



FROM LEFT: Wine director Chaylee Priete at Wo Hing General Store, Ryme Cellars, Natural Process Alliance (no, it's not water), and Wind Gap.

SETTLING THE SCORES

Local sommeliers are nurturing a new California style that celebrates wines with a sense of individuality—conventional point system be damned. By Courtney Humiston



AT A TRENDY NEW RESTAURANT in town, the sommelier approaches your table. At least you think she's a sommelier. Wearing sneakers, she looks barely old enough to drink. You tell her that you're looking for something to go with both your duck confit and your date's sea urchin salad. Without hesitation, she recommends a wine she recently discovered. Gesturing enthusiastically, she speaks of everything from its minerality and complexity to the winemaker's extensive collection of ceramic Lucky Cats. Never mind that you've never heard of the producer, the varietal, or the region in Northern California where the grapes were grown—you are an adventurous, urbane wine drinker. It's your duty to take the leap. What returns to your table is a "white" wine that's closer to orange and made from a pink-skinned grape.

Daring wine pairings are a part of the current SF dining experience more often than not. In the past few years, a new generation of local sommeliers has all but dismissed the expected style of California wines that critic Robert Parker and *Wine Spectator* have pumped up with high scores for years—"new-world" wines that are technically perfect, fruit-driven, high in alcohol, and brimming with oak.

It wasn't that long ago, however, that sommeliers regularly touted Parker scores in order to sell wines to restaurant customers who were equally eager to buy them. Kim Beto, who worked as a wine director at Postrio during its Wolfgang Puck days back in the mid-1990s, remembers the day he realized that high-scoring wines had become clones. "All those wines tasted the same," he says, recalling a tasting of Napa and Bordeaux wines that received the coveted 100 points (a perfect Parker score).

But today's wine lists are full of quirky, off-the-grid wines that you won't likely find between the pages of *Wine Spectator*, much less on the Parker scoreboard. Finding these wines used to require looking to the Old World or Europe, but now more and more sommeliers are collaborating with California makers to make old-world styles—balanced, terroir-driven specimens that often focus on unusual varietals—right here in our home state.

"California was the birthplace of wine technology. Now we're fusing this technology with techniques that are centuries old," says Hayes Valley-based Absinthe Group wine director Ian Becker, who favors up-and-coming

his restaurants and wine shop, Arlequin Café and Wine Merchant, as platforms for pioneering vintners.

Chris Brockway of Broc Cellars, a winery in Berkeley of all places, is one such example. His wines include a 2010 Carbonic Carignane crafted from grapes grown on 120-year-old, dry-farmed vines and made with indigenous yeasts and no additives. Though Arlequin is a small shop, it carries five Broc Cellars wines, a fact for which Becker is unapologetic. "Customers like them," he says, "and we want to support him."

Innovative California wines are also a focus on the list at Charles Phan's latest Mission District restaurant, Wo Hing General Store, where wine director Chaylee Priete devotes an entire section to such unexpected offerings as Trousseau Gris and Blaufränkisch, both from Pax Mahle's Sonoma offshoot label Wind Gap, and Ribolla Gialla, which shows up both in a skin-fermented interpretation by newcomers Rymer Cellars and in a blend crafted by vineyard manager Steve Matthiasson.

TODAY'S WINE DIRECTORS PRIDE THEMSELVES ON ESOTERIC WINE LISTS THAT DON'T REGISTER ON THE PARKER SCOREBOARD.

Just two blocks from Wo Hing, Commonwealth also offers hard-to-find wines thanks to sommelier Sarah Elliot, who proudly pours Scholium Project's 2009 Naucratis made from Verdelho grapes grown on a mountain vineyard in Sonoma and fermented for more than a year *sur lie* (resting on dead yeast cells). A decade ago—when Elliot was still under drinking age—Scholium Project's winemaker, Abe Schoener, was considered a renegade in the business. Having once taken aim at banishing all fruit flavor from his wines, Schoener has since risen from obscurity to success due in part to the support of sommeliers like Elliot. "When one person is successful," says Schoener, "it makes room for people to take chances." Add San Francisco's risk-taking wine drinker to this equation, and we may just have a new (if old) style of California wine in the works that prides itself on defying the once widely accepted point system. Wild west, indeed. x



The Wild West of Wine

The new California style comes with new terminology. Look for wines made from single, ancient vineyards and old-world methods. These wines are often organic or biodynamic and may be described as "funky" or "savage."

WHOLE CLUSTER

This means that the grape stems are included in the fermentation process. (Stems are usually removed.) When done correctly, this technique adds complexity, flavor, and tannins.

►Try: 2009 Wind Gap Syrah, Griffins Lair vineyard, Sonoma Coast (\$48)

NATIVE YEAST

While contemporary winemaking calls for the addition of yeast, native yeast (also known as "indigenous" or "wild") occurs naturally on grapes' skins as they ripen. This yeast provides the fuel for fermentation.

►Try: 2010 Donkey and Goat "Stone Crusher" Roussanne, Elen Ridge, El Dorado (\$35)

RARE AND OLD VARIETALS

Atypical varietals spring up as winemakers planting for terroir over popularity resurrect neglected vineyard sites.

►Try: 2009 Rymer Cellars Ribolla Gialla, Vire Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$32)

ORANGE WINE

Skin-fermented white wine, called "orange wine," is actually an ancient technique called *macération pelliculaire*. It's thought of as white wine for red-wine drinkers.

►Try: 2010 Scholium Project, "The Prince in His Caves," Sauvignon Blanc, Farina Vineyard, Sonoma (\$45)

CARBONIC MACERATION

Also called *carbonique*, this technique is used to make fresh, fruity wine that is intended to be enjoyed young. The technique is used all over France, most notably in Beaujolais.

►Try: 2010 Broc Cellars "Carbonic" Carignane, Alexander Valley (\$25)

LESSER-KNOWN REGIONS

Look for less popular California wine regions, such as Mendocino Ridge and Amador County, that may or may not be recognized as an American Viticulture Area. And don't let the general "Northern California" label fool you—it could very well be from a single vineyard.

►Try: 2010 Arnot-Roberts "Luchsinger," Trousseau Gris, Clear Lake, Lake County (\$31)