

ANDREA'S A-LIST™ SEPTEMBER 2006

The dog days of...Autumn? – Normally I'd have concluded that phrase with "August" but this year the heat is on...and on, and on. While Napa Valley's harvest weather has so far been mild, delaying the ripening of the red grapes in fact, the heat across the country has forced us to push our club shipments as late as possible in the month and to hold a lot of re-order shipments to await milder temperatures. Thanks for your patience with this—with October we hope to be back on a more normal mid-month schedule for club shipments.

Why so hot? In wine circles the discussion of global warming has really heated up, pun intended. At the July Taste³ conference that I wrote about, one of the speakers presented data extrapolating current temperature trends 50 years hence. The conclusion was that at current rates of increased average temperatures the Napa Valley in 50 years would be too hot for quality viticulture, and Germany would become suited for growing red grapes. It is a sobering thought, and left me wondering what can we, as individuals, do besides more carpooling and turning off the lights? I'd love to hear your thoughts and recommendations for any good reading on the subject.

Fig Update – We are in the thick of it! My tree is loaded. I have so far had time to make only one batch of fig preserves but they turned out pretty well considering I hadn't done any canning since I was eleven. We also made a kick-butt pizza on the grill with figs, goat cheese and arugula, and have been giving away a lot of figs. I was thinking I'd be able to work out some regular trades of figs for heirloom tomatoes, but I clearly don't have the right friends, at least for that purpose. It turns out that all my friends and neighbors are winemakers who get so busy with harvest they never bother to plant tomatoes because they ripen at the same time as grapes, so no one can find the time to pick them or eat them. Not that I am complaining because of course friends who make wine have other good stuff to trade if you know what I mean!

Re-ordering the Jean-Marc Bouley Volnay – So many of you loved that wine and we have run out of it! I am working on getting the last few bottles from the winery but of course they are in France, so the wine most likely will not be available until the end of November. That is the perfect timing for a holiday gift to yourself or a wine lover you want to impress, so I will send an email when we get a bit more.

This month's wines: Probably one of the most unusual things about the A-List™ club is how few of the "popular," i.e., Napa Cabernet and California Chardonnay, we ship. That is because the price/quality relationship in these crowded categories is something I pay extra attention to. Putting it plainly, I think there is so much average wine out there in these styles that I hold the bar even higher for them, and only ship examples that I think are E-X-T-R-A-O-R-D-I-N-A-R-Y. You agreed with me on the cult-level quality of the Emilio's Terrace Oakville Cabernet from last May, and I am sure you will feel the same way about this month's Chardonnay. It is simply a stunner, and not just "for the price," which is incredible. We tasted this repeatedly with great French white Burgundies at five times the price, and it won *every* time. It is the most "Burgundian" California Chardonnay I have ever had. I am also thrilled to have gotten a little bit of the new vintage of Olympian Peggy Fleming's amazing Santa Cruz Syrah for this shipment, and of the Grand Veneur Chateauneuf-du-Pape. Once again I am thankful we locked down our allocation before all the fancy critics' scores were published. Enjoy!

INSPIRATION CHARDONNAY, RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY 2004

Toasted hazelnut, vanilla, baked apple dumpling, smokiness...these are typical descriptors for French Meursault from the Burgundy region, but this is California wine. In my blind tastings this amazing bottling repeatedly bested top French white Burgundies at three to five times the price. I discovered the winemaker Jon Phillips last year and tasted everything he makes, and I really believe he is one of the most gifted winemakers in California right now. To me, the incredibly high quality and tiny quantities of this wine put it in a category I hesitate to utter: "cult." But it is that good.

Our club will deplete a major portion of Jon's total production. Before it is gone you should not miss out on the chance to get a few more bottles *to put away*. I say that because, as good as it is now, I really think it will get even better, not over a decade but over the next 2-3 years. I really believe it is on a path to add even more of those beautiful old-white-Burgundy bottle-age characters: mushroom and consommé, sherry and honey. This recipe will showcase all of that beautifully.

Inspiration Chardonnay, Russian River Valley 2004 \$19

FARFALLE WITH PINE NUTS AND BUTTERNUT SQUASH

Serves 6

1 butternut squash, peeled, seeded and cut into 1-inch dice
Olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper
1 ¼ lb dry farfalle (bow-tie pasta)
1 c pine nuts, toasted (or substitute chopped walnuts)
1 T brown sugar
2 t grated orange peel
1 t grated lemon peel
¼ t ground cinnamon
¼ t freshly-grated nutmeg
1 ½ T unsalted butter
6 T freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

Preheat the oven to 375°F. In a rimmed baking dish, toss the squash with olive oil, salt and pepper, and roast for 30 minutes until brown and tender. Remove from the oven and reserve.

About 15 minutes before the squash is ready, bring a pot of salted water to a boil. Cook the pasta until al dente. While the pasta is cooking, mix the pine nuts with the brown sugar, half the orange and lemon zest and half the spices. When the pasta is ready, drain it, toss it with the butter in a large bowl, then add the pine nut mixture and squash. Toss to mix all the ingredients thoroughly. Arrange the pasta on a platter, and sprinkle the remaining orange and lemon zest and spices over it. Top each serving with 1 tablespoon of the grated Parmigiano Reggiano.

FLEMING JENKINS SYRAH, SANTA CRUZ 2004

I am thrilled to have the encore vintage of this fantastic Santa Cruz Syrah for the A-List™. Last year when we were able to get a few cases of the 2003 I pointed out that there were very few really great American Syrahs with the varietal character – sweet and savory spice and earthy stink – that to me define real Syrah. My experience with American Syrahs in general is that while they can be very lush with berry fruit, without that characteristic spice and earth it's as though you could just as easily be drinking Zinfandel or Merlot. I am thrilled to say I think this is changing. Over the past year I have increasingly tasted American Syrahs that do have the Syrah personality that I think is so compelling. This is certainly one, and there are others coming down the pike for this club. What I have discovered is that the trick seems to be climate – the best Syrahs I've tried seem to come from places that are a bit cooler – the Russian River Valley, parts of Washington's Columbia Valley, even Carneros. I think the coolness helps preserve some of that spice and terroir.

This Santa Cruz bottling showcases that logic perfectly. The grapes are sourced from very near the Pacific Ocean, in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains. Olympian Peggy Fleming and her husband Greg Jenkins made only 70 cases of this wine. They also make a great Syrah from Madden Ranch (as in football guru John Madden) that almost got the nod for the club in lieu of this bottling. But ultimately I chose the Santa Cruz for its earthiness, in spite of the fact that my football-crazed household was cheering for the Madden Ranch. We did enjoy pairing the wine with my football-Sunday pot roast – the fennel and herbs bring out the earthy-spicy Syrah character beautifully.

Fleming-Jenkins Syrah, Santa Cruz 2004 \$32

SYRAH-BRAISED POT ROAST WITH ONIONS

Serves 6

Serve this roast and its sauce over wide noodles, mashed potatoes, polenta or couscous.

4 lbs. boneless beef chuck roast
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 ½ t fennel seed
2 t vegetable oil
2 lb onions, thinly sliced
2 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 t chopped fresh thyme (or ¼ t dried thyme)
1 t chopped fresh rosemary (or ¼ t dried)
1 bay leaf
1 ½ c dry red wine
1 c water
1 T demi-glace, optional

Put oven rack in middle position and preheat to 325°F. Rinse the beef and pat dry with paper towels. Place the beef on a piece of foil and sprinkle on all sides with salt and pepper. Sprinkle half the fennel seeds on one side of the roast and rub in with your hands

to make the seeds adhere. Repeat on the other side with the remaining fennel seeds.

Heat the oil in an oven-proof, 5-quart, wide heavy pot over medium high heat until hot but not smoking. Brown beef well on all sides, about 15 minutes total, and transfer to a plate. Add the onions to the pot and sauté, stirring, until pale golden, about 10 minutes. Add garlic, thyme, rosemary, 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Cook, stirring, for two minutes. Add the wine, water and demi-glace, if using, and bring to a boil. Return the beef to the pot and cover (either with an oven-proof lid or foil). Place in the oven and braise, turning after one hour, until beef is tender – about three hours total. Let stand uncovered in onion sauce about 30 minutes before serving.

DOMAINE GRAND VENEUR CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE, RHONE 2004

The Chateauneuf-du-Pape appellation is one of France's most ancient and storied. It is named for the 13th century countryside castle (now a ruin) built when the Papal court moved from Rome to Avignon. Aside from building that city's famed papal palace, the court planted vines and built a countryside castle atop the rocky soils that infuse amazing character into the wines.

As I mentioned in July's notes when we included the 2004 Champauvins Cotes du Rhone from this wonderful estate, the 2004 vintage in the southern Rhone has sparked great excitement in the wine trade. Overall, the wines have expansive, concentrated fruit as well as great structure, so they taste chewy and spicy and juicy now, and can be expected to age beautifully, too. This Chateauneuf-du-Pape is a superlative example of that dynamic. It is a notable notch better – specifically more intense and concentrated - than the 2003, which was a big A-List™ hit last fall. Part of the reason it is so tasty and so food-worthy now is the high proportion of Grenache in the blend – 70%, complimented with 20% Syrah and 10% Mourvedre. The Grenache contributes black cherry fruit and a meat stock-leather note. The Syrah lends structure and black pepper character, and the Mourvedre a licorice quality. I believe it will peak in 5 years and drink nicely for another 5-7 thereafter if properly stored.

I recommend you try this wine now and, if you like it, consider getting a few more bottles for your Thanksgiving gathering or your cellar (or both). I think it will be fantastic with the whole roast turkey and gravy, cranberry sauce and stuffing thing. Here is a delicious and extremely simple pasta recipe with which to sample the wine. I love how the bitterness of the broccoli rabe offsets the wine's earthiness, emphasizing the fruit.

Domaine Grand Veneur Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Rhone 2004

\$39.99

LINGUINE WITH BROCCOLI RABE

Serves 4

3/4 pound linguine fini or other thin, flat noodle

1 lb broccoli rabe, washed, tough stems removed and the remaining leaves and stems cut into two inch pieces

1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil

3 large cloves garlic, finely chopped

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil for drizzling

Freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup grated Manchego cheese, or more to taste

Coarse sea salt such as fleur de sel

Add a tablespoon of salt to a large pot filled with 4 quarts of water. Bring to a boil. Add the pasta and cook according to package directions until al dente. When pasta is 5 minutes from finished, add broccoli rabe to pot and continue to cook until pasta is done. Drain in a colander. Meanwhile, cook olive oil and garlic in a large heavy skillet until garlic is soft and pale golden, stirring frequently, 3-4 minutes. Turn off the heat and use tongs to add the pasta to the skillet, tossing to combine. Season to taste with fleur de sel, lots of black pepper, additional olive oil and grated cheese.