



The only thing that unites the two selections this month is that you are the first person on your block to have them. The Cortese is fresh off the boat, having arrived from Italy, via NYC, just last week. The AVA Cab comes to us from the guys at X Winery, who have just moved into their new digs, the former Nicholson Ranch property. This is the first wine they assembled from their new stock and I am definitely looking at many new, great wines in the future.

## 2009 Claudio Icardi Cortese (\$16)

Every year when I taste the new vintage of this wine my tasting note starts with the same descriptor, “wow”, and the 2009 is no exception. For at least fifteen years Claudio Icardi has produced one of my favorite wines for the summer in this Cortese. I always manage to feature it somewhere but to my surprise it has never been a WOM selection. So this year I am correcting that oversight and you will be glad I have.

Some of you are no doubt familiar with Gavi, or as it used to be called, Gavi di Gavi. Gavi is a town in the southern area of the Piedmont, between Genoa and Milan, that only produces white wine from the Cortese grape. What makes the region so unique is the combination of weather from the nearby Mediterranean and the ancient, upturned sea bottom soils, creating a thick layer of limestone in the vineyards. The result are wines with ripe, fruit driven aromas but precise, mineral textures.

The reason this wine does not carry the Gavi name, and price tag, is that the vineyard lies three miles outside the zone entitled to the name. Claudio Icardi discovered the vineyard twenty years ago and bought it, planting it entirely to Cortese at that time. Because of the close proximity to Gavi, the soils and climate of this vineyard is exactly the same. The area is bathed in fog through mid-morning then the sun comes out and creates a hot afternoon in the vineyards. By evening the cold air rushes in from the sea and cools everything down about thirty degrees. This makes the Cortese reach full ripeness but also retain acidity, creating a wine that is both rich and focused.

Claudio’s approach to making this wine is basically, “don’t screw it up.” The fruit is hand harvested and then crushed into stainless steel tanks. It is allowed to start fermentation naturally but if a tank doesn’t start he will inoculate. Once the wine is dry it is allowed to rest for three months then bottled, still retaining some of the carbon dioxide from fermentation. It will not sparkle when you pull the cork but it will have a little spritz on the palate for a few months.

Don’t chill this wine too far, serving it in the low 50 degree range is best. When you do the enticing aroma of alyssum, lemon blossoms, green apples and white peaches just explodes from the glass. In the mouth this wine displays a nice sense of up-front fruit, balanced by a nervy little poke of acidity that rises up in the mid-palate and keeps it focused into the finish. This wine is good now and will improve slightly over the next couple of months. Serve with hearty, lunch salads, chicken and mushroom crepes or crab cakes.

## 2007 AVA Cabernet Sauvignon (\$15)

A few months ago I tasted some wines from a group of guys, called the Underground Wine Company, who are providing what our industry calls, undertaker service. Their role, much like catfish, is to skim along the dark bottom of the wine business and gobble up what the bigger fish don’t use. When times are good this category is not very interesting but in times like these a lot of well known wineries are trying to cut back their production instead of lowering their prices. It’s the law of supply and demand, if they make less they can charge more, or in this case, the same. The wine they sell off, often times the same as they bottle, goes to guys like Underground who are very guarded about who, and many times where, the wine comes from. Such is the case with this little superstar, a wine with superb pedigree and good value under this obscure label.

AVA, or American Viticultural Area, name, denotes a defined area established by the Alcohol, Tobacco and Trade Bureau (TTB) as producing wines that are distinct and unique. Our model follows those established by European countries like France, with the AOC system, and Italy with their DOC(G)s. High Valley is an area in eastern Lake County, California, not Florida, that encompasses the slopes and valleys around Mount Knociti. Like most valleys the region has two distinct growing regions, the valley floor and the slopes. Mount Knociti is a dormant volcano so all of the slopes are iron rich, volcanic soils and the lower elevations are a combination of alluvial fans and deeper soils. The overall weather is warm, with the valley floor being cooler than the hillsides at night. For this reason most of the valley is planted with Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio. Higher on the slopes, often more than 1600 feet above sea level, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah are planted. There is also a large amount of Zinfandel planted in the area.

For this wine all of the grapes were hand harvested and lightly crushed before going into stainless steel fermentors. The winemaker allowed the wine to “cold soak” for three days then inoculated each tank to start fermentation. During the fermentation they employed several pump-overs to further extract color and flavor and when the wine went dry it was racked to barrel. For this wine 70% of the barrels were French, 30% American and about 20% were new.

When you crack the cap you will want to decant this wine for about half an hour. Once you do the nose of fresh blackberries, raspberries and blueberries just oozes out of the glass. There is some really deep, complexity to this wine too, with notes of black peppercorn, cinnamon, clove and caramel drifting around the fruit. In the mouth this wine shows nice brightness to start, but the mid-palate evolves and smoothes out into the long finish. You can drink this wine with steaks and roasts, but it also has enough freshness for poultry as you will see with the recipe.

### **Quick Onion Pickles**

1 large red onion, peeled and sliced in 1/4 inch rounds  
1/2 cup red wine vinegar  
1/2 cup water  
1/4 cup sugar  
2 tbsp Kosher salt

In a bowl, combine all the ingredients and mix well. Allow to rest for at least one hour, no more than two, then drain the onion pickles and set aside.

### **Grilled Tuna with white beans, fresh onion pickles and bitter greens**

This recipe is similar to one I had at a lunch in the French town of Cassis, near Marseille. If you follow the coastline about a hundred miles you end up in near Genoa, where I am sure there is a little trattoria that serves the same dish with Cortese.

**4 tuna steaks, 4-6 oz each**

**1 can of cooked navy beans**  
**1 tbsp of fresh chopped thyme**  
**1 tbsp of fresh chopped rosemary**  
**1 clove of garlic, chopped fine**  
**3 tbsp of olive oil**  
**1 tbsp of balsamic vinegar**  
**2 cups of bitter greens cleaned and washed (frisee, arugala or whatever you like)**

Preheat a grill or broiler. Salt and pepper both sides of the tuna steaks and drizzle lightly with oil. Cook on the grill or under the broiler for 3-4 minutes per side, so the outside is cooked but the inside is still rare. Remove from the heat and let rest

for five minutes. Slice each steak into 1/2 inch slices.

Combine all of the other ingredients in a bowl and then divide among four plates. Fan the slices of one tuna steak across each plate then top with a couple of slices of onion pickle. Serve with a cold glass of Cortese!

### **Cornish game hens with olive tapenade and broccoli rabe**

**1-1/2 lbs of broccoli rabe, stems trimmed**  
**3/4 cup olive tapenade (store bought is fine)**  
**1 cup olive oil**  
**1 tsp thyme (double if fresh)**  
**2 tsp hot chil flakes**  
**4 Cornish game hens, thawed and rinsed**  
**1 tbsp of olive oil**  
**2 cloves of garlic, peeled and sliced thin**

You may be surprised to see chicken with Cabernet, but for this dish the olive tapenade brings out the fruit of the wine. You can also substitute bone-in chicken breasts if you prefer.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Prepare an ice bath of 1 quart of water and 2 cups of ice. Bring 2 quarts of salted water to a boil then cook the broccoli rabe for two minutes. When the thickest parts pierce easily with a knife, drain and plunge into the ice bath to stop cooking. When cooled, drain and set aside.

In a large bowl combine tapenade, olive oil, thyme and chili flakes. Add the game hens and toss to cover, inside and out. Allow to rest for half an hour then place in a baking pan. Cook until the skin is brown and a thermometer measures 180 degrees in the thigh (about 20 minutes.) Remove from the oven and allow to rest, covered for five minutes.

Heat the remaining olive oil in a large skillet and add the garlic. Cook for one minute or until fragrant, then add the reserved broccoli rabe. Toss for a minute or two, until heated and slightly crispy. Remove from the heat and serve with one of the game hens per person.