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WINE CLUB NOTES



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JUST FOR THE RECORD:
Choosing Wines

Getting a company that we've never done business with is never a bad idea. After inquiring how long Celebrations Wine Club has been in business (answer: since 1989), people planning to give gifts or become members will often ask how I choose wines for the club. The question usually breaks down into two parts: how do I find the wineries and then what criteria do I use to select particular wines. Fair enough! Both are important questions.

Since we specialize in both California and Italian wines, smaller California wineries or importers with Italian wines will occasionally contact me, because they like the exposure that they can get from a wine club with customers throughout the U.S. But more often, I attend wine tasting events, where I meet winemakers and taste their wines. Family Winemakers of California orchestrates the biggest tasting of the year in San Francisco. At last count, 375 wineries poured 1000 wines over a two-day period. The event is open to trade and press followed by the public and attracts thousands of people. You guessed it; this is over-load. Too many people, too many wines, and too much noise make good choices difficult, although I still find wines for the wine club there. The annual Rhone Ranger tasting specializes in California wineries, which produce Syrah, Mourvedre, Grenache, and other wines, originally grown in the Rhone region of France, while the Cal-Ital organization offers California wines made from grapes indigenous to Italy. The ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates & Producers) is yet another annual tasting, specializing only in Zinfandel wines.

Smaller, more specialized tastings are usually more valuable. Various regional organizations will gather their producers under the same tent. For instance, the Santa Cruz winery association recently organized a tasting in San Francisco. Various Sonoma appellations conduct tastings throughout the year, as do wine regions from all over California. Sometimes the show goes on the road, and sometimes it's hosted in its own region. Importers will do the same to introduce and educate press and trade. Sometimes, individual Italian wineries will visit their major markets in the U.S. to conduct tasting seminars for customers

and potential customers alike. Distributors also conduct tastings for the trade, including retailers and restaurateurs, and have a sales force, which knocks on doors in a given territory. Government agencies in wine-producing countries will sponsor tastings. Italy, France, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, and Germany make appearances in San Francisco and other major markets around the U.S. The wine press can also be a good resource as can referrals from other wineries, whose owners will recommend their favorite neighbors. In other words, there are many formal venues for getting acquainted with wines as well as a few whimsical ones.

Once acquainted with a winery that fits the Celebrations profile, which is small and family-owned, and producing premium wines, why do I choose one wine instead of another? Not surprisingly, the first is a simple, mechanical discrimination that involves price. I need wines at two different price points on the California side and three different price points on the Italian side that match up with the Californian and Italian Artisan and Winemaker Series and the Italian Collector Series.

But more important, I look for balance in a wine, a concept much talked about, and while its definition has a personal and even cultural component, it is mostly objective. The first component of balance is that the wine should exhibit the typical flavors of the grape variety. In other words, Cabernet Sauvignon should taste like Cabernet Sauvignon. If the wine is red, it should have an agreeable texture, that somewhat grainy characteristic that is derived from tannins, which reside in the skins and seeds. That texture should not give the taster lockjaw, nor should it be absent as it is in grape juice, but agreeably somewhere in between. The wine should contain enough acid, the component that vinegar or lemon juice gives to salad dressing to create a crisp, clean, refreshing sensation. Since white wine is not fermented with the skins and seeds, it has no tannin, but acid is a very important component of white wine. And finally, wood flavors should be inconspicuous. I've tasted beautiful red wines that were aged in old casks without any trace of

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