

Wine Club Selections for the Red Brigade

In my September newsletter I poetically reinforced my endless optimism and sincere enthusiasm for the 2023 vintage. I dismissed the worry at the time, smoke, and even alluded to a forecast of impending rain which was likely to clear the foul air from our valleys.

Boy am I good at this.

The rain did come, it did clear the smoke away, and then, just to make sure, it came again, waited two more weeks, and then returned once more. Overall, we had five rain events between early September and our last harvest, which was in the first week of November. The drama made for an exciting season.¹ We picked in waves, each time waiting until the last minute, so we could get the fruit as ripe as possible. Over a third of all our red fruit was picked just before the last weekend of October, making that last week extremely intense.

As of this time, we've pressed and barreled almost everything. Only one lot from Quady North remains in fermenter, a batch of Grenache from Mae's Vineyard which was picked later than the rest of the lot. This wine falls into the category of happy accidents, of which we've had many over the years. I, the crew leaders, and the rest of the crew were all in the vineyard on the morning of picking and we all agreed as to where the Grenache ended, and the Petite Sirah began². And yet, a week later, on an afternoon stroll around the vineyard with Cecily the dog, I happened to walk down a row and found about three rows of Grenache still unpicked in the vineyard. The crew came in and dutifully harvested the remainder. Between the first and second picks, a week, a rainstorm and a mild frost had all occurred. Nevertheless, the second picking was both riper and more concentrated than the first. Nichole Schulte and I tasted it yesterday and agreed that a single vineyard Grenache from Mae's is likely in the cards from this year.

Other exciting new wines from the 2023 vintage include our first Chenin Blanc, from the Four Diamonds vineyard, a new planting that I designed and developed through our sister company, Applegate Vineyard Management. The planting also included Mourvèdre (for GSM Rosé), Cabernet Franc and Gamay Noir (for Battalla³) which were all excellent. Last of all (literally), is a late harvest Riesling, from the Layne Vineyard, made in the *Auslese* style.

Another vintage, with its own set of unique challenges, is in the books and with it, another set of delicious wines. In the end, the best sites, best suited varieties, and, the best winemakers, always deliver, despite the conditions. It's no wonder I can be optimistic.

² This is not a simple thing at Mae's Vineyard. An ambitious block design and some varietal interplanting have created a complex tapestry of varieties. I'm pretty sure that I'm the only one who knows what is what out there, and, obviously, that's not entirely accurate either.

³ Beginning in 2022, the *La Battalla*, will include Gamay Noir as well as Cab Franc and Malbec. This is to better emulate the wines of the Loire Valley, which was the inspiration for this wine.

This quarter's wine club selection is "OG-QN." The whole concept of Quady North was based on Single Vineyard Syrah and Viognier. We added Cabernet Franc to our portfolio because I happened to discover that we could make a great one, but in the beginning, it was Syrah and Viognier. I'm sentimental about this lineup because it contains selections from three of our original five sites⁴, the nostalgia is heightened, because it's also the last release we'll see from the Fernandes Vineyard.

First up, our very own Mae's Vineyard, named after our daughter, Margaux Mae. On the back label I write "that despite its youth, the wines from this site are vibrant, complex and full of charm, not unlike the vineyard's namesake." With the namesake about to graduate from college, it occurs to me that a rewrite of this label is in order. 2019 was the namesake's 19th year and the vineyard's 13th year. While not especially old for the vineyard, (nor for the namesake) it is certainly no longer young. It is, however, finding its stride. Over the last several years, this lot, sourced from the lower block in the vineyard, has elevated in status to become our consistent favorite amongst our single vineyard Syrah bottlings. Other vineyards, namely Steelhead Run, still rival it, especially in interest factor, but Mae's is consistently excellent year over year. I describe the aroma/flavor profile as a "purity of dark fruit," but it is the texture that is really compelling. There is both richness and acidity, which is a rare combination in Syrah, and a hallmark of the best wines.

The one vineyard that has the longest connection with Quady North is the Sam's Valley Vineyard. It began with a dinner at the Jacksonville Inn. Some of the details are a little fuzzy. I remember that it was me and my father, Andy, and we tasted Syrahs made from Southern Oregon. We had already started talking about planting a vineyard and starting a winery, and I strongly believed that Syrah should be at the core of what we made. We tried Syrahs that were made by accomplished winemakers in the Willamette Valley, including one from Ken Wright and Sam Tannahill, from fruit grown in Southern Oregon. I believe it was Jerry Evans, proprietor of the Inn, who suggested we try Cliff Creek. The wine was made by Joe Dobbles and was the most impressive one of the night. The fruit came from Cliff Creek's own vineyard, called



2019 Syrah, Mae's Vineyard
 Applegate Valley, Southern Oregon
 \$35/\$28 (Underground)



2019 Syrah, Sam's Valley
 Rogue Valley, Southern Oregon
 \$35/\$28 (Underground)

⁴ The first five sites, chosen after tasting wines made by other winemakers from these sites were: Serenade Vineyard (near Ashland), Sam's Valley Vineyard (Sam's Valley), Steelhead Run Vineyard (Applegate Valley), Frank's Vineyard (Applegate Valley) and our own Mae's Vineyard (which didn't come into bearing until 2008).

the Sam's Valley Vineyard, planted by the Garvin family in 1999. The wine had just been awarded Best of Show at the "World of Wine."⁵ The wine was inky black, a consequence of the warm vintage and young vines. It was also a deal clincher. All of the wines were excellent, but there was something about the Sam's Valley Syrah that seemed distinctive.

In 2006, I reached out to the Garvins to see if I could purchase some fruit for a new, albeit unnamed project. I spoke to Dorothy, matriarch of the family. "How many tons would you like?", she asked. "Uhhh.. one?" I replied. Meloney and I went out to visit the vineyard, in our brown Ford pickup, which Meloney had christened "Gertie." Dorothy dutifully led us through. It was late August, and it was hot, and very windy. The experience would prove to be the inspiration for Meloney's label, which sought to evoke the warm air-blast that we felt that day.

The old ironic maxim is that the only constant is change. While Sam's Valley has been a constant source of Quady North Syrah, the fruit has also changed over time. In 2006, the fruit was so tannic and concentrated that it couldn't be bottled on its own, but rather formed part of the 4,2-a. It was softened by the Serenade Syrah, which had the opposite issue. Over the years, as the roots have penetrated deeper, and the farming has become a bit less severe, the wine has evolved. It is still probably the most structured of the Syrahs we make, less fruit and more spice, but it is not nearly as tannic as it was in those early days. I love Sam's Valley Syrah as an example of terroir. Our history with the site demonstrates that it is not just soil and weather that makes up terroir, but the impact of people as well. As the Garvins evolved their farming practices, so too has the wine evolved into something more subtle and graceful.

Whether from age or experience, I am experiencing some severe nostalgia as I write about some of these wines. As I mentioned in the intro, this release contains wines made from four of the founding vineyard sites that I first selected about 18 years ago. One of the first five sites⁶ was known to me as "Frank's Vineyard." This vineyard was tended by Frank Ferreira, who had moved to the Applegate from Saipan, had a mysterious background, a huge personality, and a large collection of koi fish, exotic birds and miniature donkeys, which he bred and sold. Frank's Vineyard was a great site and was the source of some of the first wines we designated as our "Flagship."

Frank himself passed away in 2009, near the end of the harvest. In early 2011, the Fernandes family purchased the vineyard. Scott and Krissa Fernandes were from farming families. They had both grown up growing grapes and other



2019 Syrah, Fernandes Vineyard
Applegate Valley, Southern Oregon
\$35/\$28 (Underground)

⁵ This was a competition amongst Southern Oregon wineries that would later evolve into the Oregon Wine Experience (OWE). In the 2023 OWE, Joe Dobbes won Best of Show again, this time for a Chardonnay, proving he hadn't lost his touch.

crops in the Delta area near Modesto. I liked them from the onset. They had a refreshing combination of enthusiasm and pragmatism. They wanted to be great stewards and neighbors and join the Southern Oregon winegrowing community. Even though they started their own brand, Serra, using the fruit from the property. The Fernandes' continued to sell me fruit from Frank's original plantings so I could continue to make great wines from that site, and I changed the name from Frank's to Fernandes on our bottlings.

2019 turned out to be the last release from the Fernandes vineyard for Quady North. A year or two later, the family sold the site and moved on. A new owner came with new priorities. Red Blotch, that nefarious virus, started taking its toll. It was time for us to move on.

As I sit and write this piece, I am flooded with memories from the early days. I remember 2006, receiving a precious ton, topped off bucket by bucket on the scale, and the excitement I had tasting the wine in barrel later, realizing that I had probably had something very good, right out of the gate. I picture the vineyard, with its red earth, wide rows and beautiful vistas. Most of all, I remember Frank Ferreira, with his huge laugh, and Scott Fernandes, always smiling, prudent and philosophical. I hope this last release is a fitting tribute to them. I certainly look forward to drinking it myself over the holidays, re-living some of those memories, and sharing stories.

2019 was a great year for single vineyard Syrah. We bottled one from each of our primary sites, five in all. Even as we saw the last vintage of Fernandes Syrah, we were happy to bottle the first vintage of Castellano Syrah. We had been making wine from the Castellano vineyard for years, but the Syrah lots were pretty ripe and extracted. Like the Sam's Valley fruit of old, it played an important role in the Syrah 4,2-a, but, it was a little much to bottle on their own.

The Castellano vineyard sits on a West facing slope above the valley. It's an amazing site, great exposure and drainage and a fantastic view. Like many Applegate sites, the soils are poor and don't hold a lot of water. In 2019, Jim began to increase his irrigation. Like Sam's Valley, this helped to increase berry size and yields, and make the wine altogether more approachable. We were both surprised and thrilled at the result. Meloney's label is the flip side of the Castellano Cabernet Franc label, the view at night, with Syrah being the darker of the two varieties.

We still have work to do at Castellano. In 2023 we purchased all of the fruit from the vineyard, using it for our Arsenal, Franc, Pistoleta and Syrah programs. We love the site, it's reminiscent of other great ones like Layne and our own Mae's Vineyard. However, we've found that our Applegate sites need fertilization as well as irrigation to thrive both in terms of quality and economically. Organic fertility programs we've begun at Mae's and Layne have really helped. In 2024, we will be expanding those programs to Castellano as well.



2019 Syrah, Castellano Vineyard
Applegate Valley, Southern Oregon
\$35/\$28 (Underground)

