

## REGION OF THE MONTH



# CELEBRATIONS WINE CLUB

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### WINERY from cover

that is opulent, broad, fat, oaky, rich, and alcoholic. Those wines are dying on the vine, so to speak. The wine press fueled that style, gave 99 points to this wine and 103 or whatever to another, and people went almost into a frenzy, like collecting philately or numismatics or any of those hobbies that used to be in vogue decades ago. Wine collecting became kind of a thing. You had to outdo the other guy. You had to have the newest, the rarest baseball card, or the stamp with the upside-down airplane. So you had the quest for these expensive, esoteric, high priced wines. That is still fueled to an extent by the popular wine media, but they have recalibrated the pricing downward. It pays their bills through advertizing, and it has become corporatized. The last big splurge on expensive Cabs was in the heyday of the stock market a few years back when people were making money hand over fist, and everything was ratcheting up and up. Now expense account lunches are dead and gone. People aren't buying expensive Cabernet or red wines in general to celebrate. Looking at some of the recent Bordeaux prices, everything is coming down. Rhones and Syrah are selling poorly. Pinot is still kind of hot but teetering because everybody is making it, so there is no good correlation to price and quality any more. Most of us are not experiencing huge economic hardship. It's not like the great depression. We are not in soup lines. But I think there has been a huge wakeup call in terms of wine's utility and place in American life, and it's not a well defined place yet. We are still working on how wine fits into our lifestyle

### Where do white wines fit in this scenario?

Several years ago, we consciously recalibrated where we were headed as a wine entity, not necessarily a reaction to the economic climate but more about what constitutes value. Other than the more expensive wines that we already had, we decided not to make any new ones that were going to sell for more than \$20. We figured that anybody who was middle income and reasonably comfortable could afford a \$20 bottle of wine once a week at home, which would be \$35 or \$40 in a restaurant because

of the way the markups work. We tried to hit on a value oriented approach, which is why we are producing more white wine. Red wine requires more aging, more patience, the use of oak barrels. So we shifted more to white wine, and that seems to be a segment that's healthy right now. Niche white wines are a bright spot. What we have seen in the last few years is that people are thinking lighter, fresher, brighter, less formal. Maybe it's an endless quest for finding something that's new and different, which now is countervailing to red. But also concurrent is that sommeliers have been pushing the more esoteric white varieties of all types from Alberino to Gruner Veltliner to the more unique, more esoteric, more localized kinds of wines, whether it's Spanish or Austrian or Greco and Fiano from Southern Italy. There are all these unique white grapes out there that don't require oak, that are best bottled fresh and consumed young. Hopefully once you open up a pipeline, you have this pull-through for your product that's like a perpetual motion machine. We are starting to see some of that come into play for our Vermentino. We've been beneficiaries of the fact that Pinot Grigio has caught on, so people aren't afraid of a less familiar sounding varietal. Pinot Grigio is not as lyrical as Chardonnay or Viognier, but it has reached the tipping point. It's accepted. Everyone has heard of it. Pinot Grigio is the fastest growing white varietal there is, and Vermentino is kind of slip streaming behind it. I was looking for a white grape that could make us a big fish in a small pond, and we are now the largest producer of Vermentino in California. We started in 2005, and each year we have used our experience and elevated the wine, not incrementally but leapfrogging. Each year we get better and make more. What we offer is something that is unique, differentiated, artisanal, hopefully well crafted from the consumer's perspective, flavorful, interesting, versatile. All these qualities come into play.

### Where did you discover Vermentino?

When my oldest daughter was living in Tuscany, I went there to visit her for about a week, and we stayed by the seashore. We went to this outdoor fes-

tival in a fishing village and sat down at a community table to eat. There were two choices, a seafood pasta and another seafood-related dish. And they brought out in clear water pitchers liters of Vermentino. It wasn't even labeled. It was just Vermentino, the hip new grape on the Tuscan coast because it is adaptable and does well in that environment. We were sitting there with friends, having dinner, and drinking this wine out of pitchers. It was a beautiful evening, a convivial celebratory environment, and people were just having a good time, good local seafood, good pasta, good bread, and good local wine, an anonymous local wine, but good. And that was the revelation. This is the synthesis of where I want to be, the nexus of where I want to be, the crossroads. I want to be eating good food. I want to be having a good time. I want to enjoy life. The wine has to work with the food, and the food has to be good. I like to travel in Europe, and the best integration of wine and food that I've ever seen, even among aristocratic people, is in Italy. Wine is important, but wine is not sacred. Wine is not worshiped on some sort of alter like it might be in Bordeaux, where it's about prestige and status. In Burgundy it's a little less so. In Italy, the wine is important, but Italians are not label-directed. The wine has to be good quality, and it has to go with the food. But its importance is that it's integrated into this lifestyle. It's accepted. Last night, we had dinner at this new little bistro in Sacramento, and people were lining up outside the door. The food was inexpensive, flavorful, inventive, and it was a great time. Their wine-by-the-glass was \$6 to \$8 and their entrees ranged from \$9 to mid-upper teens. It was a family business, and they were really into it. I'd say that it's not at the same level as something here in San Francisco, but the owners were passionate. They had people lining up to patronize them in a less exuberant economy. There was wine on a lot of tables. My point is that the food may not have been exceptional, but they put every effort into making it the best they could. It was an extension of their vision, their concept of what their bistro needed to be. It was a good experience, and I would like to see those kinds of places all over.

## California *Winery of the Month*



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## White Wine and the New Economy

### *L'Uvaggio di Giacomo*

Jim Moore is a man for the hour. He portrays the current economy as an opportunity for a more graceful, authentic lifestyle with a certain kind of glamour based on solid value. He talks about entertaining family and friends at home, everyone cooking together with garden ingredients, or dining at informal restaurants, locally owned, where proprietors with pride in their craft provide simply prepared foods with cheerful wines. While he makes delicious reds, mostly from Italian cultivars, he's more enthusiastic about the white wines in his portfolio, which he says are the new bright spot in the market place while expensive reds sit desolately on shelves, abandoned by the frugal buyer who now wants "lighter, fresher, brighter" wines. When he travels to Italy, he visits the countryside, where he says that good wine is part of a simple convivial meal without attracting undue attention to itself. Here at home, he promotes the same sensible attitude toward wine rather than the worshipful attention that cult wines garnered when the economy roared. His thoughtful analysis of value extends to his Ferragamos, which he says are his wedding and funeral shoes and will serve him for decades although he couldn't afford to buy them now. Jim Moore has

the advantage of being a winemaker in rural Napa Valley, where he can trade wine for heirloom tomatoes and eat at rustic little restaurants hidden on the back roads, which anywhere else would be stars. But at the very least, his attitude can serve as a guide for how the rest of us might embrace the passing of a gilded age. Our conversation has been slightly edited for clarity and length.

### In the past, consumers have been much more interested in premium reds than whites. Is that changing?

We are beginning to see an ocean of moderately expensive to very expensive red wines just sitting, backing up at various stages of production, from finished wine in the bottle, to wine in the barrel, to bulk wine in tanks, back out to the vineyards. Winemakers are not buying red grapes for this vintage. There is push-back all the way to the vineyard level in response to the economy. It is just so slow at the high end. Consumers are looking for anything inexpensive, an alternative to real expensive and in some cases real heavy handed. There is a conscious rejection of the California Cabernet, the Napa Cab

See **WINERY** back page

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