



Napa, Eyes Wide Open

I made my annual trip to Napa in late February and I was struck by a number of things that I have never noticed before. Unlike years past, where most of my visits were dog-and-pony shows with hospitality ambassadors, this year I spent more time talking with production people (winemakers) and they did a lot more listening than talking. It appears, regardless of their nonchalant attitude, that the game has changed and now most of the wineries know they will need to adapt in order to survive. Gone are the attitudes that they can ride out the storm, now most wineries are looking for ways to move forward in this radically changed marketplace.

The first thing that struck me was how much attention the producers now pay to their soils. A decade ago most of the dirt under the vines was sprayed with weed killer to prevent the vines from fighting for water with the unwanted plants. Now virtually the entire valley is green, with “cover crops” between almost every row of vines to hold in moisture and provide a welcome environment for beneficial insects. More than once I noticed how healthy the vineyards looked, even while the grape vines were dormant. Most vineyard managers I spoke with feel that working to improve the health of their vineyards means less chemical adjustments to keep the vines healthy. This ultimately leads to a lower cost per acre for farming as fertilizers, herbicides and fungicides are expensive.

There is also a great deal of concern over water in the Napa Valley. Over 41% of all water in California goes to agriculture and as the state government begins to regulate and enforce water restrictions, every winery is looking to ensure they have enough. While you may wonder why this effects us, water may soon be one of the wineries most significant expenses and they are trying to figure out how to not have to pass this cost along to the consumer.

Finally, I noticed a lot more wineries

experimenting with “other” varieties. Since the mid-1990’s Napa has been a one, or maybe three, trick pony, with almost all the vineyards planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay or Merlot. Several winemakers we met are working on a Riesling and many other white varieties are starting to be grown on a commercial scale, including Albarino. The winemakers I spoke with told me that basically they were bored of making the same wines all the time and they wanted some new challenges. I don’t think you are going to see any To-Kalon Riesling or Three Palms Pinotage anytime soon, but is refreshing that so many wineries are looking to take chances with some less popular varieties.

Overall this is the best trip I have had to Napa in my ten years of visiting regularly. Despite the tough economic conditions the producers I met with were upbeat and most feel the worst is over. I don’t know if we are going to get back to

2006-2007 numbers anytime soon, but it was refreshing to see some who have a glimmer of hope. Frankly I hope things stay depressed for a little while longer, it is allowing us to by some amazing wines for great prices, and in quantities that allow me to make them Reserve Club selections. So without further adieu, the selections for Spring, 2010.

Locations:

Orlando 407.895.9463

1223 North Orange Ave.
Orlando FL 32804

Lakeland 863.644.8181

4525 South Florida Ave.
Lakeland FL 33814

Windermere 407.876.9463

428 Main Street
Windermere FL 34786

St. Augustine 904.461.0060

128 Seagrove Main St.
St. Augustine Beach, FL 32080

Lake Mary/Sanford 407.878.5806

5040 West State Road 46
Sanford FL 32771

Oviedo 407.542.4963

1890 County Road 419
Oviedo, FL 32765

Tim

Buccella

2006 Cabernet Sauvignon “Mica”

\$69 per bottle

It is again the sign of the times that I am able to bring you a wine of this caliber in our Reserve Club. Two years ago, had this wine been made, it would have all been sold to the Buccella mailing list customers. It shows just how depressed the direct-to-consumer market is when we can not only buy this wine but also get enough for our Reserve Club, 144 bottles. There is a small amount left to sell but act fast, it will go quick.

The inspiration for Buccella came when Bill and Alicia Deem first talked about making their own wine on their very first date, while drinking a 1990 Gaja Barbaresco. Within a few years they launched Buccella, which means “mouthful” in Latin, because they feel their wines deliver exactly that, a mouthful. The name for this wine, Mica, is Latin for “morsel” because it is, in their mind, a smaller example than the mouthful of Buccella. I am not sure what Buccella is like, but at 14.5% alcohol there is nothing little about this wine.

The Deems don't own any vineyards in Napa but choose to buy grapes from vineyards all over the valley. Their fruit sources read like a who's who of great Napa growers, with grapes coming from Yountville, Coombsville, St. Helena, Oak Knoll, Calistoga, Oakville and Carneros vineyards. This gives them a great deal of diversity in which to create the perfect blend. Every vineyard is farmed to their exact specifications in order to harvest the highest quality fruit. No compromises are made, only the best clusters are selected and only the healthiest berries are taken from each cluster.

The day-to-day winemaker is Chris Justin, a transplanted Philadelphian who moved to Napa to pursue his education in music, not wine. While living in Napa he became enchanted with wine (imagine that) and soon put his music career on the back burner to work as an assistant in the Steltzner Vineyards. He quickly moved to Venge and then later to Del Dotto and finally Merus, working under Mark Herold. It was while working for Herold that he discovered Buccella and has been working with the Deems since the

2003 vintage. The original wines, from 2002-2006 were crafted by Mark Herold.

In 2007 the Deems replaced Herold with super star winemaker Celia Masyczek Welch, of Scarecrow, Husic and Rocca fame. I have not tasted the older vintages but the current releases bear her signature of big texture and very integrated tannins.

For the winemaking at Buccella, all grapes are treated the same up until the final blend is made for the top cuvees. All of the fruit from each vineyard is hand sorted then placed in half ton, open top fermentors for small lot fermentation. The goal is to keep each vineyard site and block separate until a final blend can be made after one year in barrel. Once the alcoholic fermentation is complete the wine is drained to barrel, free run juice only. All of the wines at Buccella are aged in 100% new French oak for 22 months.

After 12 months the Deems and the winemaking team assemble their components in order to create the final blend. Once the selections have been made for their top cuvee, Katrina Eileen, they then select the wine for the basic “Napa” bottling. They also produce a small amount of Merlot, almost exclusively from the Hyde Vineyard, which you will read about with the next wine. Barrels and lots that don't make the cut for the top cuvees, but are too good to sell off in bulk, are put into the Mica program, of which the 2006 is their first bottling. After this blend is made the wine is returned to barrel for 10 more months of aging before bottling. There were 617 cases of this wine made and the final blend is 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Merlot, 3% Petite Verdot, 2% Cabernet Franc and 1% Malbec.

I cannot emphasize enough that this wine needs to be decanted for an hour before serving and it should be at a temperature around 65 degrees. When you pour a glass of this wine the deep, purple/ruby color clings to the glass as you give the wine a swirl. The nose is a heady blend of stewed black cherries, milk chocolate, fresh ground espresso, clove, cinnamon and black cardamom. In the mouth this wine displays staggering texture, with the fruit saturating every nook of your mouth, buffered by soft, almost invisible tannins. This is an impressively concentrated wine that is just a baby. You can age it for at least five to seven years and it will only get better.

HdV (Hyde & de Villaine)

2005 Belle Cousine

\$49 per bottle

A few years ago we sold a lot of Chardonnay from this winery but it was only recently that I learned the story behind the wines. I have met partner Aubert de Villaine several times, always representing his French properties but he never mentioned this winery in California. Of course when his “day job” is managing director of Domaine de la Romanee Conti I can probably excuse the oversight. Aubert also makes the wines at his family property in Bouzeron, in the southern part of Burgundy. The wines from HdV come from his wife Patricia’s family, her being related to de la Guerra family. The de la Guerras were one of the earliest settlers in Napa Valley, winning medals for their wines in a Paris exhibition in 1876. HdV is a joint venture with her cousin, none other than Larry Hyde of Hyde Vineyards.

Larry Hyde is almost synonymous with the Carneros region. He first started growing grapes in the area in the early 1970’s, with the encouragement of Robert Mondavi. Many producers bottle wines from his grapes, including David Ramey and Paul Hobbs. Hyde vineyard wines were recently honored at a White House dinner where only wines from Hyde vineyard were served during a six course meal. It is the first time ever that one vineyard was featured in such a way.

The Carneros region is unique in Napa Valley in that it is a cool, often cold climate, where great attention to canopy management and crop yield are the only way to ensure a successful harvest. The soils of Carneros are primarily sedimentary, with loam covering several feet of loose gravel in most areas. The climate is cooler than the rest of Napa, with fog off of San Pablo Bay lying over the region until after noon most days of the growing season and daytime temperatures often ten degrees cooler than St. Helena. Originally the area was thought to have the perfect growing conditions for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but modern winemaking advances also allow Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah to achieve ripeness in select location in the region.

For this wine the partners choose three blocks of Merlot and one block of Cabernet Sauvignon to create the foundation for the wine. Winemaker Stephane Vivier works to emphasize the character of the region, or terroir, not a particular varietal. While legally a Merlot, 80% of the blend, the wine is meant to be an expression of Carneros that pays homage to the cousin who left America to make wine in Burgundy. (The balance of the blend is Cabernet Sauvignon grown in a warmer site in the Hyde vineyard and entirely from the Concannon clone.)

The 2005 vintage was a perfect year for making wine in Carneros. The entire region was very wet during spring time, which caused the bud break and flowering to be delayed by up to three weeks in some sites. By late spring things dried up but the growing season was cool and many thought the harvest would be up to a month late. Then in August things warmed up and most of the valley was harvesting by early October, a normal time. The vintage is marked by ripe, fully developed fruit flavors but with great natural acidity.

In the winery HdV takes a different approach than many wineries, choosing to co-ferment several lots together in order to blend complexity at the earliest stages. The wine is aged in a combination of new, 2nd and 3rd pass barrels for 22 months before bottling. They produced 1560 cases of this vintage of Belle Cousine.

This wine is an interesting contrast to the Buccella Mica. Here you have a wine that is deep garnet in color. It shows a nose with subtle herbal notes of spearmint and tarragon, which wrap around primary scents of red cherries and raspberries and finish with notes of cedar and wet, red clay. In the mouth this wine displays impressive depth and has broad, muscular shoulders. The tannins are obvious but well integrated and the finish is long and you can tell, very serious. Good now this wine will age effortlessly for at least a decade.

Kestrel

2006 Winemaker Select Co-Fermented Syrah

\$45 per bottle

Kestrel is the first winery to receive a second selection in our Reserve Club, I picked their Winemaker's Reserve Cabernet Franc 2004 in the Spring, 2008 offering. I like this winery because they produce a number of small production, experimental wines that appeal to my cerebral wine drinking side. This bottling, of which only 345 cases were produced, displays what I feel is one of the best expressions of Syrah produced in the US and it should be a revelation for everyone who feels that "big wines" cannot display elegance and balance.

Although Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot seem to grab most of the attention for Washington State wines, I believe that Syrah is the most interesting grape grown in the region. Because the region is so far north they receive over 14 hours of sunlight per day at the peak of the growing season. In addition, the difference between daytime high and nighttime low temperatures is extreme, which means the grapes accumulate a lot of sugar and preserve natural acidity. Since rain is never an issue at harvest the fruit is allowed to hang as long as possible to achieve maximum ripeness and the result are wines that show superb texture and structure.

For this wine, the **Co-Fermented** moniker means that the Syrah was fermented with Viognier that was harvested at the same time. This technique has been used in the Northern Rhone for decades, if not centuries, where the Viognier has been used to lighten Syrah and help boost the wine's aromatics. Modern winemakers report that the combination of the red grape, Syrah, and the white grape, Viognier, actually produce a darker wine than using Syrah alone. This phenomenon is difficult to explain but it has something to do with the polymerization of anthocyanins of the red grapes and the phenols of the white grapes. That's enough of the organic chemistry lesson for now; let me move on to the wine.

Kestrel owns some of the oldest vines in Washington State, with some vineyards approaching 40 years old. For this wine both they use only estate grown Syrah and Viognier, the vines were planted in 1999. The fruit is all hand harvested and is sorted to remove MOG (material other than grapes) then destemmed, lightly crushed and dumped into the fermentor. The Viognier component makes up 7% of the total volume of the tank by weight. Winemaker Flint Nelson prefers to pump the wine over the cap of skins rather than punch down the cap for this wine, as he feels the extra oxygen helps to brighten the aromatics. Due to the co-polymerization which occurs during the co-ferment, color extraction is significant without the more rigorous extraction technique. When the wine is dry it is racked to French oak barrels, of which 1/3 are new. The wine is then aged for 22 months. At the end of the aging period Nelson selects the best barrels of the lot to be bottled as his Winemaker Select.

Ideally you would want to cellar this wine for three to five years before drinking, but if you can't wait, properly decant and cool before serving. Once you do you will notice that the color is very deep ruby and the legs are also deeply colored as they ooze down the glass. The nose is a powerful combination of cooked black cherries, blueberry pie filling, ripe apricots, rosemary, black olives, black peppercorns and sweet, mocha and molasses notes from barrel. The wine starts out dense on the palate, but mid-way it develops a brightness where individual fruit qualities pop out. There is a strong sense of tannins in this wine but they are deeply ingrained, so while this wine has edges the finish is long and polished. You will want to drink this wine with a roast leg of lamb or grilled steak with a black peppercorn crust. Properly stored this wine will last for at least a decade.