



The Wine Corner

2017 San Francisco Vintners Market – All the Stars

By Pierre DuMont

I have been writing this wine column for 14 years, so most of the wine events that come to town I have attended and have tracked for many years. I look forward to the annual Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (ZAP) tasting, Gambero Rosso Italian tasting and the Rhone Rangers gathering.

But last month I was pleasantly surprised to discover a new wine event – new to me at least. It was the San Francisco Vintners Market. The organizers filled up most of one of the large pavilions at Fort Mason with hundreds of, mostly small, wineries pouring their wares. The difference was that unlike all the other tastings I attend, the wines were available for purchase. So if you found a wine you really liked, you could buy a few bottles right on the spot from the producer. It saves a lot of traipsing all over town or scouring the internet when wine lovers can buy directly from the producers – without making the trek to the winery.

What I loved most about the tasting was being introduced to so many wineries that I had never heard of. After all these years as a wine writer, I sometimes feel as if I have discovered all the worthy California producers. So it was exhilarating to encounter so many wineries, all new to me, that were quietly turning out some amazing wines. Almost every wine in this review is a new discovery and I am happy to share some of California's undiscovered gems.

The following wines were the stars of the 2017 SF Vintners Market.

• 2014 Vokel Pinot Noir Russian River Valley

When you taste a lot of wines in one day at a big event like the Vintners Market, sometimes they all start to blend together. When I encountered this wine I immediately knew I was onto something unique and different. In a world of watery, “finesse” Pinots, this was a shot of pure powerful dark fruit flavors. It was intense and vibrant in the mouth with almost late harvest aspects. It reminded me of a great Italian Amarone and would be best sipped by a fire on a cold night. It was my favorite wine of the tasting. www.vokelcellars.com

• 2014 Ursa Tannat Lone Meadow Vineyard (Best Value)

Tannat is an obscure grape that grows pretty much only in Gascony in France and in, of all places, Uruguay. Now it looks like there is some in the Sierra foothills of California. The grape is known for having the highest levels of tannin and resveratrol – the chemical in grape skins that seems to ward off heart disease. This wine is not as hugely tannic as some I have had and is full of blackberry fruit and earth. It is drinking well now but will improve with time



The 2014 Ursa Tannat was rated as the Best Value.

in the cellar. www.ursavineyards.com

• 2012 Miracle Hill Syrah

Several winemakers have confided to me recently that Syrah is a really hard wine to sell in America. Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Zinfandel seem to get the lion's share of attention. I don't get it. Syrah is to me one of the most noble grapes on the planet. This bottle confirms its nobility. It has gorgeous aromas of violets, herbs and bacon. In the mouth it is lush and full bodied with gobs of blackberry fruit and plenty of structure to last for a decade or more. Very impressive. www.miraclehillvineyards.com

• 2013 ANKH Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

Named for the ancient Egyptian symbol for “life”, this was a totally new winery to me. It had classic Cabernet aromas of cassis and currants followed by medium body with blueberry fruit and some spice notes. It was balanced and well-structured with fairly tame tannins on the finish. Should improve with cellaring for seven or eight years. www.ankhwines.com

• 2014 Herb Lamb Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon

Intense and concentrated with a deep core of ripe currant, blueberry and cassis. The well-integrated oak gives a touch of vanilla. The abundant tannins on the finish are not too harsh or strident and should set the wine up for improvement with aging. www.herblambvineyards.com

• 2016 T. Berkley Cot

This winery uses the Loire Valley name for a grape that is everywhere else called Malbec. Though now known as the major grape of Argentina, Malbec is originally from France and has been grown for many years in Cahors and the Loire Valley. This wine comes from the Anderson Valley's Yorkville Highlands and is not only unusual but strikingly charming. It has a lovely floral nose and is delicate and light on the palate and stuffed with lus-

cious cherry fruit. Kudos to T. Berkley for breaking out of the box with something new and delicious. www.tberkleywines.com

• 2013 Hertelendy Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

This was my first time trying this producer's wine but it is evident they are very serious about crafting high quality Napa Valley Cabernet. This Bordeaux blend is dark, dense and concentrated, with rich layers of currant, boysenberry, coffee and minerals. This is a deep, plush, complex and engaging Cabernet which is also exhibits finesse and style. www.hertelendy.com

• 2013 Spoto Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Station

This is a blend of 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Cabernet Franc, 10% Merlot, and 4% Malbec and the fruit comes from the famous To Kalon Vineyard in Napa Valley. It is supple, graceful and complex, with a core of fruit built around plum, cherry, herb and cedar flavors that keep revealing extra nuances. It has the firmness of structure to improve in the cellar for a couple of decades. www.spotowines.com

• 2014 Le Chanceux Melange

The only clue the label gives us about the wine is that it starts with Cabernet Sauvignon and then other mystery grapes are blended in. Whatever they are, it works. A big, rich, intense and tightly focused style with layers of cherry, earth and savory herbs. Picks up a nice touch of anise and ends with ripe, integrated tannins and a dash of oak. www.le-chanceux.com

• 2014 Wargin Petite Sirah

Petite Sirah has always been one of my favorite grapes and this one does not disappoint. It shows shy aromas of currant with mocha and vanilla. It is deep, complex, intense and concentrated. The long persistent finish has ripe tannins with layers of fruit and oak. www.warginwines.com

• 2013 Bougetz Cellars “Jovana”

This interesting blend of 72% Merlot and 28% Cabernet Franc hails from Napa Valley. Ripe plum and blackberry aromas lead to a tight, intense core of flavors, shaded by soft tannins. Hints of mineral, sage and berry show on the finish. Should last for up to a decade. www.bougetzcellars.com

• 2010 Llamas Family Syrah Stagecoach Vineyard

The Stagecoach vineyard on top of Atlas Peak is a great terroir for Syrah and this classy wine showcases Syrah at its best. Smooth, rich, dense and concentrated, yet also elegant, this unfolds with blueberry and spice flavors and exhibits great structure and balance. Will be even better with a few years of cellaring. www.llamasfamilywines.com

• 2014 Pellet Chardonnay Sunchase Vineyard

Fragrant floral, pear and honeysuckle aromas carry over to the palate, offering a light dose of vanilla oak. Shows a rich, complex aftertaste, with apricot and peach flavors that run deep. Delicious now, it should last for four or five years. www.pelletestate.com

• 2013 Canard Zinfandel

Another winery new to me produces a now fairly rare wine – a Napa Valley Zinfandel. Having largely been replaced by Cabernet, this bottle shows how great Napa Valley can be for Zinfandel. Ripe and expressive, with concentrated berry, earth and pepper flavors that are sharply focused. Intense and powerful. Finishes well with soft smooth tannins. www.canardvineyard.com

• 2011 Stella Monsi Cabernet Sauvignon Konrad Vineyard

This fruit, which hails from Mt. Veeder in Napa, yields a big, rich, intensely flavored Cabernet with firm, chunky tannins wrapped around a core of blackberry, cherry, earth and sage, ending with big tannins. As is typical with mountain fruit, this wine could use some age and will improve for at least a couple of decades. www.stellamonsi.com

• 2012 Domenico Nebbiolo Amador County

I was so excited to come across this wine, as I am a huge fan of Nebbiolo from Italy (Barolo and Barbaresco). It is rarely planted outside northern Italy. Unlike Sangiovese and other Italian grapes, it has not found a welcome home in America. This wine had a hint of the traditional tar and roses nose of Barolo but with lots more fruit and less acid and structure in the mouth. It is definitely a “California version” of Nebbiolo and a very pleasant wine. Break out the pizza or pasta and let the good times roll. www.domenicowinery.com



2014 Vokel Pinot Noir Russian River Valley.

• 2014 Honorama Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley

I love to come across tiny obscure little family wineries that are doing a great job. This wine is named in honor of the winemaker's father who came to Napa from Mexico and worked as a picker in the fields. He worked his way up the ranks and turned himself into a self-taught winemaker. This shows currant, herb and cherry aromas that carry over to the palate in this beautifully concentrated wine. It has enough depth and richness to improve in the bottle for many years. A fabulous effort. www.honoramacellars.com

• 2014 Estate 1856 Petit Verdot

Of the five major grapes of Bordeaux, Petit Verdot is the one least often bottled by itself. I have never really understood why as it makes a lovely drink all by it-

self. This has a perfumed nose of violets and blueberries with lush black currant and plum fruit on the palate with a touch of mocha and caramel. As is typical for the varietal the tannins are fairly massive and a few years of cellaring will improve the already delicious wine. www.estate1856.com

• 2012 Huge Bear Cabernet Franc

Hailing from Napa Valley, this is a good example of what the Cab Franc grape can do in California. Smooth and polished, it glows with currant and blueberry fruit that lingers on the sleek finish with soft tannins. This wine is delicious and ready to drink now. www.hugebearwines.com

• 2015 Perfusion Zinfandel Howell Mountain

In Napa Valley, mountain grown grapes often show a greater intensity than valley floor grapes. That can be seen in brawny, intense Zinfandel from Howell Mountain. Complex aromas of earth, wild berry and cedar are taut and focused on the palate, with crisp acidity and tannins in a long aftertaste. Drink now; will last for five years.

• 2012 The Ox Napa Valley Red Blend

This aptly named wine shows plenty of brute strength. A blend of Petite Sirah, Syrah and Merlot it is dark hued, rich and concentrated, with layers of berry fruit that is full and vibrant. Finishes with a good dash of oak from the French oak barrels. This wine is built to last a couple of decades and would be a great partner to a lamb or beef stew. www.theoxwine.com

• 2015 V. Sattui “La Merica”

Named in honor of the first generation of the V. Sattui family to emigrate to “La Merica” from Italy, this wine harkens back to the old field blends that the Italian pioneers planted in Napa. Zinfandel, Syrah, Grenache, Petite Sirah, Mourvedre and Alicante Bouchet combine to create a big juicy wine with plum and blackberry fruit and smooth, elegant tannins. It is ripe and ready to drink and would go great with grilled burgers or steaks. www.vsattui.com

• 2015 Passaggio GSM Red Wine

This is a Rhone style blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvedre. It is ripe and distinctive with roasted meat overtones to the blueberry and plum flavors. Finishes with intensity, lingering flavors and smooth tannins. Drinks well now and should last for five or six years. www.passaggiowines.com

• 2013 Acumen Cabernet Sauvignon

This was my first time trying this winery, and a happy first time it was. The Mountainside Cabernet is harmonious and well-proportioned with well-integrated currant and blackberry fruit that's supported by firm tannins and lively acidity. Finishes with a long, detailed aftertaste. It will improve in the cellar and last for a good decade. www.acumenwine.com