

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Schaefer on wine

Something old, something new

by Dennis Schaefer

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I was reminded this week of how sometimes, in the name of instant gratification, we drink wines too young. Pulling the corks on a couple of The Ojai Vineyard's older whites from my cellar, I could appreciate just what a little time can do for handcrafted wines. Ojai vintner Adam Tolmach builds a lot of layers into his wines. While they all have fine flavors on release, there is an uncommon depth built into them that will begin to reveal itself only with as little as a couple years in the bottle.



All of the wines in today's review, with the exception of the Rock Hollow ones, which are designed to be consumed in their youth, could benefit from a little prudent cellaring. A little patience will go a long way in rewarding the palate. Of course, they are also delicious to drink now. But they have the potential to become something more.

- **Ojai Sauvignon Blanc, Santa Ynez Valley, McGinley Vineyard 2007** (\$28): Green herbs mix with tart citrus notes on the nose burnished with lanolin, musk and saddle soap. The flavors don't pop right away in the mouth like young sauvignon blancs do. Age has mellowed it, making it grassy (in a good way) and appealing with bitter lemon-lime, lanolin, pear and green apple. Rich, viscous and mouthcoating, it's lush but not in an oak-driven way. Then, when you think you've drunk in all the flavors, along comes melon on mid palate permeated with a sweet basil and anise quality as well as a sea salt minerality. A lovely wine to go with well-seasoned, herbal dishes.
- **Ojai Chardonnay, Santa Maria Valley, Bien Nacido Vineyard 2008** (\$31): The finely tuned nose of pineapple, mango and grapefruit mixed with clotted cream, coconut, creme brulee and a touch of lemon-lime are an incredible amalgamation of aromas. Flavors of pineapple, honey, mango, marzipan, grated fresh vanilla bean, orange blossom and orange muscat-like citrus combine to make for liquid creme brulee in a glass. Rich and decadent, this is a full-bodied, take-no-prisoners chardonnay that will make you sit up and take notice.
- **Alta Maria Chardonnay, Santa Maria Valley 2009** (\$28): From former Alban Vineyards' winemaker Paul Wilkins and ninth-generation grape grower James Ontiveros, their current release of Alta Maria chardonnay from the Santa Maria Valley begins with lemon pith, citrus and pineapple on the nose with more lemony embellishments on the palate with hints of butterscotch, caramel, brown baking spices and minerals. It starts out bright and sunny but takes a serious turn so it's not your cocktail chardonnay sipper. Very structured and well put together, it's still very tightly wound but somehow appears to be delicate at the same time. Served directly from the refrigerator, it was too cold to show its stuff. The reveal happens only after warming up on the counter for about a half hour. Then you see what it's really made of. The scintillating acidity helps all the other elements work and makes it a perfect foil for food.
- **Bodegas M Tempranillo, Tinto de Paso, Paso Robles 2008** (\$25): Bodegas M is the Spanish wine-oriented project of Michael Young, longtime national sales manager for L'Aventure Winery in Paso Robles.

"I cut my teeth on Rioja wines," he explained, referring to when he was a student living in Spain. Now he's making Spanish-style wines in his own backyard, so to speak. The engaging tempranillo shows a healthy nose of dark plum, blackberry, shoe polish and road tar, a good sign for this varietal. The flavors are all black all the time: black cherry, blackberry and ripe black plum. While moderately bodied, it's rich with an enveloping flavor attack on the palate while mocha and melted road tar chime in to support the fruit on the finish. This is a beauty of a tempranillo that unfolds with time in the glass. Bodegas M is a major Spanish-style vintner that can take its place next to such stellar local producers as Verdad and Longoria.

• **Rock Hollow Sauvignon Blanc, Santa Barbara County 2010** (\$13): Rock Hollow wines are made at Curtis Winery in the Santa Ynez Valley. Over the past 15 years, the Firestone family has established Curtis Winery as one of the region's top Rhone-style producers. Rock Hollow is dedicated to making wines from other than the Rhone varietals. In this case, the sauvignon blanc shows gooseberry and citrusy lemon peel on the nose but not aggressively like so many New Zealand sauvignon blancs. A kind of lighter whipped lemon chiffon aroma makes it seem more playful. Plenty of grapefruit, including ruby red, comes through on the palate plus guava, pear and lemony citrus. It's snappy and brisk, too, but with good, solid mouthfeel and flavor persistence. The typical pungency of sauvignon blanc is palpable and it's a welcome flavor counterpoint to the fresh fruit flavors, making it more complex.

• **Rock Hollow Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County 2010** (\$13): As is the case with the sauvignon blanc, this white wine comes from grapes drawn exclusively from the Firestone family's estate vineyards. Fermented in both stainless steel tanks and small French oak barrels, it's the best of both worlds: the natural fruit freshness is readily apparent but it's enhanced with toasty accents from the barrels. Pineapple, baked apple pie and clove are the enticing aromatics while the bright flavors are of pineapple, pear and lemon zest, along with butterscotch and baking spices. This is a snappy little chardonnay that gives a lot of bang for the buck. It just may become my new house white wine for summer.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. Email him at food@newspress.com