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# The Grapevine

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR VINESSE WINE CLUB MEMBERS



## MARTIN'S JOURNAL

***Fewer people are going to the movies and more people are drinking wine.***

Could these two statistics somehow be related? Well, around the Stewart household, they definitely are.

Movie theater operators have seen their attendance decrease for several years as film fans have tired of the sticky floors, the expensive popcorn and, perhaps most of all, the people in the next row who maintain a constant dialog during the movie. (Did those people actually pay big bucks to hear *themselves* talk?)

I love the “bigness” of the theater screen, but I also like to watch movies in peace. So, more and more, the Stewarts are staying home, renting a flick or two, and enjoying the cinematic experience in the comfort of our living room.

Better still, instead of sucking a \$5 Diet Coke through a straw, we get to sip a glass (or three) of Vinesse wine while we watch.

*Martin Stewart Jr.*

## Our Passion: Discovering Wines From Totally Unexpected Sources

By Robert Johnson

***There's more than one way to make a great bottle of wine.***

And that's why we at Vinesse like to say: Every wine has a story.

One of the great myths is that all of the world's best wines are crafted at venerable chateaux such as the one pictured below. Such notions contribute to the “snob” factor associated with wine — a factor that some find appealing and others reject.

While some of the world's best wine is, indeed, made on the venerable estates of Bordeaux, just as much — perhaps even more — is crafted in spartan surroundings with no masterpieces adorning the walls, no brass rails lining the stairways and no escargot in the refrigerator.

Vinesse founder Martin Stewart has often told me, “If you want to know why wine X costs \$20 more

than wine Z, start by checking out the wine X estate. *Somebody* has to pay for those fancy surroundings, and in the end, it's always the consumer.”

The best wine, Martin adds, is made by people who are passionate about their craft.

“Even if they're buying juice on the bulk market, talented vintners can make some amazing wines,” Martin says. “It's all about blending

— knowing which varieties work well together and in what ratios. I've tasted some fabulous wines that were made that way. It's part of

what I love about this job — uncovering great wines from totally unexpected sources.”

Whether it's an estate-grown and bottled cuvee from Bordeaux, a field blend of multiple indigenous varieties from Tuscany, or a tank blend from various growing regions of California, Vinesse will seek out the best of the best, secure ample supplies for club members, and share their unique stories.



Robert Johnson can be reached at [Robert@vinesse.com](mailto:Robert@vinesse.com).



### OUR MISSION:

To uncover and bring you wine gems from around the world, which you're not likely to discover on your own, and which enhance your wine enjoyment.

### YOUR GRAPEVINE TEAM:

Intrepid Wine Enthusiast, Chief Taster and Winehound:

**Martin Stewart**

Chief Operating Officer  
(aka "The Buck Stops Here"):

**Lawrence D. Dutra**

Editor:

**Robert Johnson**


Wine Steward:

**Katie Montgomery**

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## CHARTER MEMBER BENEFITS:

-  *The Grapevine* Newsletter
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## Read any good books lately? What about wine books?

I like to read about wine almost as much as I like to drink it. *Almost...*

Of course, it helps when the book is well researched and well written. As is the case with wine, some books are better than others.

Over the past few months, I've somehow managed to find enough time to read three wine-related books. Two are historical in nature (both written by award-winning author James Gabler), while the other is about as contemporary as you can get (written by a 29-year-old female master sommelier).

Let's start with the books of Gabler, a past winner of *Veuve Clicquot's Wine Book of the Year* award.

My favorite of the two is *Passions: The Wine and Travels of Thomas Jefferson*. Most of us know that Jefferson was a wine connoisseur, and even experimented — largely unsuccessfully — with growing his own wine grapes. What really comes through in this book is Jefferson's true enthusiasm for the subject; he was a man who loved wine. It's impossible to read *Passions* without some of that enthusiasm rubbing off.

Jefferson also figures prominently in Gabler's *An Evening With Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson — Dinner, Wine and Conversation*. The story is framed in a dream sequence in which the two principals discuss wine, travel and politics. There's just barely

enough vinous conversation to qualify *An Evening* as a "wine book," but if you're a history buff, it should be right up your alley.

Wine plays a much more major — although not exclusive — role in *Alpana Pours: About Being a Woman, Loving Wine and Having Great Relationships*. Written by Alpana Singh, who earned the master sommelier title at age 26 — the youngest ever — the book is aimed at women, but also contains plenty of useful information for men as well.

Singh spent five years as the sommelier at Chicago's high-profile Everest restaurant, and that led to a gig as host of a restaurant review program on a local PBS station. While her high-pitched tone and clipped speaking style can be a bit annoying on TV, her "voice" in this book is crystal clear and entertaining. Better still, it's a youthful voice that should appeal to twenty-somethings who may be intimidated by wine.

"Wine is not about expense, knowledge or snobbery," Singh writes.

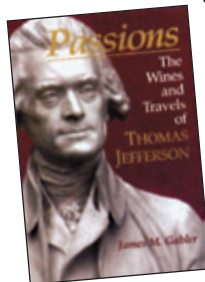
"Wine is about personal choice.

When you drink it, you should know if you like it or not. Trust that. But first be totally open about drinking it. The personal and social rewards will be awesome."

Singh strongly encourages women to be confident about their wine preferences, and to avoid always handing over the wine list to a male companion when dining out. She also draws a comparison between the aging potential of wine and the dating game.

"Believing all wines get better with age, many people will hold onto a bottle of so-so wine," she writes. "This is a bad assumption. Aging wine is kind of like a relationship. When you have good material to work with from the start, it can only get better. If at the beginning it's rocky, time can only make the situation worse."

And what about the book's advice that's also male-friendly? Well, I'll let you guys figure that out for yourselves.





## WINE A<sub>TO</sub>Z

**Gamay.** The primary grape used to make wine in the Beaujolais region of France. Particularly expressive in the fresh, young wines known as Beaujolais Nouveau.

**Hectare.** Metric measure of area (used in most countries except the United States) containing 10,000 square meters. It's the equivalent of 2.471 acres.

**Isera.** A small town (pronounced Ee-SAIR-ah) in Italy's Trentino region, not far from Lake Garda. If you're ever there, be sure to order a bottle of local Rosé with your dinner.

**Jesi.** A town (also spelled Iesi and pronounced Yay-zee) in central Italy, not far from Ancona. If you're ever there, be sure to order a bottle of local dry white wine, made from the Verdicchio grape, with your dinner.

**Kriska.** A West African palm wine.

## APPELLATION SHOWCASE

### AMADOR COUNTY/LODI

*(Editor's Note: We continue our region-by-region series on the wine-making families of California.)*

**Prospering for 30 years in the California wine business is no small feat for a family winery crafting wines in an off-the-beaten-path region.**

In 1977, Leon and Shirley Sobon brought their six children from the San Francisco Bay Area to Amador County's Shenandoah Valley to establish Shenandoah Vineyards. Twelve years later, the family acquired the historic D'Agostini Winery and renamed it Sobon Estate.

Today, the Sobons are widely respected throughout California wine circles for their innovative grape-growing, winemaking and marketing practices. In 1989, they were among the first in California to embrace organic grape growing, and their 160 acres of vines are now certified organic.

The family also pioneered Rhone

grape varieties in the Sierra Foothills, conducting important trials with rootstocks, clones, trellising systems and yeast strains, and were among the first to commission original artwork for their wine labels.

Today, Leon and Shirley's children carry on the family tradition. Son Paul is winemaker for both Shenandoah Vineyards and Sobon Estate, while his brother Robert oversees customer relations.

■ Many of Lodi's winegrowing families have been in the area for more than 100 years. These families are genuinely rooted in the soil, and have worked to build Lodi's reputation as a premium winegrowing region.

Over the last decade, these dedicated farmers have sparked a remarkable transition, one that has catapulted Lodi into the vinous spotlight. Fifth- and sixth-generation winegrowers like the Phillips family, the Mettler family and the Lange family are vertically integrating the creation of their own wine brands and building recognition for Lodi Wine Country as a producer of fine wines.



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## VINESSE STYLE

### ARTISAN CHEESE

*Given the trend toward artisan winemaking that began in the 1980s, it's only natural that cheese would follow.*



Wine and cheese go together like baseball and hot dogs... vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup... picnics

and ants. Okay, perhaps that last analogy isn't spot on, but you get the point.

More and more diners are including a cheese course when they dine out, and growing numbers of restaurateurs are taking cheese service seriously. Whether it's an appetizer course, an "interlude" before dessert, or a substitute for dessert, cheese and wine make for a heavenly culinary experience.

But which wines go with which cheeses? We asked members of the Vinesse tasting panel to share some of

their recent restaurant experiences...

• **Mouco Camembert** is a silky cream cheese made in Fort Collins, Colorado. It has a bit of an earthy quality to it, and it matches well with Blanc de Blancs sparkling wine or oak-aged Chardonnay.

• **Laack's Finest Extra Sharp Cheddar** is made in Greenleaf, Wisconsin, and maintains a creamy texture even when crumbled. Try it with Merlot or Sauvignon Blanc.

• **Pecorino Toscano Grand Cru** sounds like the name of a wine, but it's actually a beefy, rustic, nutty cheese from Tuscany. A rich, buttery Chardonnay is an ideal match, or pair it with a Tuscan white wine for a totally-Italian experience.

• **Carles Roquefort** is an authentic French cheese that's creamy and just a tad nutty. A well-aged Tawny Port would be a sublime match, but the cheese also pairs beautifully with Zinfandel (red, not pink).

So, if you find yourself noshing on cheese the next time you dine out... don't forget the wine!

## BEING GREEN

Beyond being good stewards of the land as well as good neighbors are important business and personal values in the wine community. A healthy and beautiful environment benefits neighbors, communities and wine country visitors. Vintners and their employees benefit as well because most of them live at or near their wineries. Earth-friendly methods also produce high-quality wine grapes and leave a lasting legacy for future generations. Building on these major trends and successful regional efforts, California's vintners and wine growers joined together in 2002 to introduce the statewide *Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices* — a best management practices guide and self-evaluation tool that covers all aspects of grape growing and winemaking. The Code includes methods for reducing water and energy use, minimizing pesticide use, building healthy soil, protecting air and water quality, recycling natural resources, maintaining surrounding habitat, providing employee education, communicating with neighbors about vineyard and winery operations, and more. Several thousand vintners and growers have participated in educational workshops throughout the state, and more than 1,300 workshop attendees have evaluated their operations through the program to expand their sustainable winegrowing practices. The effort is the first time an entire industry sector has scientifically documented their level of sustainability.



## Yes, You Can Drink Wine With Your Favorite Salad

**O**nce the holiday season has passed, we'll all get back to more "normal" eating habits. For many of us, that means having a nice salad for dinner two or three times per week.

One of the nice things about salads is that there are so many variations, one need never get tired of eating them. And there's really no more pleasant combination than a salad and a glass of wine.

There's also no more tricky pairing challenge, and the reason for this can be summed up in one word: acid. Wine is acidic, and so are raw veggies and the dressings with which we like to toss them.

When matching food and wine, we often embrace opposites. But when it comes to salads, the food is so acidic that unless we pour a wine that's equally so, the salad's acid will pretty much obliterate the wine's fruit.

The wine variety most often recommended in combination with salads is Sauvignon Blanc, and it is an

excellent match. Other white varieties that can work well include Vinho Verde, dry Riesling, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Grigio.

Most people don't think about opening a bottle of red to enjoy with their salad, but several varieties work quite nicely. We particularly enjoy some of the red varieties of Burgundy, including Pinot Noir and Gamay. (Hint: To tame the tannins, put the bottle in the refrigerator for about a half-hour before opening.)

Two other sublime matches: Rosé



wines (particularly effective with such hard-to-match veggies as artichoke hearts and asparagus) and sparkling wines (primarily Brut and Brut Rosé).

And if you'd like to expand the spectrum of wine possibilities, add chicken or shrimp or goat

cheese or garbanzo beans to the salad. Then open a bottle that you'd normally drink with those ingredients by themselves.

You now have some basic guidelines to follow when pairing salad and wine. But don't forget the most important food-and-wine guideline of all: Drink what you love. And don't worry about the food police knocking on your door; they're busy with French fries at the moment.

### Four Seasons



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# The Wine Rush of Calaveras County

***Calaveras County, with its rich history, cultural diversity and multitude of recreational and culinary opportunities, offers wine lovers year-round fun and adventure.***

Calaveras is nestled between the Mokelumne and Stanislaus Rivers in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, between Yosemite National Park and Lake Tahoe. The lure of gold attracted miners to the area a century-and-a-half ago, and numerous historic towns that recall those days still dot the landscape.

What a landscape it is, as countless lakes and rivers are lined with venerable redwood, sequoia, oak and pine trees — not to mention row upon row of grapevines. Of course, where there are grapevines, there also are wineries.

In Calaveras County, perhaps more than any other wine region of California, visiting the tasting rooms is a relaxed, unhurried, delightful experience — no sharp elbows are required. And more often than not, the person pouring the wine is the



## TOURING TIPS

proprietor and/or winemaker, so you'll be able to discuss the wines in intimate detail.

Accommodations in the area range from friendly bed-and-breakfast inns to waterside resorts.

For a romantic getaway, stay at Querencia, where each room has a fireplace, a feather bed, a private balcony and an over-sized shower. Local wines and appetizers are served at sunset, and gourmet candlelit dinners in the wine cellar can be arranged in advance.

Lake Tulloch Resort — featuring balcony rooms overlooking the lake — has a marina, lakeside cabana bar, full-service restaurant with indoor

and outdoor dining, water sport rentals and more. If you're looking to split your time between wine tasting and more active recreation, this makes a good home base.

Or if you're just looking for a clean, affordable place to bed down, consider the Gold Country Inn or the Jumping Frog Motel.

Dining opportunities in Calaveras County range from rustic to gourmet. The restaurant most often recommended by locals is Crusco's in Angels Camp. Situated in a 150-year-old building, Crusco's offers Italian-influenced fine dining, a very good wine list and the best desserts in the area. (When nobody's looking, sneak a piece or two of the fabulous focaccia bread into a purse or briefcase for next-day noshing at the local wineries.)

For small plates with big tastes, check out V Restaurant and Bar in Murphys, where the cuisine is Mediterranean and the wine list is inspired.

Most of the wineries in Calaveras County are small, family-owned-and-operated enterprises. One exception to that rule is Ironstone Vineyards, which offers a number of attractions in addition to wine tasting. There's a heritage museum on the grounds, as well as a jewelry shop, a delicatessen, landscaped gardens and even an Alhambra pipe organ. Ironstone makes a good midday stop for some lunch and an hour or two of relaxation.

One of the area's pioneering wine estates is Chatom Vineyards, where award-winning bottlings were being crafted long before most of the other Calaveras wineries were established. Lavender Ridge Vineyard specializes in unfiltered wines made in very small quantities. You can also sample organic olive oil and, as the name implies, a number of lavender products are available.

The Calaveras Winegrape Alliance



maintains an informative website that lists all of the local wineries, as well as a number of annual special events — including the Calaveras Passport Weekend (in June) and the Calaveras Grape Stomp (in October).

The California Gold Rush may be a part of California history, but the rush of Calaveras wines continues to embrace and delight wine lovers in search of new adventures and new flavors.

## For Further Information

### Querencia

Murphys, Calif.  
querencia.ws

### Lake Tulloch Resort

Copperopolis, Calif.  
laketullochresort.com

### Gold Country Inn

Angels Camp, Calif.  
800-851-4944

### Jumping Frog Motel

Angels Camp, Calif.  
888-850-3764

### Crusco's

Angels Camp, Calif.  
209-736-1440

### V Restaurant and Bar

Murphys, Calif.  
209-728-0107

### Ironstone Vineyards

Murphys, Calif.  
ironstonevineyards.com

### Chatom Vineyards

Murphys, Calif.  
chatomvineyards.com

### Lavender Ridge Vineyard

Valley Springs, Calif.  
lavenderidgevineyard.com

### Calaveras Winegrape Alliance

calaveraswines.org



## Podere Brancaia

*It is 45 minutes from  
Florence, and a mere  
half-hour from Siena. It  
is a must-see destina-  
tion on any trip to  
Italy's wine country.*

It is Podere Brancaia, an old Tuscan wine estate that was brought up to modern standards during the 1980s. Outside, the walls of the building were left virtually untouched. Inside, old-style materials were used to maintain the look of a different time. But the equipment now being used by the vintners is modern, and the wines being produced have been raising eyebrows around the world.

A Swiss couple, Brigitte and Bruno Widmer, acquired the property in 1981 and immediately began renovations. Just a few years later, its 1983 vintage bottlings received widespread acclaim, and the estate has been gen-

erating fabulous reviews ever since.

Brancaia's signature wine is known as IL BLU, a "Super Tuscan" blend that evokes descriptors such as possessing "velvety yet caressing tannins." Half of the 2003 vintage is Sangiovese, nearly as much of the blend is Merlot, and a splash of Cabernet Sauvignon is added for body.

The cuvee spends about 20 months in oak barriques — two-thirds of which are brand new — and then another four months in the bottle before being released. And when release day arrives, literally thousands of anxious fans clamor for their share.

Some even make the journey to the Brancaia estate and stay in one of several comfortably furnished and tastefully decorated apartments on the property. Guests have access to a 50-foot swimming pool, a small lake, bocce and table tennis. It's almost like being part of the Widmer family.

And once you get to know the Widmers — including their daughter and son-in law, who now oversee the winemaking — you'll understand why IL BLU and Brancaia's other

wines are so coveted. The family is clearly focused on quality, and to achieve their goal in that regard, they call upon a brilliant vintner, Dr. Carlo Ferrini, to lend advice and guidance.

Italy's Chianti Classico region is home to a number of world-class wine estates, and it is

where most of the country's highest-profile wines are crafted. Podere Brancaia is in the heart of the region — figuratively and quite literally. The estate is roughly three miles from the village of Castellina, and is surrounded by a park-like garden and some 50 acres of grapevines and olive groves.

Once you've been there, you'll want to go back... again and again.



# Quotes Du Jour

Here's what several vintners are saying about Napa Valley's 2006 grape harvest...

■ **Dirk Hampson of Far Niente:** "The lateness of the season is allowing the vineyards to give us more uniformity in ripe fruit flavors. I'm seeing almost no dimpling or raisining that we might see in a late harvest in a warmer year.

■ **Taylor Bartolucci of Madonna Estate:** "Because of the long growing season and long hang-time, the flavors are phenomenal."

■ **Pierre Birebent of Signorello Vineyards:** "The overall quality looks outstanding, and 2006 should be an excellent vintage."

■ **Volker Eisele of Volker Eisele Family Estate:** "Overall, the harvest has been a bit uneven — some grapes are simply outstanding; with others, the flavor is slow in coming together."

■ **Pat Stotesbery of Ladera Vineyards:** "Yields across the valley are down from last year — probably a good thing for ripening in this cool finishing period."

■ **Jon Priest of Etude:** "The wines have wonderful perfume and very good density. There is nothing more enchanting than the scent created by a winery full of fermenting Pinot Noir."

# Q AND A

**We will have eight adults at our home for a special holiday dinner, and all of us love wine. Any suggestions on how we should go about selecting the wines to serve?**

You didn't mention whether the eight adults would be in the "form" of four couples, but let's go on that assumption. How about asking each couple to supply one bottle for the feast?

A couple suggested parameters:  
1. Place a comfortable dollar limit on the value of the wine. This will prevent couples from feeling obligated to bring the best bottle in their cellar (those special bottles should be reserved for their own special occasions).

2. Ask two of the couples to bring white wine, and the other two couples to bring red. Offer some reassurance by telling them not to worry about the type of wine — just the color.

Place all of the bottles on the table and let each person pour their own. Set the table with two wine glasses per place — one for the white wines and one for the reds.

Finally, have a few extra bottles in reserve, ready to uncork, in case supplies run short. If everyone at the party loves wine, as you say, four bottles probably won't be enough for an extended holiday meal.



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**A WEED WHACKER  
IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING**

Clos Pepe, located in Lompoc, part of California's Central Coast wine-growing region, has a new way of keeping weeds in the estate vineyard under control. Steve Pepe has engaged the services of three miniature sheep — named Henley, Matilda and Althea — who have voracious appetites for weeds. Better still, they're too short to reach the grapes growing on trellised vines, which means they can do only good and no harm. Pepe is one of a handful of vintners utilizing the sheep as a way of avoiding chemicals in the vineyards and embracing organic farming.

**WITH APOLOGIES TO  
SAAR AND RUWER**

One of the more difficult wine regions not only to remember, but also to pronounce, just got a whole lot easier on both counts. Over the summer, an official name change for Germany's Mosel-Saar-Ruwer region was approved. The change will take effect with the 2007 vintage, and the region henceforth will be known simply as "Mosel." Grape growers of the



region lobbied for the change, claiming that the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer designation was confusing for consumers.

**CHILEAN WINE STAR  
INVADES NAPA VALLEY**

Aurelio Montes refuses to be relegated to a single wine region or even a single country. The proprietor of Chile's acclaimed Vina Montes also has winemaking operations in Argentina, and Vinesse has been proud to carry some of his better bottlings. Now, Montes has ventured into America's most famous wine region — California's Napa Valley — to make super-premium wine under a new label. The name of the project has not yet been decided, but what we do know is that the top-of-the-line product will be a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Montes also plans to craft a varietal Cabernet. The first vintage will be 2006, and Montes has been sourcing grapes from some of the top vineyards in Napa's Yountville, Stags Leap and Oakville appellations.

**DON'T FORGET THE  
CHEESE... AND WINE**

A one-ounce serving of cheese contains nearly a quarter of the daily recommended calcium intake, and also provides protein and phosphorus — three more reasons to enjoy wine and cheese.

**QUOTE/UNQUOTE**

Master sommelier Alpna Singh, in her new book, *Alpna Pours: About Being a Woman, Loving Wine and Having Great Relationships*: "I know a little trick that will make an inexpensive wine taste more expensive — simply chill it."

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## ANGEL HAIR PASTA WITH GARLIC SAUCE

This recipe matches well with Merlot or an acidic Sauvignon Blanc. It makes 2 to 4 servings, depending on your appetites.

### Ingredients

- 2 lbs. ripe tomatoes
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 1 sprig oregano
- Pinch chili flakes
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 lb. dried angel hair pasta
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 cup fresh basil

### Preparation

1. Bring large pot of water to a boil, and prepare an ice water bath. Cut a small "X" on the bottom of each tomato. In batches, place the tomatoes in

the boiling water and blanch until skins are easy to peel away (30 to 60 seconds). Remove and immediately plunge in ice bath. Peel tomatoes and halve horizontally. Squeeze out seeds, then roughly chop tomatoes and set aside.

2. Heat a large sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add olive oil. When oil is hot, add onions and garlic, and sauté for 2 minutes. Add thyme leaves, oregano and chili flakes, and sauté until garlic begins to turn golden brown. Add tomatoes and sugar, and stir well.

3. Lower heat and cook slowly until mixture is fairly dry, about 15 minutes.

4. Cook pasta in boiling, salted water until *al dente*. Drain.

5. Combine pasta and sauce. Add Parmesan and basil, and toss well. Place in a large pasta bowl and serve.

## MERLOT CARAMEL SAUCE

Serve this sauce atop crisp apple slices or holiday pumpkin pie.

### Ingredients

- 1/2 vanilla bean
- 1 cup Merlot
- 1 1/3 cups sugar
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter

### Preparation

1. Halve vanilla bean lengthwise and scrape seeds into a small heavy saucepan. Add bean pod and wine.

2. Boil over moderate heat until wine is reduced by half, about 10 minutes. Remove bean pod and discard.

3. Meanwhile, bring sugar and water to a boil in a heavy 2-quart saucepan over moderate heat, stirring until sugar is dissolved. Boil without stirring until syrup turns pale golden. Continue to cook caramel, swirling pan, until deep golden.

4. Remove from heat, and pour wine down the side of the pan (causing the caramel to steam and harden). Simmer, stirring, until caramel is dissolved and sauce is thickened, about 5 minutes.

5. Stir in butter, and serve warm.



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