

## ON WINE

### The state of non-alcoholic beer

It's been decades since I saw a non-alcoholic beer on a store shelf for the first time. I bought it. It was abysmal. So, it's no wonder that the early non-alc products had all the impact with beer lovers of pickle-flavored ice cream.\*



DAN BERGER

Making a fine-quality beer with alcohol is at least as complicated as is making great wine. Both beverages rely on some astoundingly complex chemistry to achieve a balance of aromatics, flavors, and textures. But they use radically different ingredients, although the chemistry is similar.

To make a beer with no alcohol in 1962, when Kingsbury non-alcoholic was launched without any public acclaim, had to be a challenge. And the market's ultra-cool response was based on the fact that it had an odd aroma (vaguely yeasty) and had almost no beer flavor.

It was a pretty frightful substitute for tap water. Over the decades, beer scientists have worked diligently to solve many of the problems associated with making tasty beers that have less than 0.5% alcohol. Today, without much support from beer aficionados, the non-alc beer category has exploded, and not only in the number of them.

When I began researching this story recently, I expected to find many flavor-challenged alc-free beers, which is what I saw six years ago, when a medical condition limited my alcoholic intake. I had been advised to abstain, so I bought a few of the non-alc then available. One, from Germany, was drinkable — barely.

Two weeks ago, I mentioned this category of beer to one of my sons who is extremely savvy about beer. He was kind enough not to tell me how out of touch I was with the category.

"Dad, there are some non-alc out there that are so good you wouldn't be able to tell they're not traditional beer," he said. It didn't take long for me to be a believer. And what an order of magnitude difference there is from what I saw in 2015 and today!

I tried to look more deeply into the science of how this stuff was made, but my investigation was thwarted several times. The subject seems intentionally clouded in clandestineness. Trade secret stuff. That's why I have no technical

Please see BERGER, Page C2



Oakville Ranch winemaker Jennifer Rue and General Manager Shelia Gentry. OAKVILLE RANCH

## The Women

### — PART I —

# Oakville Ranch

TONY POER

It takes Shelia Gentry just two words to describe the hills above Oakville: She calls them "awe-inspiring."

Whether wild with chaparral or covered in vines, there's no shortage of other descriptors for this rocky, verdant slope on the east side of Napa Valley. Rising up beneath the picturesque Vaca Mountains, its contours make an impression from Highway 29 and the floor of the Valley.

Among the superlatives often applied to the Oakville AVA's wines, Gentry's are perfectly suited to her workplace itself, Oakville Ranch. The surrounding landscape, forged by volcanic activity millions of years ago, is part of a plateau that sits like a banquet table above the Valley. The Oakville Ranch wines are certainly banquet-ready.

It's hard to say what the ranch's owner, Mary Miner, might have accomplished as a fellow vintner to her late husband, Robert, the co-founder of Oracle Software and a dedicated wine lover. Oakville Ranch was their shared project, but the tech pioneer died in 1994 before their wine brand had time to gain a commercial foothold. Instead, Mary and her small team, composed mostly of women, have since built one of Napa Valley's essential, if sometimes overlooked, wine estates.

Its grapes and wines come from a property where Gentry,



SPARK EXPERIENCES

Shelia Gentry shows visitors around Oakville Ranch in January 2021.

a Napa native, has been general manager for close to a decade. She works alongside Jennifer Rue, the ranch's winemaker and an industry veteran who has been associated with it for the better part of her career. Rue stands at the head of a line of vintner clients who buy Oakville Ranch grapes for their own brands each harvest. It's a prestigious class of fellow winemakers, to the point where the name "Oakville Ranch" is perhaps better known as a

source of top-quality grapes than as a label of its own.

The low profile is no accident. "We're not an in-your-face kind of brand," Gentry says, "and we never will be. We want to be on the radar but off the beaten path."

The GM heads up the hill each day to a place that's both refined and rugged. She divides time at the ranch between an elegant, 19th-century cottage-office and the driver's seat of a Kawasaki

Mule. The cottage sits adjacent to the ranch home; the compact ATV is her "other" office — a mobile one she uses to introduce visitors to her employer's historic property.

"When I have people come up to Oakville Ranch, I want them to leave as our ambassadors," Gentry said on a breezy afternoon this past July. She sat next to Rue under the shade of an umbrella

Please see OAKVILLE, Page C2

## DAN THE WINE MAN

### 'High-level convenience shopping'

'Eat This Drink That' is here to help you make tasty, smart, one-stop food and wine purchases. Dan The Wine Man calls it "high-level convenience shopping."



DAN DAWSON

You get two Eat This Drink That's per column. Previously featured in Tuesday's food section, this is ETDT's first stop in Friday wine.

#### #1. Chicken Parmigiana and Castello Monterinaldi Chianti Classico 2016 half bottle from FoodShed Takeaway

Foodshed is a once-a-month dinner food for my family. Add the Foodshed pizza we eat at friends' birthday parties and I'd say we're good for 20 meals a year from there. I love the place, from their chewy sourdough pizza crust to their chopped

salad, a particular favorite of my wife. It's all so convenient and tasty. Kudos, as well, to Foodshed's staff training program which focuses on teaching young adults all parts of the business, translating to life and people skills to be used for a lifetime.

Lost in the hustle-bustle is Foodshed's very good wine selection. The wines, a combination of local and Italian, are affordable (roughly ranging from \$14 to \$40 per bottle) and chosen to accompany the Italian-inspired, local ingredient-heavy food selection. You may be thinking, "duh!" on the last part, but a truly smart wine selection is not easy to pull off as it looks. It takes time and heartfelt desire to have a 100% purposeful wine selection and Foodshed has one. Speaking of purposeful, that's what my last visit to Foodshed was. I walked through their doors intent on finding a great pairing to recommend. I knew there were dozens of them at my fingertips and it was really a matter of finding one of the best.

Calling upon my considerable food & wine experience, gut feeling, and, most importantly, what I felt like eating and drinking the day of my visit, here's what I came up with...

The Chicken Parmigiana is pounded & pan-fried chicken breasts over polenta, all topped with marinara and mozzarella. It's offered in two sizes. I bought the smaller portion, plenty to satisfy a family of three. Take it away in its deep foil tray for easy reheating.

I bought the half bottle of Castello Monterinaldi Chianti Classico 2016 because it serves two perfectly with the chicken and I felt good about it pairing well. At \$16 it's a good buy for a solid Chianti. Think of it as \$8 for two generous glasses.

#### Aside—Pros and Cons of Half Bottles

**Pro:** When a full bottle is too much wine for the moment. A perfect example is a fancy dinner out with your sweetie. A half



DAN DAWSON PHOTO

Educated Guess Cabernet Sauvignon at Trader Joe's

bottle of white or bubbles before a bottle of red is just right. Pro #2: It's very rare to see mediocre wine in half bottle. You can be reasonably certain you're buying a good wine if in half bottle.

**Con:** Selection is limited. Very

few wines are half-bottled, if you will. It's a logistical nightmare for wineries that seems to take years of commitment to pay off (Look at Frog's Leap — they

Please see DAWSON, Page C3

## PLEASE THE PALATE

## A port style for everyone

Port, the fortified wine from Portugal, is often thought of as a beverage to drink at the end of a meal, either sipped on its own or enjoyed with dessert. But the world of Port is versatile, offering a diversity of styles as well as a diversity of producers.

Produced in the Douro Valley in the north of Portugal, Port is known as a sweet, rich wine. But there are various styles of Port, from dry to sweet and from white to red to tawny. It is this diversity of styles that allows for the moment and time, the food, the mood, and the people to dictate when to drink.

## White port

## Churchill's Dry White Porto

Churchill's Port was founded in 1981 by John Graham, who named the company after his wife Caroline Churchill. The youngest of the classic Port houses, they were the last company established in Gaia, the city located across the river from Porto. Churchill's, known for a more modern, drier style Port, only makes one white port, the Dry White Porto. The white port is a blend of Malvasia Fina, Rabigato, Codega, and Viosinho. It spends 10 years in wood and through the clear glass bottle, you can see the light golden color. The nose has notes of orange peel and on the palate, it has flavors of dried fruits, dates, nutmeg, and citrus. It is light-bodied and fills the mouth

without being aggressive. Fresh with a long finish, drink this wine chilled.

**Food Pairings:** Smoked salmon, olives, roasted almonds, or use it in a Port Tonic or White Negroni

## Kopke 20 Years Old White Port

The oldest Port wine house, Kopke was established in 1638 by a German family. It is made from a blend of traditional Douro grapes that are grown in schist-sandstone soils at high elevations. Aged in oak casks for variable periods with the average age of the wines being 20 years old, the wine is a bright amber yellow color. It has the aromas of dried fruit, orange peel, toasted almonds, and spice. In many ways, due to the age, it has notes like Tawny Port but without the tannins of a red wine. On the palate, the wine is smooth and elegant with a long, rich finish.

**Food Pairings:** Serve chilled as an aperitif. Pair with foie gras, mushroom risotto, scallops, blue cheese, or crème brûlée.

## Vintage port

## Conceito 2016 Vintage Port

A young Port house, Conceito is a family-owned business. Established in the mid-2000s, owners Carla Costa Ferreira and her daughter, and head winemaker, Rita Ferreira Marques, founded the company to look after the family vineyards. Located in the Tejo Valley, their 86 hectares of vineyards sit at altitudes 400-650 meters high. The 2016 Vintage Port is a field blend of Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca,

Tinta Roriz, Tinto Cão, and Tinta Barroca. 2016 was a challenging year with a dry fall but then lots of rain in the winter and a hot summer. The grapes matured slowly and were aged in stainless steel, resulting in a dark ruby colored, well-structured wine with violet, spice, herbal, and even meaty notes. The wine is young and can be laid down to age. But if drunk now, it is concentrated with vibrant fruit, spicy tannins, and a freshness on the palate.

**Food Pairings:** Chocolate desserts or fatty cheeses

## Taylor Fladgate 2015 Late Bottled Vintage Port

Established in 1692, Taylor Fladgate is one of the oldest of the founding Port houses. Sixth generation Port maker David Guimaraens is head winemaker and a member of one of three families that own Taylor Fladgate. The category of Late Bottled Vintage Port was pioneered by Taylor Fladgate in the 1970s. At the time, the only Port with a date on the bottle was Vintage Port. But consumers wanted a vintage wine that was fruity and could be drunk any time. The vintage LBV wines is bottled late, approximately four to six years after harvest, and then aged in large casts. The 2015 LBV is a full-bodied, fruit forward wine with notes of cassis and spices. It is dense and luscious with soft tannins and a long finish.

**Food Pairings:** Any berry fruit dessert, cheesecake, cheese, or chocolate

As you can see, the world of Port is vaster than just Ruby and Tawny. With a diversity of styles



ALLISON LEVINE PHOTO

a variety of Port producers and styles.

and flavors, there is a Port for all occasions.

## Tawny port

## Sandeman 10 Years Old Tawny Port

Founded in 1790, Sandeman has always been located on the waterfront in Gaia where it is cooler than in the Douro. The climate affects the wines, resulting in a consistent freshness and smoothness. The 10 Years Old Tawny Port is a blend of Tinta Amarela, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, Tinto Cão, Touriga Franca, and Touriga Nacional. A brick red color, it has a wide range of aromas and flavors, including dried red currant, quince jam, caramelized red fruit, prune, nutmeg, and vanilla. It is rich in flavor but not heavy on the palate and is very pleasing to drink.

**Food Pairings:** Serve chilled. Enjoy as an aperitif or pair with a hard cheese, apple pie, baked figs, or caramel tart.

## Dow's 30 Years Old Tawny Port

A part of the Symington family since the early 20th century, Dow's was founded in 1789 by Bruno da Silva, a Portuguese

merchant from Porto. The Old Tawny Ports are aged in the company's cellars in Gaia where they benefit from the moderate coastal climate. The 30 Years Old Tawny Port is a rare Port, as there are only six or seven casks in the cellar at any one time that can be used to make this wine. A beautifully elegant wine, it is complex with aromas of citrus, dried fruit, roasted nuts, cigar box, cardamom, and nutmeg. Even with the age and notes of oxidation, the wine is very fresh and alive.

**Food Pairings:** Slightly chilled, drink on its own for dessert, or pair with pecan pie, almond biscotti, or almond cake. Enjoy with dark chocolate or a creamy, but not too sweet, dessert, or an aged hard cheese.

Allison Levine is owner of Please The Palate, a marketing and event-planning agency. A freelance writer, she contributes to numerous publications while eating and drinking her way around the world. Allison is also the host of the wine podcast Wine Soundtrack USA and a co-host of Crush on This videos on YouTube. Contact her at allison@pleasethepalate.com.

## Oakville

From C1

at Materra winery in Napa's Oak Knoll District where her colleague makes the Oakville Ranch wines. "I want them to tell their friends about who we are and their experiences they had and the wines that they enjoyed. That's the best PR we could get. It's word-of-mouth."

If at times that word has to be spoken loudly over the rumble of an ATV engine, the communication seems to be working. The 2019 vintage wines now being released represent Oakville Ranch's 30 years in business. A simple mention on the back labels of the '19 red wines — "celebrating 30 years" — is all it says, but a lot has happened over three decades.

A few winemakers have worked on the ranch since Mary and Bob Miner harvested their first grapes in 1989. Jen Rue, a Santa Monica native who brewed beer in college, followed an interest in fermentation to Napa Valley in the mid-90s. She landed in the tasting room at Franciscan Winery but soon jumped to the production side, recruited by then-winemaker Gary Brookman.

When Brookman quit Franciscan in 1998 to make the Oakville Ranch wines, Rue came with him. Except for a couple of years in the late-2000s when she left the ranch to start a family and pursue consulting projects, she has been a part of the Oakville Ranch wine-making team ever since.

"It was formative to have come

across such an exceptional property so early in my career and incredible to think I've touched 22 of the last 26 vintages of Oakville Ranch," she wrote in a recent email.

A highlight of that career, as Rue described it in the same email, was taking over the ranch's wine-making in 2016 after assisting two previous vintners, Ashley Heisey and Anne Vawter. By that point, her history with the ranch and its owner was well-established.

"I mean for me, primarily, the person I feel I have to please is Mary," she shared at Materra of their working relationship. "You know, above and beyond anything, we want her to like what she's got. And Mary's got her name on the wines."

She wasn't being literal. There's no "Mary" or "Miner" to be found on any Oakville Ranch label. Most associations with the Miner name are tied to the well-known Miner Family Winery, also in Oakville but down the hill and a little ways north on the Silverado Trail. It was founded in 1999 by Dave Miner, Mary's nephew.

Not coincidentally, Miner's hillside property housed an earlier version of Oakville Ranch Winery, the one Gary Brookman left Franciscan for with Rue at his side. Miner was the Oakville Ranch president at the time and purchased the winery from his aunt to launch a new brand with his wife, Emily. Brookman's job eventually morphed into the winemaker's position at Miner Family and is where he works with Dave Miner to this day.

Gentry arrived a while after Rue, in 2013, having built an impressive resume at Shafer Vineyards, Harlan, and Sloan Estate. "I did sales, hospitality, distribution—all of the above," she said.

If there was a career advancement mentality at those high-profile wineries, she seems to have hit a stride with her current employer. "Mary's aware of everything that we do. I think she has entrusted us with her brand, and in making decisions about it."

Then she summed it up. "Oakville Ranch is the last job I ever want to have."

The relative anonymity of the two women's boss doesn't translate to a lack of involvement. While she's not the face of the brand, Mary Miner wants to contribute where she's able, according to her GM. She poured tastes of the Oakville Ranch 2019 Chardonnay and explained that Mary's behind-the-scenes contributions are significant. "She does sit down in all of the tastings with us and participates in blending sessions to decide the wines" that go into bottle.

Rue sipped the Chardonnay she'd made—with Gentry's and the owner's input—and considered her own role. "I would say making wine for someone is a really intimate endeavor. And I think even more so in a project like this, where it's such a kind of crystallization of a place and a family and a story."

Intentionally or otherwise, she played for a moment off of that family's high-tech history, describing Mary as "sort of the op-

erating system that's running in the background, that drives how we make our decisions."

Then she clarified her point. "It sort of feels disingenuous to say she's 'in the background,' because she's ever-present. She's just not controlling, and she's not directing. We're given all of the tools that we need to do what we need to do, but without the micromanaging."

The tools and the raw materials, Rue might have added. Chardonnay, Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, and an old-school field blend of Zinfandel and Petite Sirah are grown in Oakville Ranch's 70 planted acres. There's also a block of Grenache in the vineyard, which she vinified as a dry rosé in 2020. While some decision-making is ongoing about the red wines to be bottled from that fire-ravaged vintage, the 31 harvests preceding last year's add up to momentum in 2021.

Going forward, the three women are making some adjustments to how the Oakville Ranch brand is perceived. Beneath the "30 years" mention on the 2019 back labels, they've added the familiar term "estate grown." It's just a couple of words, but they speak volumes about the wine's single origin. The addition highlights how Oakville, the ranch, is a specific site within Oakville, the AVA.

It was a piece of information omitted in previous vintages. But, as Rue explained it, "I think that as consumers get more and more savvy, you kind of need to leave those breadcrumbs, something to help them understand, like, 'Oh,

this is a wine of a place."

Gentry concurred. "We need to keep reiterating that: it's a wine of a place, and we're 370 acres on top of Oakville, overlooking the Napa Valley. And yet sometimes people are like, 'Wait, where?'"

If those same people consult Google Maps, they'll discover a location that looks to be a stone's throw from the Silverado Trail. Switching to the satellite option makes the variations in terrain — from the wild chaparral to the manicured vines — more apparent. What's lost in this mapping, since it's not possible to "street-view" the location up its steep driveway from the Trail to the front gate, is how tucked away it actually is. When Gentry describes the ranch being "off the beaten path," her guests can take her at her word.

There's something else Google Maps reveals about Oakville Ranch, courtesy of a function the search engine debuted in 2018: The business identifies as women-owned. This exact message appears under the address, phone number, and other contact information. Not unlike the "estate grown" designation on the 2019 back labels, it says a lot about the ranch in just a few words. Women run this place.

Or, mostly women; Phil Coturri is an exception. The owner of Enterprise Vineyards in Sonoma is one of Northern California's most respected organic viticulturists. He works for, and alongside, the women of Oakville Ranch and is their direct connection from the vines back to the vines and soil.

## Berger

From C1

details that explain how they're all doing this.

CIA-like, no one is talking.

What I learned is that the processes involved in making an NA, as they're called, include some of the most stealthiest data, which appear to be as closely guarded as is the formula for Coca-Cola. What I can say is that the latest non-alc beers include some fine products.

One reason light beers were developed relates to the fact that the early efforts to make non-alcoholic beers in the 1970s and 1980s were so lackluster and unappealing to true beer lovers.

Sure, it's possible to simply remove the alcohol in a beer, but students of zymurgy (the branch of chemistry associated with fermentation and distillation) typically find that simply taking the alcohol out can result in a liquid that doesn't resemble its un-treated brother.

One key result of fermentation is the conversion of sugar to alcohol. If you remove some sugar, you get less alcohol, but if you remove a lot of the alcohol you usually get a flavorless brew.

And if you leave some sugar behind, to give the resulting beverage a richer body, you have a beverage that's a bit sweet. And if you try to balance sweetness with higher acidity, which often is done in some white wines, you could end up with a beer that can be bizarre.

In the last decade or so, yeast strains have been developed that produce much lower levels of alcohol than previous yeasts, but you still end up with some alcohol. Some of that can be reduced further by using other special techniques (reverse osmosis, fine membrane filtration, spinning cone, and other distillation techniques).

White Labs of San Diego offers two yeast strains in particular that it suggests for low-alcohol and no-alc beers. They may be used in conjunction with dilution, in which water is carefully added to reduce alcohols.

The first real breakthrough in non-alcoholic beers of which I was aware was from the Firestone winery family of Santa Barbara.

Founder Brooks Firestone, partner Hale Walker, a brewing expert, and Dr. Michael Lewis, head of the brewing school at UC Davis, developed a beer brand

called Firestone & Walker that produced an excellent non-alc beer in 1988.

It was test-marketed in San Diego and sold for about two years between California's central coast and San Diego before the brewery abandoned the non-alc project to focus on micro-brewing.

I tasted one of Fletcher's first efforts with NA brews even before it was test-marketed, and many consumers found the brew to be fascinating because it was rich, and more like a "craft brew."

I tried one of the first test efforts in 1988 and found it to be superb — more like an ale, denser than I expected! I spoke with Fletcher at the time, and he said focus groups found it too rich, so he reformulated it, making it more like a lager. That made it more like domestic beers, simpler and less complex.

He described the reformulated version as "very much like an English ale, not bitter, with lots of malt, and not very heavy on the hops."

A week ago, curious about this new category of non-alcoholic beer, I bought six of the more popular versions and tasted them with a friend and ferment-

ation instructor. Three of them were acceptable as substitutes for beer, but only two were what I would call good enough to consider a regular basis.

The following non-alcoholics all sell in six-packs; many stores will sell singles.

■ Heineken 0.0: Clean, toasted barley notes with a light lager mid-palate. Uncomplicated and refreshing, very slightly sweet aftertaste.

■ Clausthaler Dry-Hopped: This well-established non-alc producer added this line extension and it is remarkably complex, with a lot more hoppy characteristics — along the lines of a red ale. Excellent clean flavors. The aftertaste, which is slightly sweet, is well-balanced.

■ Athletic Run Wild IPA: Calling this an IPA is really a stretch, but once you get past the fact that it has very little IPA characteristics, the brew is quite appealing with a citrusy and hoppy complexity.

■ Lagunitas IPNA: Sort of IPA-like, but with an odd, almost tea-like quality. It reminded me of a slightly heavier style of domestic lager, not a lot like an IPA.

■ Athletic Golden: Not particularly beer-y, this has a pale,

lager entry with a curious citrus-y note. OK to drink if you don't think of it as beer.

■ Estrella Galicia: The aroma and taste clearly indicate that this product has lots of maltose, so it's noticeably sweet and the aroma has a faint note of soy sauce.

One point about all six of these products is that the heads (foam) seemed to be short-lived, and not particularly dense. And the effervescence in all of them was also relatively fragile. All were chilled only slightly (about 50°F) and poured into beer glasses before evaluation.

As an incidental note, the carbohydrates and calories in all these brews or significantly lower than traditional light beers.

\*Lucky Pickle Dumpling Co. introduced a pickle-flavored ice cream about 16 months ago. I'm not aware of any reaction by either Ben or Jerry.

dan berger lives in Sonoma County, Calif., where he publishes vintage experiences, a subscription-only wine newsletter. Write to him at winenut@gmail.com. He is also co-host of California Wine Country with Steve Jaxon on KSro radio, 1350 AM.