wrote the text of HR5034.

You will recall that the 21st Amendment to the Constitution repealed Prohibition and granted to the states the authority to regulate alcohol sales. Most states responded by establishing a "three tier" system in which producers

(wineries, breweries, distilleries, and importers) must sell to middleman wholesalers, who are the only authorized vendors to retailers, who then may sell the product to consumers. A few states opted to take over retail sales themselves by operating state liquor stores, but most went to the three-tier system with minor variations. By and large, direct to consumer sales were severely constrained to small quantity, on site, in person purchases. If you, as a Michigan resident wanted to buy a California Cabernet you read about that had no Michigan wholesaler representation, you had to travel to California to buy it and take possession so that you could ship it back home to yourself. Or, alternatively, you could ship it to a neighboring state that had a reciprocal arrangement with California to allow such deliveries on a limited basis.

Such was the state of affairs until 2005 when *Granholm v. Heald* was decided by the U.S Supreme Court. In that case, the Court ruled that laws in Michigan and New York violated the Constitution's Commerce Clause. The laws essentially banned shipments from out-of-state wineries to New York and Michigan residents, but allowed the wineries in those states to ship wine. The court held that any such regulations must apply equally to in-state and out-of-state businesses.

As a result many states have since 2005 begun allowing direct to consumer shipping and this increased freedom has been a boon to consumers who have more options and a boon to small producers who have greater access to markets previously closed to them for lack of wholesaler representation. Wholesalers, however, see this new landscape as a threat to their protected turf, which, indeed, it may be. After all, the logic of ‘Granholm’ can be applied equally to retailers, who may see advantage in avoiding the wholesale tier to buy directly from producers. In fact, the nation’s largest wine retailer, Costco, sued in federal court for the right to place a question on the Washington state ballot allowing exactly that. The ballot measure failed by a close margin after a campaign that saw Costco’s supporters outspent by the wholesalers by a huge margin.

The spending on HR 5034 is also eye opening. According to MAPLight.org, political contributions to congressmen by supporters of the bill are over 36 million dollars to date, more than 7.6 times the amount contributed by those opposed. Another rather ominous bit of information recently was the news that Warren Buffet’s Berkshire Hathaway has purchased a large wholesale distributor based in Georgia.

It is clear that the wholesale tier sees further de-regulation as a threat to dismantle the entire three-tier system. It is also clear that this battle is far from over. If you would like to learn more, *The Wine Spectator* has done

exemplary investigative reporting on the introduction of HR 5034 and continues to follow the story closely. hr5034.org makes the wholesaler’s case. freethegrapes.org has been for years the leading advocate for reducing barriers to free trade in the industry.

This is an issue that all wine lovers and wine consumers should be aware of and involved in. We urge you to learn more and to contact your congressman with your questions and your concerns.

When the Saints Go drinking?

Wine and religion seem to be inextricably intertwined: historically, culturally, and ritualistically. Jews thank the creator of the fruit of the vine at each Shabbat. The Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox communions celebrate the Eucharist as the literal transformation of wine to the blood of Christ. The major wine producing areas of Europe can trace their oenological and cultural roots to Greeks and Romans who worshipped Dionysus and Bacchus and to religious orders of the Middle Ages who preserved and perfected the art of viticulture. If you browse any wine aisle counting the number of labels with religious images and noting the regions and wineries named after saints or with other religious connotation, you’ll be surprised at how many there are and quickly impressed by how deep those connections go. Many a learned dissertation might be written on the role of religion in the evolution of wine, or on the

role both may play as solace and respite from the rigors of life. Our purpose in this edition of Jim Hiller’s Wine Club is much simpler. We simply collected a bunch of wines that we like that have some (sometimes tenuous) connection to the sacred and present them as a holiday present.

Taster’s Table Whites

NV Grand Provence Estate Angel’s Tears White

This delightful white quaffer from the Western Cape of South Africa is a blend of Chenin Blanc and Muscat with exotic peach and honeysuckle aromas and flavors. A nice summer sipper, or a great match with holiday desserts or Asian dishes.

2008 Santa Rita Casablanca Chardonnay Reserva

The Santa Rita 120 label has been a standby value brand at the low end of the price spectrum in the Chilean section. Their Reserva level (and the Medalla Real tier) show some impressive sophistication and elegance. From the Casablanca Valley, this Chardonnay shows nice tropical fruit and grapefruit with soft vanilla and nut undertones. A touch of butter on the finish and a plump mouth feel make a nice pairing for seafood.

2008 St Hallet Barossa Poacher’s Blend

A blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon with a splash of Riesling, the Poacher’s Blend is one of the most refreshing and food friendly Aussie whites on the market. The fruit is entirely from

the Barossa Valley, the wine is crisp and dry but with pronounced fruitiness.

**2008 Chateau Ste Michelle
Columbia Valley
Gewurztraminer**

Peach, litchi, pears, and grapefruit – all the classic aromas of the grape and always a great value. In fact *Wine & Spirits* had this vintage as one of their Top 100 Values of the year.

2007 Bishop's Peak Chardonnay

Located halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles on California's South Central Coast, Bishop's Peak is an ancient volcano that towers above the city of San Luis Obispo. Bishop's Peak wines are handcrafted by Talley Vineyards from grapes grown in the Talley family's vineyards as well as those purchased from local growers. Classic Central Coast chard with gobs of tropical fruit.

**2008 PJ Valkenberg Madonna
Liebfraumilch**

Hints of herbal notes add to this harmonious ensemble of rich fruitiness and delicate sweetness, perfectly balanced by a mild acidity and a lush seductive bouquet.

Taster's Table Reds

**NV Pietra Santa Master's Blend
Sacred Stone**

The blend is predominately Merlot, Zinfandel, Dolcetto, and Sangiovese aged in French and American oak barrels. Ripe and juicy with cherry and plum flavors and a hint of earth and spice. A

great wine for pasta or simply as a terrific glass of red.

**2008 Di Majo Norante
Sangiovese**

Vintage after vintage, this has been a top value. This time around Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* gave it 90 points: "An incredibly delicious, full-bodied wine with gorgeous clarity and definition . . . I can't think of too many estates that can match Di Majo Norante for sheer value."

2005 St Francis Red Splash

Full-bodied and versatile, St Francis Red is a succulent blend of 48% Merlot, 28% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Syrah, 3% Zinfandel and 6 % Mixed Blacks (Cabernet Franc, Grenache, Alicante, Malbec). Lush with ripe red fruit flavors and spicy aromas.

**2008 St Hallet Gamekeeper's
Red Barossa**

"Medium-weight, refined and nicely focused to show cherry, raspberry and bacon flavors, lingering on the finish. Shiraz, Grenache and Touriga" 88 points in *The Wine Spectator*.

**2008 Antinori Sangiovese 'Santa
Cristina'**

Piero Antinori's father, Niccolò, originally introduced Santa Cristina in 1946 as a Chianti Classico. However, with the passage of the 1984 DOCG laws - spearheaded by Piero Antinori - requiring lower vineyard yields, Chianti Classico grapes became so complex and rich that they required more aging than this fruity fresh wine should have to maintain its style and character.

Therefore, with the 1987 vintage Santa Cristina moved away from the Chianti Classico designation, and with the 1994 vintage Antinori began including 10% Merlot to the blend to add soft, open fruit nuances to the wine.

**2007 Domaine St Martin de la
Garrigue Cuvee Reservee**

A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot from the south of France where Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Carignan reign. Ripe blackberry and black currant fruit, delicate spiciness, and a super-velvety mouth feel.

Collector's Club Whites

**2009 St Andre de Figuiere
Vieille Vignes Blanc**

A blend of Vermentino, Semillon, and a splash of Ugni Blanc (the grape from which cognac is made), this white is made from bio-dynamically grown fruit from old vines. Impressive in its complexity, this is a wine to take seriously and linger over as it will evolve and morph in the glass over the course of your evening.

**2008 Chateau Ste Michelle
Indian Wells Chardonnay**

The warmth of the Wahluke Slope produces Chardonnay with an appealing tropical fruit character and rich texture. The Indian Wells Chardonnay delivers ripe tropical pineapple flavors and showcases the luscious opulence of Washington fruit.

**2007 Three Saints Santa Maria
Valley Chardonnay**

Characterized by its strong impression of acidity and by a

finish that lingers on the palate, this shows papaya, grapefruit, lemon oil and tropical flower aromas balanced with a creamy hazelnut impression. On the palate the wine is all citrus: lemon rind, lemon curd and lemon blossoms.

2007 Paradise Ridge Russian River Chardonnay

Green apple, light spice and toasty oak. Pair with caramel popcorn. Really.

2008 Domaine Albert Bichot 'Clos de l'Eglise' Macon-Villages

100% oak free Chardonnay that is fermented and matured entirely in stainless steel. It has a nice brilliance with a green gold tint with fresh aromas of wild peach and white flowers. Spirited and big, it is fleshy and tasty with great length. This wine will be very good with fish, particularly freshwater and with cold meats, also with shellfish,

2007 Domaine de Saint Laurent-l'Abbaye Pouilly Fume

The Sauvignon Blanc fruit is from 23-30 year old vines grown in clay soils and vinified in stainless steel. It shows a bright attractive nose of lemon, melon, tropical fruit and soft chalky minerality. The palate is clean with little wisps of grass, stone and good weight which carries the bright juicy acidity all the way through.

Collector's Club Reds

2006 Wirra Wirra Church Block

The 2006 Church Block is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz

and Merlot, sourced entirely from the McClaren Vale, matured in 70% French and 30% American oak barrels for 18 months prior to bottling. Lifted aromas of fresh berry fruit, particularly mulberry, blackberry and raspberry, with hints of licorice, cinnamon and mocha.

2006 Santa Margherita Chianti Classico

Known in the U. S. primarily for their Pinot Grigio, which is the best selling super premium restaurant pour in America, Santa Margherita shows here an exemplary representation of the traditional, distinctive characteristics of the Sangiovese grape from the Chianti Classico zone: elegant, with tannic austerity and complex aromas.

2005 Chateau Ste Michelle Canoe Ridge Merlot

The Canoe Ridge Estate Merlot is a refined and elegant Merlot with plenty of concentration. The 2005 bottling exhibits complex aromas of black cherries and spice with dusty, restrained tannins. This is a medium-bodied versatile wine with food, which will not overwhelm your meal or your palate, just your taste buds.

2005 Saint Francis Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon

The St. Francis Sonoma Cab is styled to emphasize rich varietal character and body in a classic Sonoma style. The fragrant Cabernet aromas of cassis and black fruit are underscored by discreet notes of vanilla, cedar and tobacco, and carry into ripe, intense berry fruit flavors on the

palate. The structure is firm and well balanced, with excellent depth and supple, generous tannins. These impressions are confirmed on the finish, which is long and marked by complex notes of spice and oak.

2008 Vinicola Mas dels Frares Tinto Priorat

“The 2008 Mas del Frares is an unoaked blend of 50% Carinena, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 20% Garnacha. The nose gives up earth notes, mineral, lavender, and black cherry. Substantial on the palate with good density and ripe flavors, this friendly effort is a good introduction to the region and an outstanding value.” 89 points *The Wine Advocate*.

2006 Chateau Puynormand Montagne St Emilion

One of the principal red wine areas of Bordeaux along with the Médoc, Graves and Pomerol, Saint-Émilion's history goes back to prehistoric times and is a World Heritage site. The Romans planted vineyards in what was to become Saint-Émilion as early as the 2nd century. The town was named after the monk Émilion, a traveling confessor, who settled in a hermitage carved into the rock there in the 8th century. It was the monks who followed him that started up the commercial wine production in the area.

The Puynormand is from with old vines and mostly made with Merlot with about 10% Cabernet Franc. This is a powerful wine with a sustained finish, great balance and significant ageing potential.