

St. Louis Eats and Drinks With Joe and Ann Pollack

Joe and Ann Pollack, St. Louis' most experienced food writers, lead a tour of restaurants, wines, shops and other interesting places. When we travel, you will travel with us. When we eat, drink, cook, entertain or read, we'll share our knowledge and opinions. Come along for the ride!!

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This Week's Wine March 8, 2009



I've handled a lot of poker chips in my time, sometimes raking them in, most of the time throwing them into the pot, but I've never seen one on a wine bottle, serving as the label.

It was a black chip, not to be removed, and it marked High Roller, a 2006 California Napa Valley Cab that is the premier wine of JAQK Cellars, a young, San Francisco-based winemaker and marketer. And marketer is a good word since half the ownership quartet, Katie Jain and Joel Templin, came out of the marketing and design world. The descriptive information, labels and proprietary names all show imagination, talent and the fact that they do not take themselves seriously.

As their mission statement notes, "We are a new wine company. We're also a new type of wine company. In addition to being dedicated to making great wine, we're also passionate about something else: play. For us, play includes the excitement of testing our luck—and tempting fate—at games of chance."

JAQK, which buys grapes around California and does the vinification and bottling in San Francisco, has eight wines, five red and three white, ranging in price from \$70 for the High Roller to \$23 for the 2007 Charmed, a California Sauvignon Blanc. The others are Her Majesty, '07 California

Chardonnay (\$27); Bone Dance, '07 California Merlot (\$29); 22 Black, '06 California Cabernet (\$31); Pearl Handle, '07 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$42); Black Clover, '06 Napa Merlot (\$48); and Soldiers of Fortune, '06 Napa Shiraz (\$50). High Roller and Black Clover have simple black labels, the others are more fanciful in their label design.

Obviously, grapes from specific counties are more expensive, and presumably better, than those with the California designation, meaning they can come from anywhere in the state, in any proportion of the blend.

Given the usual 2-to-2½ times markup for restaurant wine lists, these can be on the high side. I sampled five of them and found all to be extremely worthy, well-made wines with good structure and a lengthy finish. The High

Roller answered to its high price with berry notes on the palate and a hint of tobacco in the aroma. Well-balanced and with splendid flavor, it's an excellent wine. My favorite was the Soldiers of Fortune Shiraz, a brilliant wine, extremely dark and rich, with big flavor notes. The two Merlots, Black Clover (from Napa) and Bone Dance (California) were good, but the former showed more depth and richness. The Pearl Handle Chardonnay was pleasant, but I have tasted only a handful of Chards that have provided a fabulous experience.

Design is a high point. JAQK offers a pair of four-pack gift sets, four different soldiers on a set of Soldiers of Fortune, each representing a suit in a deck of cards. Similarly, the Pearl Handle has a set of aces in ornate, attractive designs.

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Given difficult economic times, price is a driving factor in wine sales these days, and the best thing about it is that wineries are working diligently to make better wines, and therefore better values, at the lower end of the scale. Makers of sparkling area wines have had mechanical help to make less-expensive bubbly, and prosecco and spumante sales have responded in the last few years, with Italian offerings scoring well on the sales front in both the retail and restaurant areas.

Spumante, which means "foamy" in Italian, is the term that covers all Italian, or Italian-style, sparkling wines. Prosecco comes from the Venice area of the country. All Prosecco is Spumante, but not vice versa. It's like the French situation where Brandy is the generic term for the liqueur, but Cognac is from a specific area.

Gallo, whose wines cover the world and the price spectrum, is in the spumante field with Ballatore, a California producer. Made primarily from the Malvasia Bianca grape, the fresh and fruity bubbly is a fine value at less than \$10, and comes in both traditional white and a wonderful Rosso, or red, in the same price range. Both are about eight percent alcohol, about two-thirds of most table wines, and both have a tinge of sweetness. I was extremely impressed with the red, finding all sorts of strawberry and cherry flavors. The red has a sugar proportion of eight grams per 100 milliliters, slightly above the 7.6 grams ratio of the white.

I found them outstanding aperitifs, just for quaffing, and the white also was a fine companion to spicy Asian dishes.

Across the Atlantic, Mionetto makes the traditional Italian Prosecco, from the Venice region, and uses the also-traditional crown cap for the bottle labeled "II," emphasizing that this is "the" classic Prosecco. Again, it is lower in alcohol, and slightly less sweet on my palate. Good fruit in both the II and the brut, which is even a bit drier. A little sweeter is the Sergio Extra Dry, named for winemaker Sergio Mionetto, also possessing pleasing fruit flavors and a good bubble. The II is about \$12, the others between \$17 and \$20,

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Tom Meadowcroft makes wine in Sonoma County, one of our favorite places in the whole wide world; he talks about making wine in the spirit of giving, of sharing, and his Magito label (muh-GEE-toe), pays tribute to the Magi, well-known givers and sharers through history. Remember "The Gift of the Magi," the O. Henry short story in which a man and his wife each sold a most precious possession to buy a gift for the other? It exemplifies the spirit of sharing, as the Magi of legend brought gifts to Bethlehem.

From a winery in Sebastopol, Calif., Meadowcroft produces \$16 bargain wines of superb flavor and complexity, blending different grapes from different vineyards along the way. For example, his '05 Panorama Zinfandel, delicious and mouth-filling, includes six different grape varieties from eight vineyards in four northern California counties. He starts with 75 percent Zinfandel from Amador, Solano and Napa counties, then factors in Cabernet Sauvignon (8 percent, Sonoma), Sangiovese (6, Napa), Syrah (5, Napa), Merlot (4, Sonoma) and Petite Sirah (2, Napa). The result is an extremely complex wine with berries and plums on the tongue.

His 2006 North Coast Sauvignon Blanc, a bright, citrus-touched offering, offers a wine far more complex than the usual versions, which use Sauvignon Blanc grapes and rarely add others. But Meadowcroft, making his wine far more complex, uses 75 percent of the key grape, sourced from Mendocino, Napa and Lake Counties, then adds Verdelho, a Spanish grape (10 percent, Lodi County); Sauvignon Musque (8, Sonoma) and Viognier (7, Sonoma). The result is outstanding, with an aroma of citrus and flowers, and flavors of melon, peach and citrus, with a touch of mineral that creates backbone. Delicious.



The 2006 Highlands Cabernet blend, with a Sonoma County designation, involves three classic grapes, all from the county. He starts with 60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, then adds Cabernet Franc and Merlot in equal amounts. As a result, he can call the wine a Cabernet blend but not Cabernet Sauvignon; he would need 75 percent to name it after a single grape.

The wine is big, with the flavor of extremely ripe fruit, featuring blackberry. There's a little tannin, but its presence is an addition, not a subtraction.

Meadowcroft admits to borrowing a page from Italian and French winemakers, who usually use almost every grape on their vines in their wines. As a vineyard manager for many years, he talks about strolling among the vines, sniffing and tasting, trying to get a feel for the grapes.

"It involves a lot of walking," he said, but the results are very special.

It's a small winery, with a small, Columbia, Mo.-based distributor, Golden Barrel, but the wines should be available at Lucas and the Wine and Cheese Place.

-Joe

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