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# The Grapevine

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR VINESSE WINE CLUB MEMBERS

## Exploring Italy's *Langhe Valley*



**How to Organize Your  
Home Wine Collection**

**The Grades of Beef and  
Their Wine Equivalents**

**Style: Why Real Maple  
Syrup Is So Expensive**

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## EDITOR'S JOURNAL

# Steaking Claim to the Best Grades of Beef

By Robert Johnson

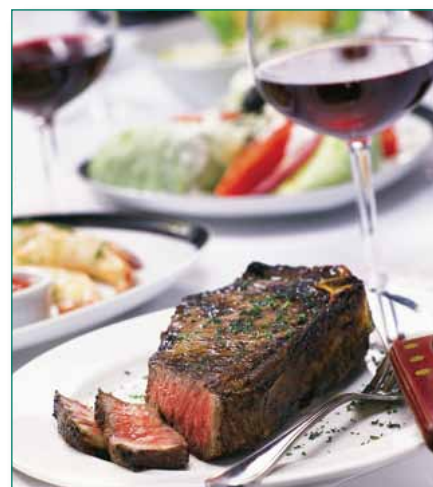
*The type of beef that a restaurant serves can make all the difference between a memorable meal and a dining disaster.*

Beef is graded by the United States Department of Agriculture, and as is the case with school work, grades matter. The higher the grade, the better the beef.

Fortunately, most restaurants realize this and focus on only the two highest grades of beef (there are eight grade levels in all). If you see "USDA Prime" listed on the menu, you're about to enjoy one of the best steaks of your life. More likely, the restaurant will serve USDA Choice, which is less expensive but still of exceptional quality.

In food and wine pairing, we sometimes match opposites on the aroma and flavor spectrum — for example, an off-dry or slightly sweet wine with a spicy Chinese or Tex-Mex dish. But when it comes to beef, I'm more inclined to pair "big" with "big." So if you're fortunate to be dining on USDA Prime, you may as well go all the way and uncork a big, bold Cabernet Sauvignon. This is no time for subtlety.

Likewise, if the beef is USDA Choice, you may opt instead for a nice bottle of Merlot or Pinot Noir, or perhaps a well-aged Cabernet.



There are other factors to consider. When beef is dry-aged — that is, hung in a cold space for around three weeks — it concentrates the flavors. That calls for a concentrated wine, and that brings Cabernet back to the forefront.

Cooking style also influences the wine selection. If the steak is grilled in butter, for instance, you'd be amazed by how nicely it would pair with a big buttery Chardonnay. That's right: white wine with beef.

Sometimes the greatest challenge is learning what type of beef the restaurant serves. If the grade isn't listed on the menu, ask. If the manager doesn't know or doesn't want to tell you, you don't have to stick around.

After all, you wouldn't order a bottle of wine at a restaurant without knowing who made it... would you?





## Tips for Organizing Your Wine Cellar

***You'll be busy with spring cleaning soon enough. Meanwhile, take some time to organize your wine cellar (or closet or rack) so you won't have to deal with it at the same time as everything else.***

The more bottles you have, the more important it is to keep them organized for optimum enjoyment.

So what's the best way to accomplish this goal?

Obviously, it depends on the size of your collection. The bigger the stash, the greater the organization required. But for most of us, a simple two-area approach works.

No matter how you choose to store your wine, make sure the bottle labels are clearly visible. You want to be able to see not only the name of the maker and the type of wine, but also the vintage.

On one side of your cellar, cooler, basement or closet, place all of the

wines that would benefit from several months to several years of aging. Think of this area as your "wine library," a place to explore every so often, or when a special occasion is coming up. Keep Cabernet Sauvignon bottles with other Cabs, Merlots with Merlots, and so on.

On the other side of your storage area, place all of your bottles that you intend to drink sooner rather than later. These are your "house wines" (wines that you enjoy often with dinner or for casual sipping), joined by bottles that

have been moved over from the "library" because their time has come.

Rather than organizing these wines by type, arrange them by "drink by" date. Obviously, you don't have to drink them in the order you set up, but this type of system provides an easy-to-understand road map for consumption, and helps prevent wines from being stored beyond their prime.



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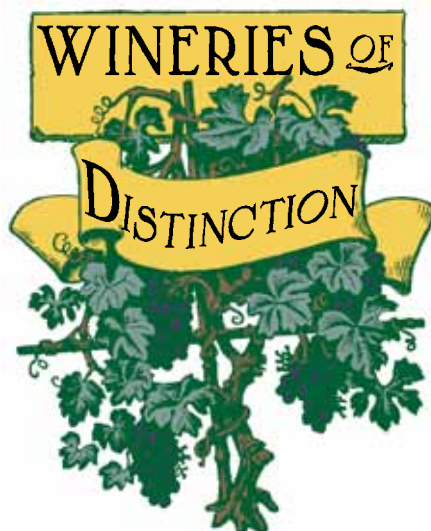
**FREQUENCY:**

Approximately Monthly

**PRICE:**

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## Exceptional Wines Help Put Remote Winery on the Map

**A**ltamura Vineyards and Winery, established in 1985 by Frank and Karen Altamura, is the only winery in Wooden Valley, which is located within the Napa Valley appellation.

The Altamuras are Napa natives who take a hands-on approach to every step of the growing and winemaking process. Thus, a natural production limit is established and the wines show off the couple's deep commitment to reflecting the terroir of their Wooden Valley Ranch.

Wooden Valley is a small, almost round valley, approximately two miles

wide at its widest point. It's located nine miles northeast of the town of Napa, and is reached by a winding mountain road that originally was carved into what was called Napa Mountain by Chinese laborers in the 1800s. The valley is bordered by the Vaca Range to the east and "Napa Mountain" to the west.

The warm summer days in Wooden



Valley are cooled by dramatic fog banks that pour over the palisades, along with mid-afternoon breezes which can produce temperatures as much as 10 degrees lower than the Napa Valley average. This results in a long growing season.

Wooden Valley was named for John Wooden, a giant among men at 6-foot-8, who purchased the area in 1852 from Jose Ignacio Berryessa and became its first resident owner. Originally from Virginia, Wooden traveled west in a wagon train that embarked from Missouri in 1846.

Today, Wooden Valley is reminiscent of an earlier age when cattle roamed the hillsides; orchards, grain and hay grew in the fertile soil; and the children were educated in a one-room schoolhouse. Winegrapes were first planted in 1905, but pulled out 30 years later during the Great Depression.

In 1985, the Altamuras began planting 65 acres of their 400-acre ranch to vineyards with a clear emphasis on Cabernet Sauvignon. The five main soil types on the ranch lay the foundation for six distinctive Cabernet vineyards, all producing wines with varying texture and flavor profiles, and all of which are blended into a single wine.

Also planted are Sangiovese, Nebbiolo and Sauvignon Blanc in optimal soils for each varietal. Altamura's vineyards sit at an elevation range of 800 to 1,000 feet.

Frank Altamura's lifelong pursuit as a winemaker is fueled by his passion for viticulture. He began working with his cousin, a vineyard manager, right out of high school and knew that this would be his life's calling.

Formal viticultural training began at Sterling Vineyards in 1976, as he began to explore what winemakers were looking for from the vineyard. This concept was further developed from the winemaker's perspective at Caymus with mentor Charlie Wagner.

"Growing up in Napa Valley and surrounded by farming, my most influential experience came from

working at Caymus for five years," Altamura said. "We developed many grape varieties — from Burger to Zinfandel — refining the concepts of soil and climatic influences, and growing for quality rather than quantity.

"As we worked to get the most from each vineyard site, I learned that it was important not to have pre-conceived ideas about what to expect from a vineyard, but rather to discover the flavors that the vineyard offered. My job now as a winemaker is to successfully get those flavors into the bottle."

More than 20 years later, richly textured Altamura Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese are lauded for their intensity and silky integration of the elements unique to each of the vineyard sites on the ranch.

Many of the early vintages of Cabernet were sourced from a historic Wooden Valley vineyard that had been settled by members of Karen Altamura's family in 1855. Frank sensed the long-term potential for this growing region and began extensive site selection research within the Napa Valley to ensure optimal vineyard development on the ranch.

They then began their adventure, taming what had once been a cattle ranch by clearing 65 acres and planting to Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese on six sites. Caves were dug and meticulous construction began on the stone winery.

Lured by the natural beauty and rural atmosphere, the Altamuras found their home in Wooden Valley.

## Winery 4-1-1

### Altamura Vineyards and Winery

1700 Wooden Valley Rd.  
Napa, CA 94558

707-253-2000

*The winery is not open to the public. Please call to inquire about current vintages.*

## Four Seasons



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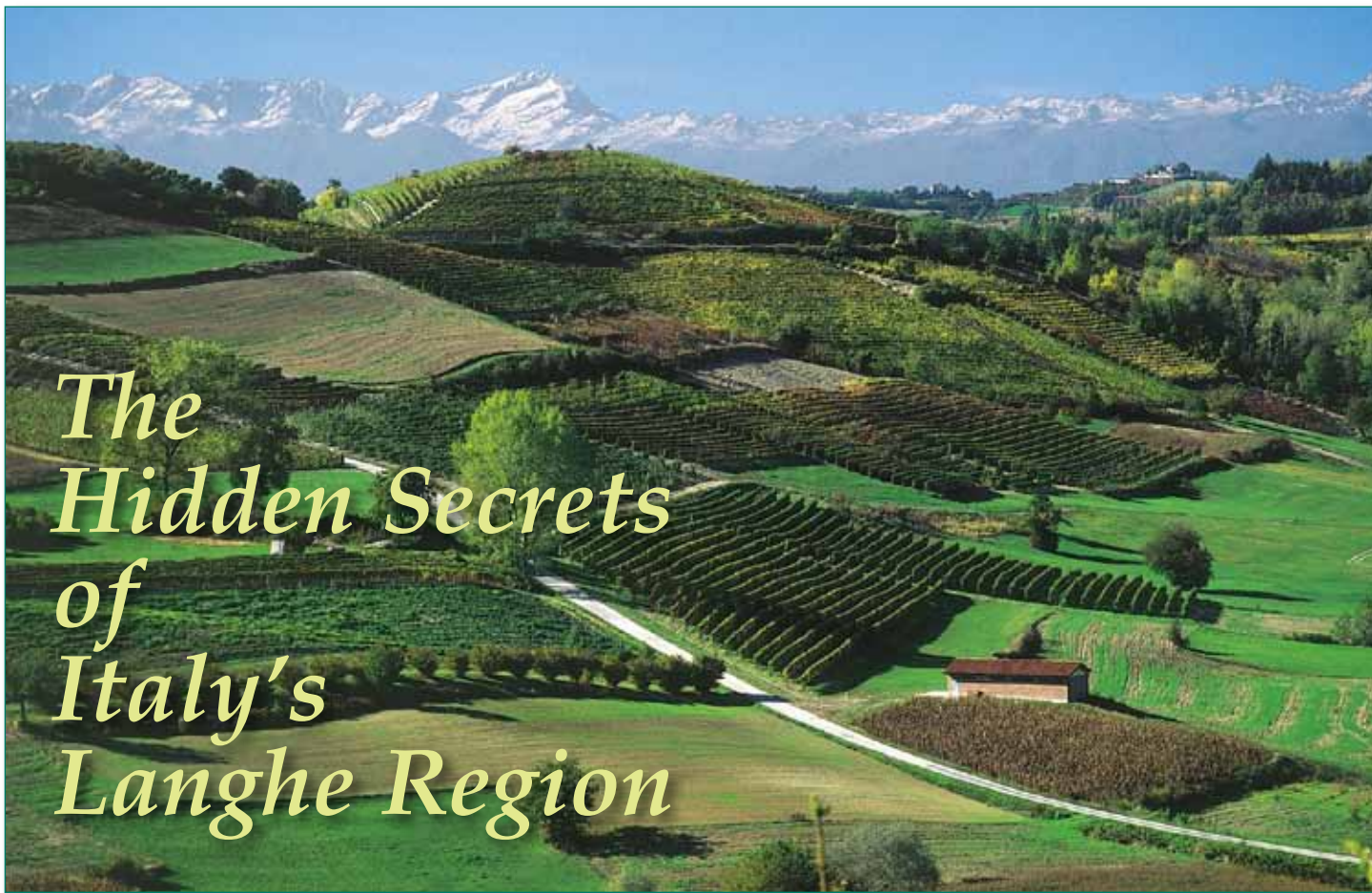
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# The Hidden Secrets of Italy's Langhe Region

**P**iedmont, Italy's largest winegrowing region, hides within itself the Langhe, a self-contained and unique landscape wedged between the Ligurian Apennine to the south, the Tanaro River to the west and north, and the province of Asti to the east.

The Langhe offers a varied landscape of hills and valleys of remarkable fertility and beauty which have given rise to a refined culinary tradition. You may come across the "Langhe" name when tasting some of the distinguished products made there: the Barolo, Barbaresco, Dolcetto and Moscato wines; the Piedmont hazelnut and the delicious sweets that it inspired; or the Alba truffle.

Every hill chain and valley has its own unmistakable identity and has produced its own dialect, customs and traditions, all of which add up to a small universe rich in surprises.

■ **The Langhe of Barolo and Dolcetto** — On the main square of La Morra, itself a balcony boasting one of the most spectacular views of the Langhe, rises a monument to

the winegrower, the central figure of this land which produces Italy's most famous wine, Barolo, from the local Nebbiolo grape.

Vineyards are everywhere in the Langhe, from Grinzane to Monforte, from Serralunga to Barolo, from Castiglione Falletto to Verduno, and from Novello to La Morra. Winegrowing is a continuous effort which shapes and changes both the landscape and the inhabitants of the Langhe.

When contemplating the process of winemaking, you will discover the continuity of ancient traditions, the signs of an ancient farming civilization whose products and artifacts can be admired in the wine cellars of Grinzane, La Morra and Barolo; in the farming museum of the

Abbazia dell'Annunziata; and in the shops located in the castle of Grinzane.

Dogliani, the hometown of one-time Italian President Luigi Einaudi, is admired as much for the Dolcetto which comes from its wine cellars as for the neoclassical brick buildings of its most famous architect, Schellino. Diano D'Alba is another name associated with the richly flavored Dolcetto wine.



**TOURING TIPS**

■ **The Langhe of Barbaresco** — The gentle hills which enclose the Tanaro Valley and form a gateway to the town of Alba are the first harbinger of a rougher, more mountainous Langhe.

The sun-drenched slopes produce Nebbiolo grapes which, after maturing in oak barrels in one of the many wine cellars that dot the hills, will become Barbaresco wine.

The slopes that remain hidden in the shade are covered with woods and hide another Langhe delicacy: the Alba truffle. From the top of its hill, the small town of Neive enchants with its Roman and Baroque buildings, and opens the view upon the lands of another famous wine, Moscato.

■ **The Langhe of the Moscato** — This area stretches across the hills of Santo Stefano Belbo, Cossano, Neviglie and Mango, and has been made famous by the writer Cesare Pavese, who was born in Santo Stefano Belbo in 1908. The art of Pavese remains linked to this landscape, whose beauty he has sung in his novels *A House on the Hill*, *Holiday in August*, and *The Moon and the Bonfire*.

■ **The Langhe of the Hazelnut Cortemilia** — Located at the confluence of the Bormida and Uzzone Rivers is the capital of the Langhe round hazelnut. The hazelnut is celebrated during an August festival when the perfume of the hazelnut cake fills the winding streets of quaint Cortemilia.

Of Roman origin, the town of Cortemilia boasts a small architectural jewel, the church of the Pieve Madonna, and a medieval tower with the remains of a castle that overlooks the town.

Starting from Cortemilia, you may follow the course of the Uzzone River, encountering the quiet stone-built towns of Pezzolo, Castelletto Uzzone, Gorrino and Gottasecca. Further still, you'll come upon the sanctuary of Todocco. Along the course of the river Bormida, you'll pass through Torre Bormida, Levice, Gorzegno and then Prunetto.

These are the most secluded parts of the Langhe, more like mountains than hills and rich in mushrooms, chestnuts and undisturbed silence. The High Langhe Meadows, woods and hazelnut groves fill the landscape of the High or Alta Langa, which can be reached from Alba through Montelupo, Serravalle, Bossolasco, Murazzano and Sale Langhe.

Side trips may lead you to Lequio Berria, Albaretto della Torre, Arguello, Cerretto Langhe, Bonvicino, Cravanzana, Feisoglio, Niella Belbo or San Benedetto Belbo, where the search for a special rustic restaurant or a local treat — such as Tuma cheese from Murazzano or hazelnut cake from any of the local bakeries — has become a favorite weekend activity.

Lodging in the Langhe offers numerous options. Locals recommend the Hotel Villa Beccaris, which sits on a hill overlooking a vast expanse of grapevines. Room rates begin at \$294.

For a memorable meal, visit Belvedere restaurant, which also offers vineyard views. The classic Piedmont cuisine includes selections such as vitello tonnato, porcini and white truffles.

And when in Barolo, be sure to check out the museum that is devoted to the wonders of viticulture. After all, you ventured to the Langhe for the wine; the friendly accommodations, fabulous dining and magnificent scenery are just a bonus.

### For Further Information

**Hotel Villa Beccaris**  
Monforte d'Alba  
[www.villabeccaris.it](http://www.villabeccaris.it)

**Belvedere Restaurant**  
La Morra  
[www.belvederelamorra.it](http://www.belvederelamorra.it)

**General Information**  
[www.piemonteitalia.eu](http://www.piemonteitalia.eu)

# VINESSE

## Hot LIST

**1 Hot Chianti Winery Tour.** The Fontodi wine estate in Panzano-in-Chianti, north of Siena, offers a wonderful tour that includes a visit to the cool cellar and ends in a tasting room that offers breathtaking views of the surrounding vineyards. Because production is limited, Fontodi's amazing "Super Tuscan" wine, known as Flaccianello della Pieve, may not be available to taste. But the Chianti Classico definitely will be, and it alone is worth the trip — along with the gorgeous scenery, of course.

39-055-852005

**2 Hot New Sonoma County Tasting Room.** Audelssa Estate Winery opened its new tasting room in time for the holiday season. The elegant space is located in the historic Poppe Building in "downtown" Glen Ellen, Calif., a small town in Sonoma County. Designed by co-owner Linda Brewer and Denise Nelson, the stylish room occupies 1,000 square feet and provides visitors with a beautiful setting to sample Audelssa's wines.

[www.audelssa.com](http://www.audelssa.com)

**3 Hot Wine Book.** With so many wonderful wines coming out of Argentina these days, it was only a matter of time until someone published a comprehensive book about touring Argentine wine country. That book is *Vino Argentino*, written by Laura Catena, who was born in Argentina and educated in the United States.

[www.chroniclebooks.com](http://www.chroniclebooks.com)





**H**orizontal Wine Tasting. A tasting of a group of wines from the same vintage or representing the same style of wine (such as all Chardonnays).

**I**cewine. Canadian wine made from frozen grapes. (Canada has trademarked the term as a single word. In other parts of the world, it is two words.)

**J**ustin. A winery in Paso Robles, Calif., recently acquired by Fiji Water. Known primarily for a Bordeaux-style blend known as “Isosceles.”

**K**orbel. A Sonoma County maker of sparkling wine.

**L**ieu-dit. French term for a named vineyard site, typically below Grand cru level.

**M**uscadine. A variety of wine, popular in Arkansas and a few other states, that’s noted for its somewhat “foxy” quality, while also being sweetly refreshing.

## VINESSE STYLE

### MAPLE SYRUP

*In case you were wondering why that bottle of pure maple syrup is priced more like a brick of pure gold these days, it’s all about cycles.*

As Dana Wildes, a fourth-generation Vermont maple syrup producer, recently told *National Geographic* magazine, “We go through cycles, and we’re in a cycle.”

Many believe that climate change is the primary culprit, as the critical springtime “freeze-thaw” process that sap goes through has declined by about 10 percent (or 3.2 days) in the past 40 years.

Simply stated, the process involves a maple tree’s sap freezing overnight as air temperatures dip, and then thawing out during the warmer daylight hours. Knowing when to “tap” the trees — when the sap is at just the right stage — takes years of experience. But even veteran syrup producers are having

difficulty estimating when that period will arrive, and the ultimate result is less sap.

This creates a perfect storm: It takes 40 gallons of sap to make a single gallon of syrup. Less sap means less syrup, and less syrup, combined

with high demand, means sky-high prices.

Once you’ve had *real* maple syrup — whether dark, light or medium in hue — there’s no going back to supermarket brands of syrup that contain little or no maple. And that only exasperates the problem by further increasing demand for the real thing.

For a pancake, waffle or French toast lover, it’s a gastronomic and economic conundrum with no easy solution.



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## APPELLATION SHOWCASE



**L**ocated in the heart of the Iberian Peninsula, Castilla-La Mancha is the “homeland” of the most daring and famous literary knight: Don Quixote of La Mancha, main ambassador of an unknown land — a land that hides surprises in every corner, on every valley, plain and mountain.

Any of the five provinces that shape the Castilla-La Mancha community is worth a visit, discovering its customs and festivals, its rich craftsmanship and its varied gastronomy, underwritten by products with a “Guarantee of Origin.”

The big daddy of them all is aptly named D.O. La Mancha, the largest single wine region in the world. Its gargantuan dimensions spread into four different provinces, allowing for not only lots of wine, but a great deal of variety, too.

The most widely planted grape is a white variety called Airén. It has never been highly regarded, but when given a little pampering (and some modern technology) this tiny fruit can produce very tasty and crisp wine.

That said, the future of La Mancha’s fame resides in its reds. Winemakers employ mostly Tempranillo (often called Cencibel in these parts, so don’t be confused by the wording on the label), but increased blending with Cabernet

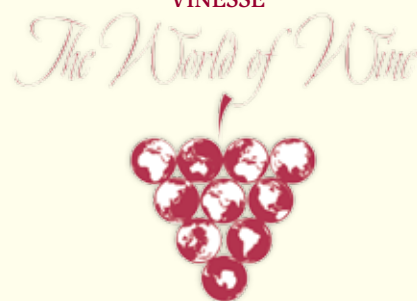
Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot also is becoming fashionable.

Critics are still heralding the imminent coming of age of this region, but what most fail to realize is that it already has arrived.

You can’t talk about Castilla-La Mancha without mentioning a Spanish classic, D.O. Valdepeñas. Situated in the south of La Mancha, Valdepeñas has been known for its false reds or “alokes” — wine made from a mix of mostly white grapes with a few reds. But Valdepeñas fell out of style as the demand for true quality rosé increased. Now, its “real” reds, made mostly from Tempranillo, offer very good quality for the price of a beach ball.

Castilla-La Mancha also is home to Spain’s first private wine regions, called vinos de pago — single-estate wineries with their own rules and regulations: D.O. Dominio de Valdepusa and D.O. Finca Elez. The wines are more select, as can be the prices, but they are some the best Castilla-La Mancha has to offer.

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**9** Percentage of the acreage in Napa County that is planted to grapevines. That's roughly 45,000 out of 485,000 acres devoted to winegrowing.

**Q** How many of America's states have wineries? I can't imagine that Alaska, for instance, would have any.

**A** Better start imagining! There actually is winemaking activity in Alaska, just as there is in each of the other 49 states. As recently as 1975, there were 16 states where no wine was made. No more. Quality varies widely from region to region and state to state, but there is "homegrown" wine to be had regardless of which state border you may pass.

**O**ver the years, the wine clubs of Vinesse have featured numerous bottlings crafted at wineries owned by South Africa wine pioneer Graham Beck. So we are sorry to report Beck's death at the age of 80, following a long battle with lung cancer. Most of Beck's wine production was centered in the Stellenbosch and Franschhoek growing areas of South Africa.



**T**he Rutherford Dust Society Board of Directors has strengthened its long-standing commitment to supporting local community projects in the Rutherford AVA by increasing its donations overall by over 60% in 2010. This includes a 95% increase in donations to the historic Rutherford Grange to assist with its restoration project. "We are strong believers in supporting the community in which we live," says RDS President Robin Baggett. "Rutherford is a small community with a big heart, and we are committed to offering a helping hand." The society is spearheading the effort to restore the Napa River and its ecosystem.



**E**ver hear of Pierre Peters Champagne? How about Jean Milan? Or Larmandier-Bernier? Chances are good that you haven't, unless you frequent hip restaurants and notice them on the by-the-glass list. The aforementioned sparklers are among the group of wines known as "Grower Champagnes," and while they may not always be as refined as the more famous names in French sparkling wine, they can be packed with personality. In the Champagne region, there are approximately 19,000 growers, most of whom farm very small plots and sell their crop to the big Champagne houses. But about a quarter of those growers keep their crop and make their own bottlings, typically in very small quantities — rarely enough to export to the United States. So when you have an opportunity to sample a "Grower Champagne," give it a try. And enjoy your meal, because chances are you'll be in a very good restaurant.

**“**You meet a great person at a festival, (then don't see) him for a year and you need to get the conversation started... That's the time for a great bottle of wine. That gets you talking.**”**



— Mandolin virtuoso Chris Thile of Nickel Creek and Punch Brothers, quoted in *Wine Spectator*.



## FOOD & WINE PAIRINGS

# FERRARI-CARANO WINE DINNER

*There's no better way to enjoy fine wines than at a dinner featuring a menu that was developed specifically to complement those wines.*

We like to share wine dinner menus with you to help get your creative juices flowing in the kitchen — because every dinner is better with wine, and spectacular with the right wine.

The date was September 13, 2008. It was the annual Sonoma County Wine Country Weekend. The Ferrari-Carano winery was hosting a special Harvest Dinner starring five of its wines.

Here's a look at the menu on that magical evening...

■ **Appetizer Course** — Scallop Carpaccio with basil oil and opal basil. Also, Seared Day Boat Scallop with garlic crème and pea shoots. Wine: 2006 Fiorella Chardonnay, Russian River Valley.

■ **First Course** — Mixed Sonoma Valley Organic Greens with candied walnuts, crispy veal sweetbreads and quince balsamic vinaigrette. Wine: 2005 Reserve Chardonnay, Carneros.

■ **Second Course** — Roasted Duck Breast on Swiss chard with a fig gastrique. Wine: 2006 Sky High Ranch Pinot Noir, Mendocino Ridge.

■ **Entrée** — Rack of Sonoma Lamb PreVail Reduction Sauce, with gratin potatoes and butter braised garden carrots with thyme. Wine: PreVail Back 40, Alexander Valley.

■ **Dessert** — White Chocolate Apricot Crème Brulee with vanilla-infused apricots and topped with a white chocolate custard. Wine: 2006 Eldorado Gold, Sonoma County.



## Light & Sweet

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## CABERNET BEEF STEW

Beef stew is a wonderful wintertime dish, and this version is made with and pairs perfectly with Cabernet Sauvignon.

### Ingredients

- 3½-lbs. boneless stew meat, cut into 1½-in. squares
- Flour, salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons cooking oil
- 2 cups sliced onions
- 1 cup sliced carrots
- 4 cups Cabernet Sauvignon
- 2 cups beef stock
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and diced coarsely
- 2 cups stewed tomatoes
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon dry thyme leaves
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch, dissolved in 2 tablespoons cold water

### Preparation

1. Dry meat and coat in flour; discard excess. Salt and pepper meat to taste.
2. Heat oil in a large stewing pot. When oil is very hot, add meat in a single layer.
3. Brown meat 3-4 minutes, stirring frequently until it's brown on all sides. Take out meat and reserve.
4. Add 2 tablespoons oil to pan and add onions and carrots. Saute vegetables until golden, stirring as needed.
5. Add some wine to stew pot, scraping browned bits and pieces off bottom of pan. Add meat back in along with the rest of the wine, the stock, garlic, tomatoes, bay leaves and thyme.
6. Bring the stew to a simmer and cover. Simmer 2½ to 3 hours, until meat is very tender when pierced by a fork.

7. Take meat out of the stew pot and reserve. Pour rest of the liquid through a strainer into another pot.
8. Degrease the cooking liquid.
9. Taste the sauce. Salt and pepper to taste.
10. Mix cornstarch and water together. Add this to the stewing liquid, and bring to a boil, stirring until thickened.
11. Add meat back in and serve.

## JUMBO SHRIMP w/HERB BUTTER SAUCE

This recipe serves 4, and matches beautifully with California Chardonnay.

### Ingredients

- 16 jumbo shrimp
- Salt and black pepper, to taste
- 2 sticks butter
- 1 teaspoon tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon lime juice
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped dill
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped basil
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped chives
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- A few drops of Tabasco, to taste
- ¼ teaspoon Paprika

### Preparation

1. Preheat grill to high.
2. Season shrimp with salt and pepper.
3. Place on grill and cook until crisp, about 2 to 3 minutes per side. Place on dish and keep warm.
4. Melt butter in medium saucepan.
5. Add remaining ingredients, bring to a boil, and simmer on low heat for two minutes.
6. Pour over cooked shrimp and serve.

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