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Wine Pick of the Week (70)

Wine Pick of the Week for April 4, 2014

2007 Brut Rosé

Caraccioli Cellars

Santa Lucia Highlands

Alcohol: 12%

Suggested Retail: \$57

"Taste California Travel discovered this week's 'Pick' on a recent visit to Carmel. In an all-too-brief visit to the winery's tasting room we had time to try the Brut Rosé and a still wine, their 2009 Pinot Noir (\$47).

"Most Monterey County wineries are situated close to their vineyards. While they have access to some wonderful fruit, most of the vineyards supplying it are off the tourist track. Lately these wineries have been opening tasting rooms closer to where the visitors are—the City of Monterey, Carmel Valley and the City of Carmel, itself. We'd not visited the Caraccioli Cellars tasting room on Dolores Street in Carmel by the Sea, nor in fact had we even heard of Caraccioli. It was a delightful surprise. Though the room has a sophisticated vibe (appropriate for quality sparkling wine), the servers were friendly, as well as knowledgeable.

"Though Caraccioli Cellars has very small production (less than 1,000 cases of the 2007 vintage of our reviewed wine were produced—759 of the standard 750ml bottles and 115 magnums), it has attracted a world class winemaker, Michel Salgues, who made wine for Roederer Estate for 20 years. He's now doing consulting and works with the Caraccioli's other winemaker, Joe Rawitzer.

"The 2007 Brut Rosé pairs the restrained power of great California fruit with the elegance and style of French Champagne. It's fuller, rounder than any blanc de noirs and even more so than most rosés, but still expresses a delicacy. The rest of the afternoon could happily have been spent tasting other Caraccioli wines—or maybe even having another glass of the rosé—but we'd spent enough time to discover an exemplary sparkling wine."

Published in Wine Pick of the Week

Tagged under Monterey County Santa Lucia Highlands Carmel sparkling wine

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March 28, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

2012 Misterra Pinot Noir

J Vineyards & Winery

Russian River Valley

Alcohol: 14.3%

Suggested Retail: \$50

"Our Picks of the Week are often selected because they just taste wonderful to us. Sometimes, however, we select a wine or a beer because there's a story to tell and we think we should bring that story to our readers. Such is the case with this week's Pick, the 2012 Misterra Pinot Noir from J Vineyards.

http://www.tastecaliforniatravel.com/index.php?option=com\_k2&view=itemlist&task=category&id=102:wine-pick-of-the-week&Itemid=251[4/7/2014 9:07:07 AM]

"J Vineyards produces excellent California sparkling wine from Sonoma County. Their vineyard sources supply high quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay for those products. Though grapes for sparkling wines are picked at much lower sugar levels (less ripe) than those for still wines, good fruit is good fruit and we've enjoyed wonderful Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs picked from riper grapes bearing this label.

"The *Misterra* Pinot Noir comes from Russian River grapes, as do several other Pinot Noirs from this producer. What's quite different about this wine is that, in addition to Pinot Noir, it contains Pinotage (6%) and Pinot Meunier (4%). These lesser known varieties making up 10% of the blend are valid on their own, but are not usually (and maybe never before?) included in any bottlings labeled 'Pinot Noir.' Pinotage, a red variety, is sometimes called 'the work horse grape of South Africa,' but is grown in small quantities in California and a few other parts of the world. Pinot Meunier is another red grape that is often a component in French sparkling wines made in Champagne.

"The winery suggests that 'sturdy, rustic flavors' (perhaps from the Pinotage?) and 'aromatic floral and dried fruit' aromas (presumably due, at least in part, from the Pinot Meunier) are evident in this wine. That may be so, but at the time of tasting (March 2014—very early in the life of a quality red wine from the 2012 vintage), the *Misterra* Pinot Noir seemed more intriguing as a noble experiment than as a \$50 Pinot Noir. Had it borne a proprietary name and eschewed the Pinot Noir identity, we might have judged it on its own unusual qualities and thought it better, though pricey. However, tasting it as a Pint Noir, we found it lacked the charm and sophistication we would have expected of a bottle of this variety priced at \$50. Perhaps we'll retaste this wine sometime in the future and realize that the concept was valid, but that it just needed more time to show its quality. At this point, though, we'd suggest you opt for any of the several other Pinot Noirs that J Vineyards & Winery produces."

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March 21, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2012 Pinot Noir

**Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery**

**Russian River Valley**

**Alcohol: 14.3%**

**Suggested Retail: \$38**

"Prominent aromas of raspberry and cola, followed by subtler aspects of cinnamon and nutmeg, currently referred to as 'brown spices' in many reviews. Dark cherry and cranberry fruit show on the palate in this powerful Pinot from one of California's best growing regions for the variety. As with most examples of high-quality Pinot Noir, be they from California or Burgundy, there are layered subtleties. We found an elusive herbal quality (sage?), that came and went, as did a bit of dark chocolate. Moderately-long finish in the thoroughly satisfying wine."

Food Affinity: "Salmon is the hip pairing often suggested for Pinot Noir, but we feel that at 14.3% alcohol, this wine is too big for all but the boldest of salmon preparations. If we could pull a mallard out of the freezer to roast, we'd go in that direction (domestic ducks or geese would also work, especially if prepared with a sauce or marinade including red fruit). Two more accessible ideas might be pan roasted pork chops in some brown sauce incorporating sage and thyme or grilled Portobello mushrooms that have been marinated in a vinaigrette with garlic and parsley for an hour or so."

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March 7, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2011 Cabernet Sauvignon

**Hogue Cellars**

**Columbia Valley (Washington)**

**Alc.: 13.5%**

March 14, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2011 Cabernet Sauvignon

**Souverain Winery**

**North Coast (California)**

**Alcohol: 13.6%**

**Suggested Retail: \$15**

"Composition is 81% Cabernet Sauvignon (law requires a minimum of 75%), augmented by traditional Bordeaux blending grapes of Petit Verdot (7%) and Cabernet Franc (5%), and two other varieties native to France's Rhone Valley, Petite Sirah (5%) and Syrah (2%). Such a mélange wouldn't be allowed in France, but their laws are often a codification of centuries-old tradition, rather than restrictions that actually guarantee a better wine. If Souverain winemaker Ed Killian decides such a combination is what he wants, we're inclined to think it's what works best for this particular bottling.

"We get aromas of vanilla and mocha, followed by a lot of blackberry-like fruit. Some cherry notes are there, too. Reasonably long finish. Restrained alcohol level (13.6%) and substantial tannin leads us to believe this modestly-priced Cab will age well. Certainly it will get better for at least the next five years or so."

Food Affinity: "Of course, Cabernet Sauvignon is a natural pairing with beef and lamb, but we think the mocha quality and the young tannins would make this a natural if served with a dish incorporating a deep, rich molé and the vibrancy of some jalapeño or serrano peppers.

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February 28, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2011 Chardonnay

**Souverain Winery**

**Appellation: North Coast**

**Alcohol: 13.8%**

Suggested Retail: \$10

"Though we're familiar with this Washington winery and have sampled earlier vintages of their Cabernet Sauvignon, today's 'Pick,' the 2011 bottling, was a pleasant surprise when we encountered it last night. Meeting an old friend at Cafe Bernardo in Davis, California, I took his suggestion to try the house wine at happy hour. A glass of wine for three bucks is a rare find these days. You couldn't go wrong on price and Tom said it was a pretty decent pour, too. It was.

"We each had a couple of glasses at happy hour prices and another when the cost went up to the normal \$5 afterward. This was not a great Cabernet, but it was a very respectable glass of wine. To find a palatable glass of wine at \$5—let alone \$3—is rare and Cafe Bernardo deserves a bouquet for providing such. Some traditional Cabernet Sauvignon characteristics of cassis and black cherry were there, but those aromas and flavors seemed muted. Our samples were from both an already-opened bottle and another bottle freshly opened in front of us. Perhaps a little more time exposed to air would have caused the wine to 'open up' and evidence more of those qualities. But sometimes being 'true to type' isn't the most critical consideration. As more than one colleague has said to me, does the wine taste good is the primary question. The Hogue Cabernet contains 81% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Merlot and just 1% Merlot. It's packaged with a screw cap, which may be slightly cheaper than cork. However, that didn't seem to be the primary consideration when I tasted with the winemaker and few wine writers at the Hogue winery in Prosser about three years ago. The winery feels the screw cap gives their consumer a more consistent quality and our collective tasting seemed to support that theory. This is a solid value from a winery that has built a reputation for good wine at fair prices."

*Food Affinity:* "My friend and I drank the 2011 Hogue Cabernet Sauvignon with a small pepperoni pizza and two little roast beef sliders—those snacks certainly worked, but they wouldn't be the only possibilities. Could be good with a pastas in Bolognese sauces, grilled calves liver with onions and grilled burgers, topped with a teaspoon of crumbled blue cheese and a thin slice of Torpedo Red onion."

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Suggested Retail: \$13

"Souverain is one of the storied California winery names, dating back to the 1940's when Lee Stewart had his vineyards and winery up on Howell Mountain, just east of the city of St. Helena. The winery has gone through several ownerships since Stewart's time, but through it all has produced good wine at fair prices. We've always thought of it as one of those (too-few) brands that 'over-delivers.' After moving from its original digs in Napa, Souverain operated for years in Sonoma County, occupying the Geyserville property now home to Francis Ford Coppola's winery. In 2006 Souverain built a new winery just a bit north of there at Asti, itself a name with deep roots in California's wine history.

"Through various corporate parents, Ed Killian has guided more than two decades of Souverain winemaking. Current owner Treasury Wine Estates has begun taking a more aggressive marketing posture, emphasizing both the Lee Stewart connection and the steady hand of Ed Killian. The winery also produces some reserve wines at substantially higher prices, but has decided to concentrate on providing good quality wines in the \$15 and under category. Their Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc carry a suggested retail price of \$13, the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are each \$15.

"The 2011 Chardonnay from Souverain is sourced from grapes in grown in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino Counties. It's perhaps a bit understated, but is balanced and offers a lot for those wanting a sophisticated style of this variety at a relatively modest price. Our first impression was aromas of citrus and pineapple; then came a subtler note of hard butterscotch candy (nice childhood memory). We found flavors of Bartlett and Comice pears with a creamy mouthfeel. There's a little toasty brown spice character, but not too much. Roughly two-thirds of the juice was fermented in stainless steel, the balance in French oak. The wine was aged 'on the lees,' with frequent stirring of the spent yeast cells at the bottom of the vat or barrel in a process the French call *battonage*. This brings a richness and complexity we like. That creamy aspect is offset/balanced by a crisp lemony character in the finish."

*Food Affinity:* "We served this Chardonnay with fettucine in a creamy sauce of smoked salmon, dill and Crimini mushrooms, a pairing we liked. We think it would also be fit companion to grilled chicken wings marinated in a teriyaki sauce or the clean flavors in a dish of diced chicken served with almonds and pea pods."

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February 21, 2014 [Wine Pick of the Week](#)

2012 Gewürztraminer

Producer: Lazy Creek Vineyards

Appellation: Alexander Valley

Alcohol: 14.5%

Suggested Retail: \$22

"It has been a while since we tasted a Gewürztraminer and longer still since we tasted a really good one. This Lazy Creek example reminds us how delightful top-quality California Gewürz can be. This white grape variety can produce wine in styles varying from dry to quite sweet. Grown in many parts of the world, its primary homes are Germany and the Alsace region of France. When applied to Gewürztraminers from other places such as California, the phrase *Alsatian* style is usually code meaning the drier version. Lazy Creek is located in the Anderson Valley of Mendocino County on California's northern coast. It's an idyllic area known for fine Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs, but it also produces equally fine Gewürztraminers.

"Floral and spicy are descriptors often applied to this grape variety. In the 2012 vintage of this wine we found aromas of peach blossom, honeysuckle and roses—perhaps dried roses. In the mouth we sense white peaches or nectarines and maybe just a bit of pineapple or mango. The 'spicy' component is here, but even at the relatively high alcohol level (14.5%), spicy doesn't mean 'hot.' It manifests itself in the seeming presence of clove and cinnamon or nutmeg. Though not an Alsace-grown Gewürztraminer, the Lazy Creek displays in abundance the traditional virtues of the variety."

Food Affinity: "Chinese and Indian cuisine are frequent suggestions for this variety, but we chose to pair the Lazy Creek Gewürztraminer with our own attempt at Alsatian cooking—a slowly-roasted, herbed pork shoulder. Nutty and smokey-flavored cheeses would be natural, as would many sausage dishes."

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February 14, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2012 Chardonnay

**Producer:** Estancia

**Appellation:** Monterey County

**Alcohol:** 13.5%

**Suggested Retail:** \$12

"There are many serviceable examples of Chardonnay for \$2-3 dollars less than the 2012 Estancia, which we purchased in a supermarket for \$10. Most of them are recognizable as the variety, but are otherwise undistinguished. Though still relatively modestly-priced, this bottle, sourced from Pinnacles Ranches fruit, is an example of getting a much better product by paying just a bit more.

"Color is a golden straw hue, a little deeper than most wines from such a recent vintage. Aromas of Bosc pear and pineapple on first impression. The predominant flavors evoke tropical fruit—pineapple again and guava, though we find some more pear characteristics and maybe just a hint of green apple. Subtle cinnamon and toast notes from just the right amount of oak aging gives the impression of a more expensive wine. Flavors are fairly rich, yet clean and crisp."

Food Affinity: Chicken and leek vol-au-vents. Baked salmon. Big shrimp sautéed with garlic and rosemary.

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February 7, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2011 Pinot Noir

**Producer:** Robert Mondavi Private Selection

**Appellation:** California

**Alcohol:** 13.5%

**Suggested retail:** \$10.99

"A quick internet search indicates that at least five different examples of this variety use the name Robert Mondavi on the label. Most of them are better than this bottle, which is produced by Robert Mondavi Private Selection, a separate winery from the original Robert Mondavi Winery in the Napa Valley, according for a spokeswoman for both entities. But it's not surprising these wines should taste different. Our example was purchased on sale at Safeway at \$6.99. The basic Napa Valley Pinot Noir from the Robert Mondavi winery in Oakville retails for \$27. How similar could they be? We mention these prices not to malign our Pick for this week, but to help consumers realize that a purchase of a wine using the Robert Mondavi name can mean various experiences—a splendid, high-end product north of \$45, a solid purchase for about \$25, or an acceptable table wine under ten bucks.

"We love Pinot Noir. It's seldom cheap and we constantly seek decent examples at prices that would allow frequent, if not every-day, purchases. In California the Pinot Noir variety is best grown in cooler coastal regions. Some of the juice in this bottle came from such vineyards, but about two-thirds of the content was grown in California's Central Valley.

"Extended preface out of the way, we can say the Robert Mondavi 2011 'Private Selection' Pinot Noir is a decent bottle of wine. Syrah and Petite Sirah grapes bolster the Pinot Noir, which comprises 80% of the blend (5% more than required by law). Aromas of strawberries and cherries are predominant. The fruit tasted is cherry and plum-like, with just a little spice and toast in the background. There's a surprisingly long finish. Pinot Noir—whether from Burgundy, California or even other climes—can be a sublime experience. While this isn't in that category, it's a respectable example of the breed at a bargain price."

Food Affinity: "Tea-smoked duck, grilled lamb burgers, pork sausages with a not-too-vinegary red cabbage."

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January 31, 2014 Wine Pick of the Week

## 2003 Saperavi

Producer: Vinoterra

Appellation: Kakheti (Republic of Georgia)

Alcohol: 12.5%

Suggested Retail: \$14-16?

"Wines reviewed for the Pick of the Week feature usually come from one of two sources. For the most part, they're either purchased by *Taste California Travel* or they're sent to the magazine for review by their producers. On occasion, our Pick will be something one of our staff has encountered by the glass in a wine bar or at a tasting. This week's choice was discovered in the editor's cellar when he was invited to a friend's house to enjoy a Beef Stroganov (Stroganoff) dinner earlier this week. In recent years Georgia has been a proudly pro-western democracy in the Caucasus, but prior to achieving independence, it was a part of the USSR. And in one distant and pre-Soviet era it was actually part of Mother Russia--thus the wine seemed appropriate accompaniment for this dish named in honor of Pavel Stroganov.

"To the best of the editor's recollection, this bottle was purchased at Corti Brothers in Sacramento after he returned from a Georgian visit. The retail price quoted is a guess of what he paid for the bottle about seven or eight years ago. An internet search finds the '03 and more recent vintages of this wine to be considerably higher now.

"Georgia is the home to the world's earliest winemaking efforts and this Saperavi was made in the old and traditional method. Fermentation takes place in a large clay vessel called a *kavevri*, which is buried in the ground. In the modern era, the wine is then aged in oak barrels after completion of fermentation. Saperavi is one of the most popular of the almost infinite variety of grapes known mostly to Georgia and obscure, if not unheard of, in most of the rest of the world. This wine comes from the Kakheti wine region, which lies east of the capitol city of Tbilisi near the Azerbaijan border."

The Editor writes, "Aromas of cherries and raspberries were followed by flavors evocative of those fruits, but there were a lot of subtleties in this bottle of Vinoterra Saperavi, too. There was a black tea element, as well as a seeming presence of spice or ground white pepper, which would come and go. A bit of currant might have been there, also, and a black tea characteristic seemed to show up in the relatively long finish."

Food Affinity: "My host and I felt the wine worked fine with the Beef Stroganov, but it would also be appropriate accompaniment to most Russian, Georgian or American dishes that you'd pair with a red wine."

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