

WINEINK WINE OF THE YEAR

CARTE BLANCHE 2012 PROPRIETARY RED NAPA VALLEY

I'M NOT A BIG FAN OF Top 10 lists, wine scores or even Wine of the Year designations.

On the one hand, I understand that they can be valuable for making recommendations to readers and useful in recognizing those who have done bang-up jobs with a vintage. And, of course, they are media-friendly.

But, on the other, they tend to inspire competition among people who can feel

their efforts are something less than stellar if they don't top the lists. This is not an "every Little Leaguer should get a trophy" rant. I simply believe that there are so many outstanding wines, wineries and winemakers that to single out a few at the top while disregarding others is unfair. Call me soft.

So it is, with complete contradiction of the above ethos, I name my wine of the year. Go figure.

This wine announced itself to me in a totally organic manner. It was not with a rep at a winery or at an organized tasting. Rather, it came to me in my kitchen on a stunningly beautiful fall morning while I was cooking bacon and eggs. In my bathrobe.

THE REVELATORY MOMENT

I had received some samples of a number of the Carte Blanche wines, a relatively new project of Nicholas Allen's in the Napa Valley. The evening before the breakfast, I had unwrapped the tissue paper from a bottle of Carte Blanche 2012 Proprietary Red Napa Valley, popped the cork, poured a glass, and let it sit for a bit as I started a fire to grill a rather large rib-eye and some late-season veggies.

Fire lit, I picked up the glass and saw that the wine had a thick, viscous, velvety quality. It was like a perfect, round pond of deep, dark liquid — the kind that picks up the image of a surrounding shoreline and reflects it back more clearly than the real one. With a swirl and a sniff I caught the aromas of fresh red fruit as well as darker blackberries and dried cherries. On first taste, the velvet pond I had noticed coated my palate before tender tannins kicked in. Yum.

It was great with the steak, and my wife and I finished the bulk of the

bottle. But there was still a glass or so left when we went to bed.

CUT TO THE NEXT MORN'

As I began to break the eggs and cook the bacon, I spied the bottle of the Proprietary Red open on the counter, still uncorked from the night before. Grabbing a fresh glass, I drained the bottle without much thought. I gazed out the window at the surrounding Rockies in their golden fall splendor, listened to the bacon as it began to sizzle and unconsciously took a sip.

An old Todd Rundgren lyric immediately leapt to mind: "All the children sing/ All the dancers start to sway in time/ The scent of love is in the air/ Somebody poured the wine!/ The sun and moon collide/ Isn't gravity a funny thing/ The universe explodes apart/ all the children sing/ Everybody sing!"

OK, that may be extreme, but the young 2012 wine had spent a night in the mountain air and after, oh maybe 10 hours of exposure to the waking world, had opened up and become, in a single sip, simply intoxicating. It was the best thing I tasted all year. Hence the accolade.

Wine of the Year.

THE WINNING WINE

This should come as no surprise given the pedigree and particulars of Carte Blanche. Nicholas Allen, the owner, is a scion of the family that has owned the Bordeaux First Growth Chateau Haut-Brion since 1935. In 2007, he began a new project in Napa to marry grapes of the New World with the winemaking sensibilities of the Old.

The 2012 Proprietary Red is a "Right Bank" blend, meaning it is inspired by the wines of the merlot-centric right side (east side) of the Gironde River in Bordeaux. The wines of the right bank, especially younger vintages, tend to be a little softer and a touch less tannic compared to the cabernet sauvignon-led wines of the Left Bank. Right Bank blends use more merlot to achieve an approachable profile, and this wine's blend of 38 percent cabernet sauvignon, 33 percent merlot, 20 percent cabernet franc and 9 percent petite verdot is in line with that thinking.

2012 was an ideal growing season, the first of three of the most highly anticipated vintages in the relatively short history of the Napa Valley.



"It was pretty hard not to make good wine with the fruit from '12," chuckled D.J. Warner, the Carte Blanche general manager who is also married to Helen Keplinger, the winemaker at Carte Blanche. "But, I have to say, if you liked the '12, you'll love the '13s and '14s."

Allen's first winemaker, Frenchman Luc Morlet, was responsible for the harvest and the vinification of the 2012 releases, but this blend was completed by Keplinger, one of Napa's most respected young winemakers, and she did the blending for the Proprietary Red shortly after Allen hired her.

That day, D.J. remembers, was auspicious for another reason as well. "Helen and I were called by Wine Spectator in the spring of 2014 and they said they had a new copy of the June 15, 2014, issue and that we could come by and pick it up at their Napa office," he shared. "We were on our way to the winery to meet Nick and blend the 2012 reds, but we thought

we should stop by as they (Wine Spectator writer James Laube) had been with us earlier in the vintage, both in the vineyards and at the winery.

"When we got there we were amazed to see that Helen was actually on the cover," he paused, recalling the moment. "So we go to the winery for the blending and as we walked in I said to Nick, 'Guess you hired the right winemaker.' Nick had no idea about the cover but he said 'of course I did!'" D.J. laughed. "So I showed him the cover. We all kind of hugged it out."

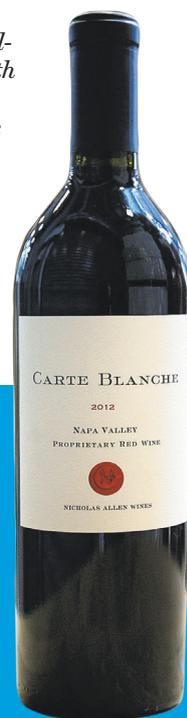
A good day indeed. Both for the Carte Blanche family and my 2015 Wine of the Year.

Kelly J. Hayes lives in the soon-to-be-designated appellation of Old Snowmass with his wife, Linda, and black Lab named Vino. He can be reached at malibukj@aol.com.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

CARTE BLANCHE 2012 PROPRIETARY RED NAPA VALLEY
200 cases, released in November 2015, \$125

Tasting this blend takes one on a tour from one end of the Napa Valley to the other. From Oak Knoll merlot, to cabernet sauvignon and cab franc grown in Oakville, to petite verdot from Calistoga, it assembles fruit from the sweetest spots of the Valley's best vineyards. Hand-picked and aged 18 months in French Oak, this is a wine that will mature over the next decade but is wonderful for drinking now. Especially with bacon and eggs.





NEW YEAR'S WINE RESOLUTIONS

As this is the New Year, it is only appropriate that we make some resolutions. Here are three:

1. SEE. SMELL. SIP.
I resolve to pay more attention to each bottle, each glass and each taste as I sample my wines.

2. DRINK INTERNATIONALLY
Because there are so many great wines from America, my tendency is to focus on those. In 2016, I resolve to buy more wines from places that I am a little less familiar with.

3. TAKE A TRIP
The best way to explore wine is to get a little dirt under your nails. In 2016, I resolve to take a trip to at least one wine region that I have never been to before. Hopefully more.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Nicholas Allen at his Carte Blanche winery in the Napa Valley; Carte Blanche's Helen Keplinger is one of the most respected young winemakers in the business; wine rests in Carte Blanche barrels as they mature before bottling.



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