



## 2005 Bodega del Desierto 25/5 Merlot (\$15)

I wanted to feature a Merlot this month because I believe the time has come to again appreciate this variety for serious quality wines. Sure, Merlots armor became tarnished in the 1990's and rusty in the first half of this decade, but I am starting to see a lot of really compelling wines made from this grape and from some very unusual places.

This wine comes from the Argentinean region of La Pampa, located at the north-east corner of Patagonia. The region is a high valley with a dry, almost desert-like climate, swept by a fierce wind that blows up from the arctic. The Bodega del Desierto was founded in 2001 by Armando and Maria Loson, a brother and sister team dedicated to making this a world class winery. They are well capitalized but face some stiff odds, the only other commercial winery in La Pampa failed after two years. Even their wine making facility is a refurbished tomato canning plant, another agricultural failure in the area. To their benefit, the lack of rain and constant wind in the the area mean that disease and pests are almost unheard of. Unfortunately the constant wind causes the vines to grow in a twisted and tangled canopy, meaning they have higher labor costs, but it also causes grapes to develop thick skins. This means that when the grapes are made into wine they have a lot more structure than is normal for Merlot. The Losons also convinced American winemaker Paul Hobbs, a master of tannin management, to guide their winemaking. Like all of Hobb's wines, Desierto's are dense, but smooth, with complexity far greater than you would expect for a wine made from five to seven year old vines.

When you open this wine make sure you decant it for at least half an hour. After that you will see aromas of fresh clay, cooked cherry preserves, cocoa powder, dried figs and cinnamon develop in the glass. In the mouth this wine starts out with a powerful presence of fruit, framed by noticeable but well integrated tannins. I could not find winemaker notes on this wine but the marks of French oak (cocoa powder and baking spices) are obvious. Paul Hobbs also uses a lot of oak on all of his wines, so it is a safe assumption this wine spends time in good quality French barrels. Good now, this wine will continue to improve for a year or two. By the way, if anyone ever tells you that Merlot doesn't age, this one is going to be five years old in February. Drink with either recipe this month or almost any beef dish.

## 2006 Henry Estate Pinot Noir (\$16)

It is almost as cliché to pick Pinot Noir in November as it would be to select a Gewurztraminer but you will have to admit, this is pretty darn good wine. The thing that makes this wine work so well at the Thanksgiving table is that it actually looks and tastes like Pinot Noir, but I will get to that in a minute.

The Henry Estate was founded in 1972 as part of the first wave of Pinot fever that struck Oregon. What made the Henrys unique is that they planted their vineyards south of the Willamette Valley, in the Umpqua Valley. This area is slightly warmer than the Willamette and it shares the very rich soils of their neighbor to the north. When they first planted their vines they had trouble getting the fruit to ripen despite vigorous growth of the vines. To compensate for the vigorous growth of the grape vines in rich soil, Scott Henry developed a unique trellising system that is now used around the world in areas with similar dirt. It is because of this trellising system that areas in New Zealand and Chile are able to produce world class wines.

The goal of winemaking at Henry Estate is to emphasize the character of the area, or *terroir*, and the quality of the fruit from the vineyard. Unlike the common trends of many Pinot producers to pick late and use extended, pre-fermentation maceration techniques to extract deep color; the Henrys prefer the classic method of a faster, slightly warmer fermentation, looking to get the wine off the skins earlier and allow the pure fruit to shine through. The approach is carried out even further in the cellar, using almost all neutral American oak to age the wine, so as not to cover the flavors with a lot of wood notes.

When you pour a glass of this wine the first thing you will notice is the color is light garnet and the tears are almost clear. When you swirl the wine the nose develops as a complex blend of dried sage, juniper, pomegranate, raspberry and fresh red plum. In the mouth this wine shows a bright, fresh fruit flavor with subtle earth and tea tones that develop into the medium finish. Good now, this wine will continue to improve for a couple of years. This is a great Thanksgiving wine but it will also work great with grilled salmon glazed with Asian sauce or the pork tenderloin and cherry dish on the back.

This month I decided to promote dishes other than Thanksgiving fare for the wine selections. Both wines work great with the Thanksgiving dinner but they are also versatile for many other dishes, which you will see with these recipes.

### **1 pork tenderloin**

**1/2 tsp ground pepper**

**1 tsp of salt**

**2 tbs of olive oil**

**1/3 c of ruby port (cheap stuff is fine)**

**1/2 c dried cherries**

**2/3 c chicken broth (low sodium)**

**2 tsp minced fresh rosemary**

**salt and pepper to taste**

remove any of the browned bits from the bottom of the pan and continue cooking until the liquid is reduced to approximately two tablespoons. Increase the heat and add the broth, rosemary and any accumulated pork juices from the plate and cook until the liquid resembles maple syrup (about two to three minutes.) Season to taste.

Reduce the heat and add the pork slices back to the pan and allow to cook through, about three minutes. Transfer the meat to a serving plate and spoon over the sauce.

### **Pork Medallions with port, dried cherries and rosemary**

Lay the pork tenderloin on your cutting board and slice into 1 inch thick medallions. For the ones near the tail, slice into 1 1/2 inch thick slices then lightly pound out until their circumference is about the same as the other slices. Season each piece with salt and pepper.

Heat the olive oil until it is almost smoking then add the pork slices to the pan, making sure not to crowd them. (You may need to cook in two batches) Cook for roughly a minute and a half on the first side, until they are nicely browned, then gently flip the pieces over. Cook for another minute and a half until that side is also nicely browned then remove all the pieces to a plate, then tent with foil.

Once all the meat is cooked and the pan is empty, return to the heat and add the port and cherries. Stir and scrap to

### **Broiled salmon filets with Asian glaze**

The secret to this dish is the equipment. You will need a half sheet pan and a cooling rack that fits within the edges. The goal is to get the salmon filets off the pan so they brown and crisp, not boil in their own juices.

Mix the soy sauce, rice vinegar, mirin and cornstarch together in a small bowl. Heat the vegetable oil in a small sauce pan over medium-high heat until hot. Add the ginger and cook until fragrant but not browned, about 30 seconds. Give the soy mixture a quick stir and pour into the sauce pan. Bring to a light boil and reduce the heat to low; cook for another couple of minutes until the glaze is thick and clear. Remove the pan from the heat and mix in the sesame seeds and sesame oil.

Set up your oven so the top rack is located on the second to highest place under the broiler. Preheat the broiler. Line

the sheet pan with foil and then rub the cooling rack lightly with vegetable oil. Generously sprinkle each filet with salt and pepper and place them on the cooling rack, skin side up.

Once the oven has reached temperature place the pan under the broiler and close the door. Wait three minutes and the skin should be browned and starting to wrinkle. Pull the pan out, brush the meat with a thick coat of glaze and gently flip the filets over. Return to the broiler and cook them for another three minutes. At this point the meat should slightly flake at the thinnest parts. Brush the top of the fish with another thick coat of glaze and return to the oven for two minutes until the glaze is slightly browned and the meat registers 165° at the thickest part. Remove from the oven and serve immediately. Note: mirin can be purchased at the grocery store in the international food section.