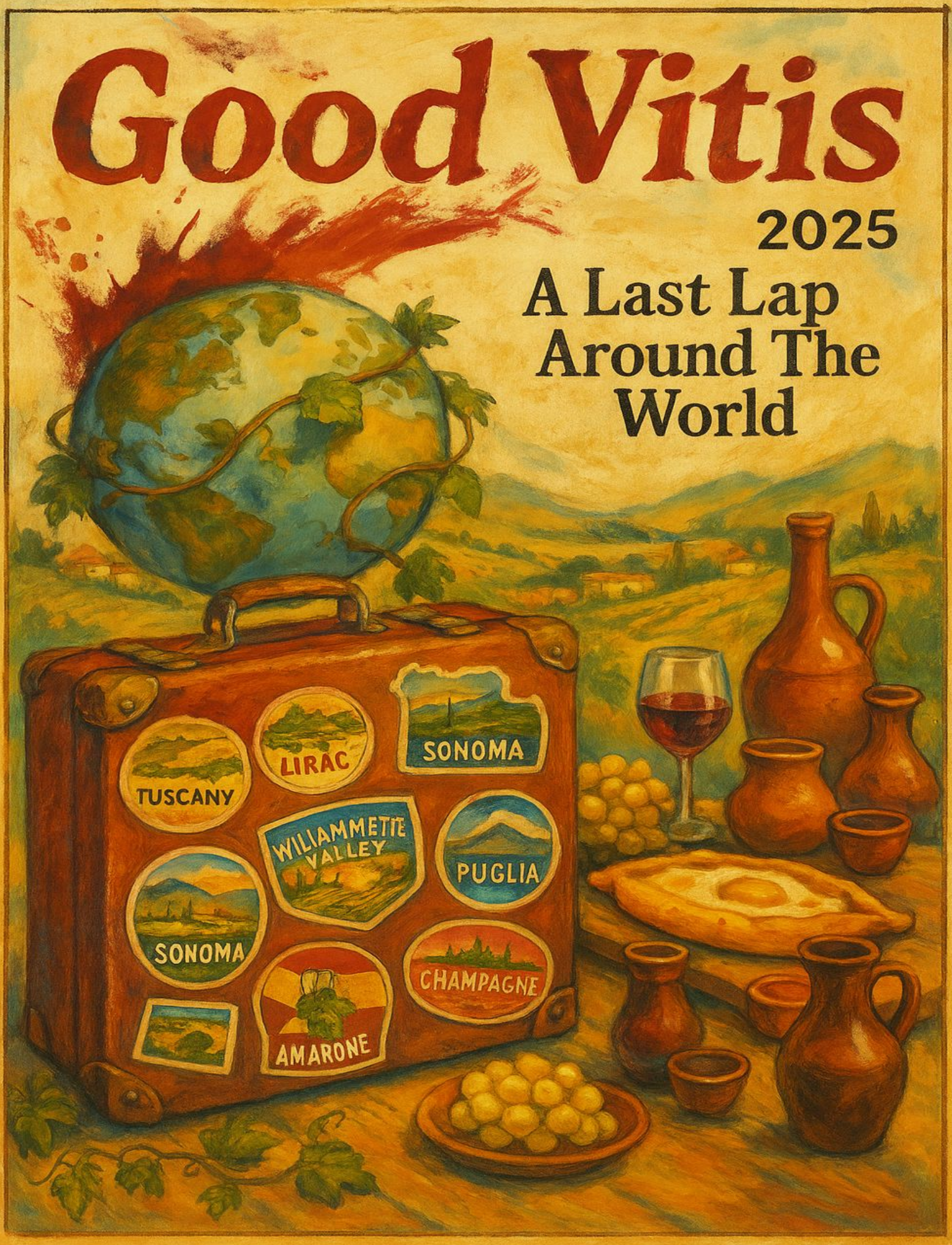
Good Vitis

2025

A Last Lap Around The World



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Friends,

I was introduced to wine by someone with a great passion for the juice years before I was able to get into it myself. It was one of the most impactful things that's happened in my life, a foundational experience that started me down a path that's lasted roughly 25 years and shows no signs of letting up. The journey started off as a love for the product of wine, but it's turned into something far more meaningful that I've been frustratingly unable to capture in *Good Vitis*, which is why this will be the last issue.

When I open a *Good Vitis* interview with a winemaker, I start by giving the simple background of the blog: After two part-time harvest internships (now a decade ago), I started *Good Vitis* to continue learning about wine while I pursued a career in politics. I figured I'd keep it going so long as I got to try new and good wine while meeting new and good people. The damn thing has delivered on these terms, which is why it's lasted this long.

However, I've run into my own ceiling time and increasingly time again when writing about wine. Wine is no longer just about the bottle for me. Through wine I learn about history, geography, and science. That stuff is roughly translatable to the *Good Vitis* page. I can convey aromas and flavors through tasting notes. What isn't translatable is now the most important and meaningful thing to me: the connections wine facilitates for me with the people who make, sell, serve, and drink it.

It is relatively easy to describe the scene of meeting a new winemaker, or the method they use to make the wine, or the way they tend to the vineyard (or work with their vineyard manager). It is impossible,
however, to meaningfully describe the emotional sustenance of long-time friendships with winemakers around the world. It is impossible to meaningfully describe the pinch-me-ness of an unplanned supra in Telavi, Republic of Georgia, with a winemaking family I'd only met a few days prior that quickly ascended to a love for a country and its people, culture, and traditions that is so strong I now feel immensely proud when someone tells me they like Georgian wine.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe the intellectually fulfilling nature of deep conversations with winemakers whose approach to life, which they are open to sharing with me because we invest in honesty with each other when discussing business, is similar enough to mine that I imagine my approach to winemaking would be similarly similar to theirs' if I got my chance.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe the excitement I get when I pull the right bottle for someone who isn't as invested in wine as I am. One of my wife's go-to antecodes about my wine life is that we have bottles in our collection purpose-purchased for important people in our life. Yes, we buy for ourselves, but we also make sure to have wines at peak maturity for when we get together with a select list of close friends and family that are based on their preferences. Seeing each of those investments pay

off is very rewarding because we're sharing that unique experience together.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe the gratitude I get when wineries offer their wines to me for potential review. Those bottles are these peoples' lives' work, and they are entrusting them to me, my ignorance, and my instinct. I take that responsibility seriously, even if I am unable to devote the amount of time I'd like to tasting, thinking, and writing about the experience, which has increasingly been too often the case. I cherish that trust and those relationships because wine is made by people, not vineyards.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe those most prized memories that not coincidentally originate with a bottle of wine. Last spring I visited my cherished friends, Stu Smith and Julie Ann Kodmur, of Smith-Madrone Vineyards and Winery, with one of my closest and longest-tenured friends. While their property is beautiful and their wines incredible, their friendship is even better. We sat out front of the crush pad looking over Napa Valley from the upper slopes of Spring Mountain talking and drinking for hours, sharing stories and debating politics. Half way through, Stu took us into their cellar and we pulled out a birth year bottle of cabernet sauvignon (1983) and one of Stu's favorite cab vintages (1988). I'll never forget how good those wines were, especially the 1988, not because they're great wines (which they are) but because of the context in which we enjoyed them: with close friends AND knowing that those old bottles had not been moved since bottling and had only made it about 20 feet before

being consumed.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe the thankfully many moments of human connection that *Good Vitis* has facilitated. One of the most watershed occurred in 2018 when my then-girlfriend and now-wife and I hosted a motley assortment of family and friends to which we invited Jackson Family Wines' now Senior Vice President of Marketing and Communications, Kristen Reitzel, and out-going co-owner and winemaker of Siduri, Adam Lee. Kristen became one of *Good Vitis'* most important early supporters, and Adam became one of my favorite people, closest wine world friend, pivotal door-opener, and sharer of immense knowledge. Adam has shaped how I think about wine and how I write about it more than anyone else, myself included. Far more importantly than me, though, he has inspired his now-wife Morét Brealynn to become a winemaker, a profession she's demonstrated incredible and incredibly consistent talent at doing far earlier in her career than seems fair. Learning from people who are world class talents like Adam and Morét is one of my favorite things in life whether it's wine or anything else.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe the value I place in relationships I have with the public relations and communications professionals of the wine business, and not because they help me get free wine but because in getting to know so many of them I've found a few with whom I connect professionally; they get me and I get them. They are every bit as important to whatever success *Good Vitis* has had as any other

factor in its history.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe the non-wine professionals I've met through a shared love of wine. The list of people who fall in this category are numerous and spread around the world, and while I value each of them there are a few I think about every time I open certain wines because they are the people with whom I want to share those bottles. When we can't pull corks together, I yearn for the next moment when we can.

It is impossible to meaningfully describe what a bottle of Rombauer Proprietor Selection chardonnay means to me. I first tried it on a visit to Rombauer in 2017 and fell in love with it. Not long thereafter, I met my now-wife who told me she didn't like chardonnay. I was able to change her mind with a bottle of 2014 William Fevre Montée de Tonnerre. Shortly after that she spent a day in Napa with some friends, and I suggested she visit Rombauer and try the Proprietor chardonnay. As requested, she called me after tasting it and, after telling me how much she liked it, I told her why it reminded me of her. It became "our wine" and we shared a bottle throughout the course of our wedding day. We never let our stock fall much even as we drink a few each year. I've told you what happened, but I can't possible communicate the depth of importance this wine has had in my life.

I've tried to describe some of these moments in *Good Vitis*, but I've never felt like I've done them justice because I know I haven't. As I continue to drink wine and meet people through

wine, it is these types of experiences and moments that I cherish most and because I cannot do them justice in *Good Vitis*, I find myself writing about the elements of my wine experiences that are, frankly, of secondary importance to me.

So instead of keeping that up, I'm winding *Good Vitis* down. We've recently moved to Boise, Idaho, where thanks to my wife I am rediscovering my love of mountain biking. Two winters ago we both picked skiing back up after decades-long haituses, and this coming winter we're looking forward to exploring Idaho's slopes. Professionally, I've pivoted to the energy industry in an attempt to use my political and public affairs experience to advance clean energy, a cause I foundationally support. We're making new friends, and we're reconnecting with a member of my family who lives here as well. We're looking at various volunteer and local leadership opportunities. And I'm meeting people who love wine like I do.

The amount of gratitude I have for the wine industry cannot be put into words. I've touched on only a portion of people in this letter who I am immensely grateful for knowing. The only hesitation I have to making 2025 the last year of *Good Vitis* is that I won't have the "media visit" excuse of meeting new people or, far more worryingly, keeping up with people I know because of it already. I've made some incredible friendships through *Good Vitis*, and I don't want to lose a single one.

Of equal gratitude is the appreciation I have for you, the readers of *Good Vitis*. It's cliché because it's true: without you none of

this would have been possible. I plan to keep the website up for the foreseeable future. I hope it can be a reference and a place where old material can be (re)discovered. I hope it continues to assist you in your wine journey like it has mine. Thanks for taking some of your valuable time to read what I've had to say. It means the world.

On the logistical front, I have a number of wineries I tasted over the first half of 2025 that I will sporadically roll out in *Good Vitis* coverage over the second half of 2025. I'm going to include this letter in each individual article publication, so if this is the first you're reading it, know (1) there may be previous 2025 coverage you've not seen and (2) there will be a 'whole shebang' 2025 issue that will include all the 2025 articles in one issue to close things out.

Thanks again for being part of my journey. I hope y'all get to experience the world through wine like I have.

Best,
Aaron Menenberg

Important Note On Pictures

Normally I list picture credits next to each picture, but for simplicity (emanating from laziness), I'm going to do that here by article because in most cases, the pictures are coming from the wineries or people at the wineries themselves. The AI is all *Good Vitis*.

Lirac for the (Highly Discerning American) Masses (Etienne): Morét Brealynn

È uno standard di settore (Il Poggione): Alessandro Bindocci

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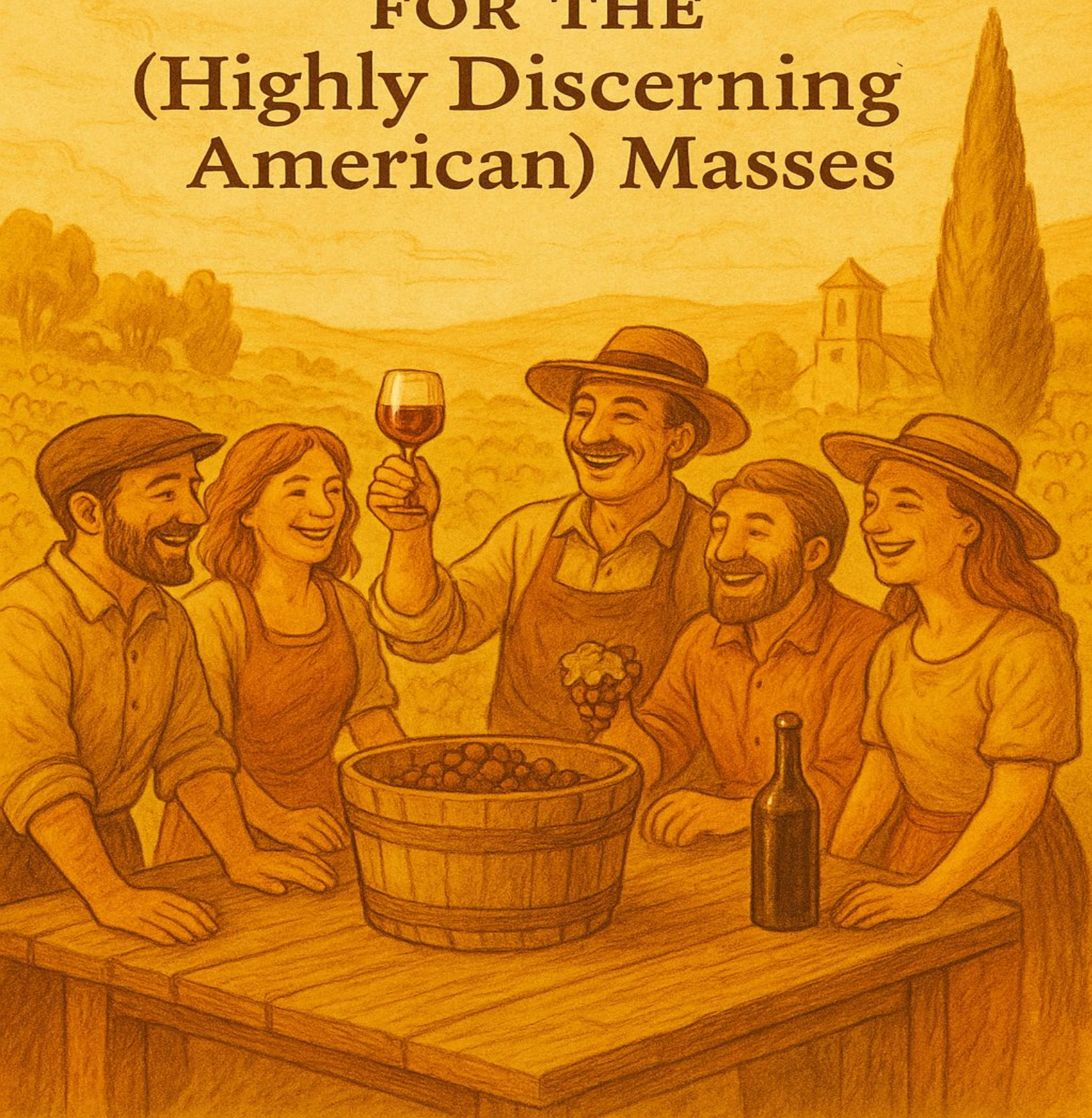
Another Side Of The Briar Patch (Varvaglione): TBD

Lirac

FOR THE (Highly Discerning American) Masses



Who Even *Is* A Winemaker?

"I guess it depends how you define winemaker," Adam Lee told me in response to my question, 'so...who is the winemaker [at Etienne]?,' a new project based on red wine from France's Lirac region. What a typical Adam Lee response; respectful of the craft and its traditions but entirely open-minded about the abundance of paths available to finding an answer. In the case of Etienne, "it kind of redfines things" responded Sasha Verhage who is one of Etienne's three, or four, or maybe even five, winemakers, depending on how *you* define 'winemaker.'

The operating principle behind Etienne is opening the American mind to one of the Rhône Valley's lesser-known regions, Lirac. The wines just happen to be assembled at the consensus of multiple winemakers (the aforementioned Adam Lee and Sasha Verhage plus Morét Brealynn) but made by one of the Rhône's preeminent consulting winemakers, Simona Paly, using grapes grown by her husband, Jeff Paly, who weighs in along the way.

Before we talk Lirac, I want to note a core part of Etienne's genesis: the convening force of the late Philippe Cambie, who was an important person in each of these five peoples' lives prior to the launching of Etienne.

Philippe was in his own right one of the most important forces in Châteauneuf-du-Pape; if you made a Mount Rushmore for the region, you'd be hard pressed to make a winning case for his exclusion. I'm told by those who knew him that despite his love

of Châteauneuf and its history and its traditions, he had an insatiable appetite for trying new things and pushing constraints.

It was the legal constraints in France that ultimately led him to partnerships with Adam and Sasha on two very different California-based projects, Downstream Wines with Sasha (and Saxum's Justin Smith) and Beau Marchais with Adam Lee.

Remote Winemaking Before COVID

Philippe "loved California and he came out here three times a year," Sasha told me. "He resonated with the grit of innovation that California allows" that regulated France limited, he explained. "[Philippe] wanted to be part of that. He had old world knowledge but wanted to bring and infuse it [into the flexibility and creativity of California]."

With Downstream, Philippe wanted to see if he could make the maligned zinfandel into a wine considered on par with the world's upper crust of red wines. Beau Marchais took on the challenge of making pinot noir using the theories and techniques Philippe employed with grenache in Châteauneuf.

In both cases, the California partners were the labor and Philippe the winemaker calling the shots remotely. Whether it was Downstream or Beau Marchais, Philippe would get constant feedback from what his American partners were seeing and tasting in the vineyards and crushpads. They'd send him lab reports, and Fedex him samples. He'd ask questions, and they'd provide answers. He'd want their advice and guidance, but the

decisions were his to make.

Both projects ended when Philippe passed. I never got to try Downstream, but I tried each vintage of Beau Marchais and recently revisited a bottle from the inaugural 2019 release that was singing beautifully. While it's clearly California pinot noir, it's also unlikely any Californian pinot noir I've had in some very distinct ways that make it a classic Cambie/Lee wine.

When it came to his French clients, Philippe was assisted by an oenologist named Simona Paly. When he died, she took over for him with some of his clients (while also making the wine for her family's label, *Le Deux Pins*). "The quality was so high with Downstream [and Beau Marchais] doing things this way," Adam told me, and because "Simona was cut from the same cloth [as Philippe]," he and Morét and Sasha felt that with Etienne, "she got it. She tasted the wines and she got it." With her, Etienne can "elevate and show a region (Lirac) to the world that needs to be seen."

Lirac, Counterpart to Châteauneuf

There's a little dirty secret in Châteauneuf-du-Pape these days: it's got a bit of Lirac in it. "NAME OF FAMOUS WINE WRITER ANONYMIZED told me that everyone [in Châteauneuf-du-Pape] is buying into Lirac and sneaking some of that wine into their Châteauneuf-du-Pape," Adam told me. "I thought, well that's probably hyperbolic, but I asked around, and I was getting a lot of knowing glances that turned into head nods."

What's demonstrably true is that wineries in Châteauneuf-du-Pape are buying into Lirac, names like Guigal, Château Mont-Redon, and Clos du Mont-Olivet. The *terroirs* are similar but the price tags are much less. Sasha explained that this is because the Rhône river, which splits Châteauneuf and Lirac, "[has] moved three times [in its life], it was massive - at one point was seven miles wide. Where Lirac is [now] is a stone's throw from Châteauneuf-du-Pape," Sasha continued, explaining that due to the river's movement, the soils of Lirac and Châteauneuf-du-Pape are identical. "[Lirac] is impeccable, worldclass. They [have been] growing grapes there for a long time. They have a long pedigree." Americans, however, just aren't aware. Yet.

Roman Expansionism, Phylloxera, War, and French Bureaucracy

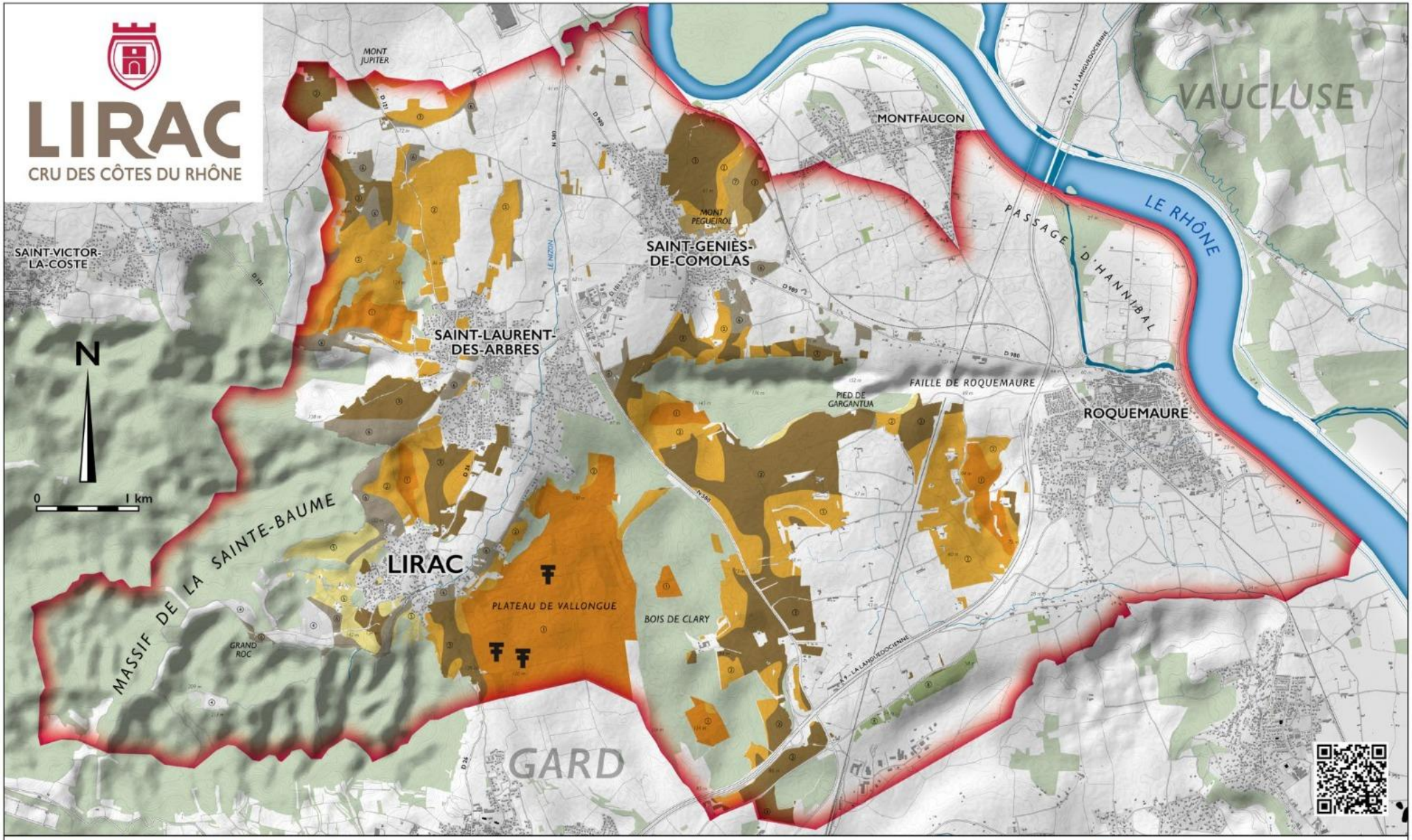
Lirac is a village near the city of Avignon, which in 49 BC came under the rule of Rome. Just six years later in 43 BC, it became a Roman colony. As Rome sank its tentacles into the area, they also sank grape vines into its ground. These vines would eventually produce some of the Middle Ages' most renowned wines with the papal seat in Avignon identifying Lirac as the region's best wine, leading the papacy to becoming perhaps the largest consumer of Lirac wines. Lirac's popularity also grew among French royalty, leading to exportation to England and Holland.

Lirac's reputation continued to grow into the 1700s, so much so that other wine regions including Châteauneuf were trying to

ETIENNE

LIRAC

CRU DES CÔTES DU RHÔNE



- Sable et galets de quartzite
- Sable fin et cailloux silcieux
- Limons argilo-sableux et galets de quartz
- Calcaire blanc
- Calcaire argileux
- Alluvions sableux
- Argile marine
- Alluvions de basse plaine (limons et cailloutis)

pass their wines off as Lirac. So offended by this was Lirac-loving King Louis XV that he ordered wine shipped from Lirac be labeled "CDP" for "Côtes du Rhône."

Things were going really well for Lirac's wine industry until the 1860s when they were bestowed with phylloxera, the first spot in France to be hit. By the 1870s, Lirac's vineyards were effectively gone and the economy decimated. It wasn't until the early 1900s that Lirac (and much of France) were back to planting vines, but France was soon hit by an economic crisis followed by World War I. An influx of cheap wine from Algeria and other parts of southern France made it harder for Lirac and neighboring Châteauneuf-du-Pape to re-establish demand for their superior products.

In response, winemakers in Lirac, Châteauneuf, and elsewhere formulated sets of quality standards to rally around, hoping to elevate their wines back to preeminent status by getting government recognition of their quality superiority. The industry in Châteauneuf moved quickly through the bureaucratic process and achieved recognition in 1937. Lirac, unfortunately, moved more slowly in submitting their paperwork, pushing into further delays caused by World War II. Ultimately recognition would not come until 1947. Châteauneuf's headstart and better branding and advertising gave it a huge leg up on Lirac as both regions tried to recover from the war's economic impacts. Châteauneuf has yet to lose its position as the #1 region of southern Rhône.

Rallying Around Lirac

So Lirac seems cool, but why are three American winemakers working with a Lirac winemaker and her grape-growing husband? Each has their own story.

For Sasha, the light bulb went off when he went to Hospice du Rhône, which is a food and wine festival, in 2005. He tasted the wines, "saw the sandy soil, and my jaw dropped. I had to learn everything I could about this region. I needed to make grenache."

At the suggestion of his wife, "who knows my love language," Sasha took another trip, this one focused on Châteauneuf-du-Pape. "I met Philippe, he made some calls for me, set up some visits." They established a friendship and eventually Sasha worked the 2011 harvest at Domaine la Barroche, which had been Sasha's ah-ha wine at Hospice. The friendship led to the partnership in Downstream, which launched in 2016.

As for Adam's love of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, I don't know when it started, but I've associated Adam with Châteauneuf for as long as I've known him given his penchant for its wine. And I think Adam's love of it has rubbed off on Morét. For Morét, the southern Rhône where Lirac and Châteauneuf reside feels "home-like." The trio "had a good feeling going into it." Following Philippe's death, Adam and Sasha "got together and started down [the path of Etienne]. "I've always respected Sasha's Rhône knowledge," Adam said.

The precise moment of Etienne's genesis moment was a dinner Sasha "pulled together" for Adam when Adam was in Sasha's neck of the woods and needed a place to crash.

Adam "was visiting the vineyards in the [Santa Lucia Highlands]" where he sources grapes for his Clarice wines. "I was on the phone with Sasha, and the weather was really bad, and Sasha told me to come over" rather than make the multi-hour drive back to Adam and Morét's home in Santa Rosa. The meal that Sasha pulled together, Adam "barely remembers because Sasha opened so much good wine."

Normally Morét hears from Adam when he's gone, "but it was crickets," she said. " I knew he was safe and with Sasha so I was fine. Then I get a call from a very drunk Adam: 'oh yeah we had such a great time, and Morét, we're going to make a wine in Lirac!' I was like, okay Adam, drink some water, take some Aspirin, I'll talk to you in the morning." When Adam started the drive home the next day, they spoke. "He remembered, we're going to make wine in Lirac, and I'm like, oh, he remembered."

Thinking more about it, Morét remembered an event she hosted with winemakers from the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH) a number of years ago where Adam was one of the guests. "I asked each of them the question, if they could make wine anywhere in the world, where would it be. They were all supposed to say the SLH, and all of them did, until I got to Adam." While he did say he'd choose the SLH, unlike the others he added a second

location: southern France. Given the trio's common connection to the Rhône via Philippe, and their familiarity with Simona and Jeff, the group decided to visit Lirac and meet with Simona and Jeff, after which Morét got truly excited herself. The result is now in bottle.

The Making of Etienne

In describing the process, Morét started with one word: Whatsapp. "Jeff talks to us more than he talks to his parents who live in the same town where he works. He's always sending pictures from the vineyard." She described the process as "the same as with Philippe [via Downstream and Beau Marchais]." They exchange lab reports and pictures, text weather updates and questions, but in the case of Etienne, things are reversed, though Morét noted that "we also rely on [Simona and Jeff] to know how the wine is developing, aromas, tannins, etc." They are, like Sasha and Adam were to Philippe, "our eyes and mouth and nose."

Working with Simona on the winemaking side has come easy to the group with Morét calling Simona "attentive to what we like." At first, however, when they started blending together as a big group, there were differences based on the different nation's consumers' respective palates.

Getting Etienne right for the American audience is critical since the vast majority of it is intended for the American market. "We were able to help Simona dial in the American palate. We started with her blend, then we created a blend [ourselves], and she got

it. That's her job [as a consulting winemaker with multiple clients]," Morét pointed out. "She's in tune with reading what the client wants."

Adam added that Simona is "very cognizant of the idea that 'I'm working with different clients' and it just can't all be a Simona rubber stamp. That's something that Philippe demonstrated, she demonstrates it. It's now us learning one another's' style. That's cool because it's easy to come in with a load of talent like Sinoma has and Philippe had."

Sasha observed that "Simona has access to a bunch of great domaines [through her consulting work] where they have multi-generational traditions and haven't considered doing things different for decades. [With Etienne] we're bringing some different ideas to old world Rhône; we try to have that [California] sensibility, and [Simona and Jeff] have an open mind and palate. We're not trying to get rid of that *terroir* but it's our unique expression."

Despite the distance, the American trio remains hands-on as well. Having just returned from a visit in early July, Morét told me that "we talked about what barrels to get [for future vintages]. We like grenache, for example, in this new Demi [Muid] versus that once-used [barrique], [so] now we're going to buy barrels based on that." The bottom line is "we're as hands on and included as possible but rely on them to make some executive decisions as-needed."

The Wine

2023 is the inaugural vintage of Etienne and comes in the forms of two red blends that are absolutely spectacular: a blend of 74% grenache, 24% syrah, and 2% mourvèdre called Essen, and a reserve blend of 40% grenache, 40% syrah, and 20% mourvèdre called Coronati that they anticipate making in "exceptional vintages." What's not in these wines is the carignan they have access to because it did not grow well in 2023. It did, however, grow well in 2024 and will therefore show up in the next release.

"We are incredibly excited for the 2024s,"

I was told. Sasha noted that while 2024 “in and of itself isn’t being talked about as one of the better vintages [in France], [it’s more considered] a challenging vintage because of tons of rain and mildew.” However, “some places did better than others [and] fortunately the Rhône has that natural air condition with the Mistral [wind], which dries things [in the vineyards] out.”

Adam added that “Jeff did a heroic effort in the vineyard taking care of our sections, making sure that everything that came in was of the highest quality. It was a real challenge, one he stepped up to. I think they felt, ‘we had a good year in 23′, we don't′ want to let them down [in 24′].′ Adam described the 2024 wines as “a bit fuller, a little less pure fruit-forward [and] with some earthy-type character that still maintains great fruit.” This makes sense, Adam said, “since we’re getting to know each other.”

Morét said that response to the 2023s has been “super positive” with “a lot of re-orders, a lot of wine of the night’s.” I can see why. They bear both the Lirac DNA and the California fruit quality sensibility. They are big, balanced, and complex. They are Rhônes for the fearless-hearted.

I’ve posted my tasting notes below. If you’re tempted, there are are sold in 3-packs and there are, I’m told, very few remaining. If you don’t manage to get your hands on 2023, I suggest getting in line early for the 2024s. I know I will.

Reviews

2023 Etienne Coronati - The rich nose wafts endless black plum,


LIRAC
2023
ETIENNE
ESSEN
LIRAC
CORONATI

blackberry, black currant, cassis, anise, and graphite. Full bodied, it's surprisingly smooth on entry given its youth. The dense tannin comes in soon thereafter and anchors the seriousness of the wine, which is reinforced over time as the tannins develop texture. The acid is refined and integrated. The palate features blackberry, salted plum, licorice, black pepper, five spice, dried sage, and lilac. It's long on the finish. It has a dichotomous sweet and salty personality at the moment that's fun, but with time will fuse and produce something even better. It's tasty now, but it'll be best in six or eight years. 96 points. Value: A-.

2023 Etienne Essen

Smells like a cigar box drizzled in honey, with notes of cherry and blackberry compotes, pollen, chewing tobacco, spearmint, black pepper, and sandalwood. The full body coats the palate with finely grained tannin and bright acid. Flavors include blackberry, blueberry, tar, lilac, and black pepper. It's drinking very well right now, lively and spirited. The finish of this lip-licking wine is delicious. With extended air, the density sets in and delivers a another level of complexity driven by raspberry brightness and dried flowers. Drink over the next two years for primary primacy, or let sit for at least four years to secure early tertiary refinement. 94 points. Value: A.

È uno standard di settore: Il Poggione

Tackling Brunello di Montalcino

Brunello di Montalcino can be a challenging wine region to engage. To begin with, while not all wineries make the same wines, almost all wineries have a core lineup of three: Rosso di Montalcino, Brunello di Montalcino, and Brunello di Montalcino Riserva. Some make IGT white and/or red blends, some make single vineyard Brunello di Montalcino, some make Vin Santo, some might have an unusual one-off single varietal (most likely a white), but at its core the region is about the trio of sangiovese wines. This makes differentiating between wineries sometimes difficult because all a consumer has to go on, on first past, when separating a rosso from a rosso, normale from normale, or riserva from riserva, is the name of the winery and label artwork.

Complicating matters is the impact of vintage variation on a Brunello's initial appeal and ideal drinking window. Naturally vintage matters to all wines, but sangiovese will beat you up if it's not ready and won't hide its exhaustion if it's too old. Further, certain qualities will only come through in certain kinds of years. It's helpful to know your Brunello preferences before deciding whether to buy into each vintage. Speaking from personal experience, I don't enjoy the fruit-forward vigorous personas of warm year Brunello enough to pay for it. I also don't care for colder years, which isn't always the case for me in some other regions. However, I eagerly pay for moderate vintages that produce slow-evolving wines.

Speaking of buying in, that's the third challenge. While Brunello

is widely available in the United States, the stuff ain't cheap. You can find really enjoyable Rossos starting in the $30s and some decent Brunello in the $50s, but the entry point for really good Brunello is nudging towards $100 (a grotesque over generalization) while the best riserva and single vineyards are multiples of that. Alas, that's the cost of doing business with this beautiful and historic wine region in Tuscany, and one of the best examples of why it's worth it is Il Poggione.

The Romance of Sangiovese and Tuscany

Before we dive into Poggione, let me point out that sangiovese and Tuscany are a natural fit for each other. Yes, Tuscany can be stunningly beautiful, and is full of exceptional wine, food, and people, but it is also a rough place in its own right: steep hills, twisty roads, a full four seasons of weather, agrarian, and expansive. Getting around it and being within this historically war-torn region with all of today's modern luxuries can be surprisingly draining. It is therefore hard to imagine what it was like before the industrial revolution and the advent of things like antiseptics, cars, and a human penchant for (relative) peaceful coexistence. I've spent some time walking the stone streets of Florence, Sienna, and Montalcino, and after each day I'm beat. The absolute hardness of the stone combined with the steepness of the streets takes a toll on the body.

Sangiovese has similar qualities. Yes, it can be stunningly beautiful, but there's harsh structure to work through to get there. Hearty sangio, the kind you need to achieve the grape's

highest heights after twenty years of age, is immensely and persistently gritty for most of its consumable life. Dark and sometimes bitter flavors can dominate the wine over the first half of its life; I'm talking things like tar, black tea, black currant, and anise, the kind of flavors that when they're the plurality are often just too much for many people to enjoy. There can be so much tannin that it needs an intelligent acid deft at asserting itself, and a fruit quality that provides sweet and spice to balance those darker flavors, to create something beautiful.

Sangiovese and Tuscany are similarly rough things capable of reaching incredible levels of beauty and tranquility. They're made for each other, which is why, I would imagine, they've been getting the best out of each other for a long time. This brings me back to Il Poggione, which has been in production for over a century on the same estate where it produces, among other wines, what I consider one of the industry's standard Brunello normales (the "mid range" wine, which seems unfairly underwhelming to say, between the entry level rosso and high end riserva).

The Poggione Family

My conversation with Poggione winemaker, Alessandro Bindocci, centered on the story and importance of generational continuity as core to the winery's reputation as a standard bearer for the region. Lavinio Franceschi, a landowner in Florence, founded the estate, which remains in the family's ownership today. As leadership has passed through the Franceschi family

from generation to generation, "they have always hired my family to work for them," Alessandro told me. "Next year will be twenty years [for me]" of working for Il Poggione," he said. "My father [Fabrizio] arrived in 1976 and still works for the Franceshis. My sister Francesca and I are the fourth generation of our family to work here." Fabrizio runs the property and together with Alessandro makes the wine.

Il Poggione is a large estate and winery by Montalcino standards. The estate covers 1,300 acres of which 336 are planted to grapevines. A further 120 acres are home to olive trees with the remainder used for grains, livestock, and forest purposefully protected to maintain biodiversity. It takes a large contingent to manage this size of operations. "We have a big family of 75 full-time workers year-round," Alessandro explained, characterizing the sizable team as "part of [Poggione's] approach" that is focused on respecting "the human aspect" of work.

Alessandro pointed out that many modern wineries use temporary workers, whereas Poggione's team are "on wage, their welfare is good, good parental leave, sick days, etc." The Bindocci's multi-generational employment is not unique among Poggione's team, and the dedication of its employees to the estate is viewed by its owners as paramount to success.

This was something I didn't know before speaking to Alessandro and makes me like Poggione even more. I'm a sucker for treating employees like human beings. The subject came up in the portion of our conversation prompted by the question, "what

makes Poggione different from other Brunello producers?" The topic of treating people well came through in other parts of the conversation as well, extending to its impact on the wine itself.

One example of this dynamic was Alessandro's description of vineyard management. "When you farm by the acre (versus by tonnage), you get a different product," he said, adding that "we still do the first sorting of grapes in the vineyard [by hand before optical sorting in the winery]." He reasoned that "you can do that if you know how to do it, and our people that have been with us for a long time, they know how to do the selection of the grapes. This allows us to go two to three times through the vineyard to make sure that when each berry is picked [that] it's perfectly ripened." This happens because "[our people] feel part of the family so they put a lot of attention into the vineyards, [they] know the winery inside-out. Many have been with us for a decade, or two, or three; multiple generations of family working on the property."

The Vineyards

This "larger property that works like a smaller artisanal one," as Alessandro described it, has southern sloping vineyards that look towards the Maremma, which is a geographical region covering parts of Tuscany and Lazio. Although for centuries Maremma was known mostly for malaria and roving bandits, it's now widely considered one of Italy's most desirable areas. Alessandro explained that Poggione is "very close to the coast, 25-30 kilometers [as the crow flies]. It's breezy all the time, which dries

the grapes if it rains and means we have very few issues like diseases."

This allows them to be "even more sustainable in the farming, [using] just copper and sulfur. We've been working organically for the last 15 years so we figured we might as well get certified." They started down the certification path in 2022 and the first certified vintage will be 2025.

The oldest vineyard on the estate, I Paganelli, is used for the riserva Vigna Paganelli bottling. Alessandro told me that it's "hard to say whether Paganelli is the oldest vineyard in the appellation - maybe a farmer has a hectare somewhere - [but it's a very old vineyard]." The vineyard is the result of an effort conducted "two or three generations ago" by horticulturalists to identify "different clones within the estate and choose the two they thought were best for the land, soil, and climate." Those clones were used to plant Paganelli, and are still used today "whenever we plant new vineyards."

The estate's vineyards are not replanted frequently, however. Poggione's Brunello di Montalcino normale comes entirely from vineyards that are at least 25 years old. They are also planted between 150 and 450 meters above sea level, which allows the winery today to benefit from decisions made in the 1970s "to plant at high elevation" because of how the climate has been changing more recently.

The vineyards younger than 25 years of age are used for the

winery's other various red wines, including the Rosso di Toscana, which I think might be Poggione's most impressive wine at a retail of around $18. The 2022 vintage I tried is a blend of 40% sangiovese and 30% each of merlot and cabernet sauvignon. I cannot think of a better wine I've had under $20. Of the wines tasted for this article, it is the most memorable because of how much it surprised me.

Alessandro and I spent some time discussing this wine, which he thinks of as the starting point for introducing people to Tuscan wine. He told me that "it's been a really frustrating [sales] category for a while," referring to the entry-level Tuscan red blend that includes grapes not approved to be labeled as a Brunello (or Chianti for that matter).

"It's important a wine tells you where it's from, [but] this category, sometimes the wines don't talk about the land they're from." He feels that "Toscana should be the first step for those approaching Tuscan wines because we use grapes familiar to them (e.g. the merlot and cabernet sauvignon components). But [with] sangiovese you will appreciate [its] freshness and fruit along with [the] softer aspects of the merlot and cabernet," making the Rosso di Toscana "an in-between style of something Italian drinkers know as having Tuscan DNA."

I don't have a ton of experience with the Toscana category but the Poggione version is very impressive and shockingly affordable. It's a short-term drinker but offers an impressively deep list of aromas and flavors emanating off substantive

structure and balance, the resulting wine provoking a tasting note more detailed than most at its price point.

2022 Il Poggione Rosso di Toscana: The very appealing nose features broadly sweet aromas of cherry, plum, rose, violet, dark soil, and gravel. Full bodied, this is round and plush in mouthfeel with bright, semi-juicy acid that adds levity and freshness. Flavors include sweet black cherry and black plum, cassis, black currant, graphite minerality, and blood orange. It finishes with a dusting of dark cocoa powder. This is very tasty, easy to drink, and rewarding. I can't think of a better red wine at this price. It's a slam dunk for entertaining and pairing with classic Italian pasta and eggplant dishes. It's likely best within the next two years. 92 points. Value: A+.

Winemaking

The year-round winemaking team is six people deep, although more come in from the vineyard during crush and bottling to help out. The current winery was built in 2004 and is focused on optimizing the winemaking process. "It's computerized so that ideally you can run the winery with just a few people so that you can send everyone to the vineyards when we need everyone possible out there." Because of this, "we never missed a work day during COVID. It was really important for everyone's mental health and income" they they could keep working.


IL POGGIONE
TOSCANA
Indicazione Geografica Tipica
ROSSO
2022

Traditionally Slovakian oak is used to make Brunello, but Poggione has used French oak for the last 30 or so years. Asked why, Alessandro told me that it was mostly a choice driven by a desire to produce a smoother wine. "The Franceschis were the second family to make Brunello commercially in Montalcino," he said to make the point that Poggione has lived through multiple iterations of viticultural and oenological trends: "even when Brunello producers started shifting towards smaller barriques," versus the traditional and much larger *botti*, Poggione "stuck with the larger format."

For most of its existence Slovakian oak was the winery's choice as well, which has "lots of harsh tannins" that take "[a long] time to soften." But as trends developed, the winery decided to try French oak. Still, "we didn't go to [225 liter] barriques, we [initially] went to 5,000 liter French oak. Now we use [a combination of] 3,000 and 5,000 liter [casks] for all production."

Poggione uses Piedmontese cooperage Botti Gamba, who travels with the Poggione team each to France to source the wood directly. "We season the staves for six years, which is twice the standard to ensure they are neutral [from the get-go]. We keep [the finished casks] for 20 years." This approach "doesn't make the barrels any cheaper, but at least we know what we're getting. Since the wines spend so much time in them, we want to have the best oak we can find." Each cask "requires a lot of planning if you sum up the selection of the trees, stave making, 6 years of seasoning, building the [casks] ; [add it all up and] it's around 7

years [from the time the wood is harvested until the casks are ready for use] so we have to think 7 years ahead." The casks, which are used for both the Brunello and Riserva bottles, "get shaved every five years so the wood is refreshed."

French oak is not the only non-standard winemaking practice at Poggione, which also uses something called a "submerged cap technique" more traditional to Piedmont. "When we built the new winery in 2004, we designed the tanks ourselves to include a mesh filter that's installed about mid-height [within each tank]. As we fill the tank from the bottom, the skins float up until they are blocked by the filter." The filter can be moved up and down to change the contact with the juice. Further, as the filter is moved the cap breaks, increasing skin and juice contact and interaction.

Before you get the wrong impression, Poggione is not reductive wine. "We still do manual pumpovers during fermentation because yeast needs oxygen," Alessandro clarified, adding that "even when we do the internal pumpovers (as described above), each pumpover pipe has a valve that opens with the movement to pull oxygen in with venturi focus so there's always a good supply of oxygen." Reductive wine Poggione is not.

As previously discussed, Brunello's wines can take time to show their better selves, though Alessandro has seen that change "in the last ten years," as "Brunellos in general happen to be quite enjoyable as soon as they're released." This early accessibility lasts "for about 12 months" following release, after which the "wine shuts down," becoming "a bit more introverted, not showing as

much flavor." From that point, "you have to wait maybe six to eight years [for them to] start to open again." Then, depending on the vintage, "they can keep developing 30-50 years," though it "really depends on vintage."

The 2019 Vintage

The 2019 vintage is considered a very good one for Brunello di Montalcino. The winter was not particularly cold, although "we don't have a lot of cold vintages nowadays, unfortunately," Alessandro remarked. There was a good amount of rain in the spring and beginning of the summer, which "created a good amount of water in the soil" that allowed the vines to produce grapes "in a very balanced way," especially considering the now-standard hot summer "that wasn't too hot." Alessandro described it as "in the mid-30s (celsius), which is what happens in Montalcino and in [Poggione's] area in particular."

Harvest started on September 18th for the normale and 24th for the riserva. "If [harvest] is in the second half of [September] nowadays, that's a good thing [because it] means it's not too early of a harvest." Critically, Alessandro explained, mid-late September harvests (versus earlier ones in particular) "helps with the wines coming out balanced; 2019 is for long-term aging."

I'd say the 2019 Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino normale demonstrates that initial accessibility in modern Brunello described by Alessandro. It's a brilliant wine that is both tasty in its first year but clearly made for the long haul. I tasted this wine

in February of 2025, so I'm not sure if that accessibility remains at this stage. However the initial appeal and obvious depth bode very well for those willing to sit on this wine until early-mid 2030s.

2019 Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino - Unmistakably Brunello on the nose, with aromas of irresistibly complex cherry and blackberry compotes, cedar, sagebrush, dried thyme, and worn leather. Medium bodied in weight, but flaunting finely grained tannin and sweet acid for days. The beautiful structure flouts a delicious flavor profile that's a mirror of the bouquet: sweet cherry and blackberry, cedar, dried thyme and sage, cigar tobacco, and black pepper. This is downright gorgeous. The bountiful nose draws you into the glass, and then upon first sip the brightness goes straight to your head, which then settles into the structure that's surprisingly well balanced at this young age. Drink now or let it sit for at least six or seven years. 96 points. Value: A.

Concluding Remarks

I've highlighted the 2022 Il Poggione Rosso di Toscana and 2019 Brunello di Montalcino, which were my favorites. The winery was kind enough to send me four additional wines, whose reviews I've posted below. As I said at the onset, I've considered Poggione an industry standard and this lineup of wines confirms that for me.


BRUNELLO DI
MONTALCINO
DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA E GARANTITA
RED WINE
2019
IL POGGIONE
ESTATE BOTTLED BY
FRANCESCHI s.a.
MONTALCINO - ITALIA
750 ML - PRODUCT OF ITALY - ALC.15% BY VOL.

In my experience it can be hard to find a winery release of rosso, normale, and riserva where all are stunners. Looping back to the introduction, I think this speaks to the nature of making wine in Montalcino as well as the challenge of making sangiovese. Both the region and the grape are unrelenting in their uncompromising personalities, and neither will be truly tamed. This is one reason why Brunello is not for the faint of wine-loving heart. You have to be willing to roll with punches, which is about as easy as "rolling" over Montalcino's steep hills. Traversing Brunello is, however, made slightly easier by following some of those industry standards like Il Poggione, which has the unique value-add of having done this for as long, or longer, than pretty much everyone else doing it today.

The Remaining Reviews

2023 Il Poggione Brancato Rosato di Toscana - A reticent wine in general, it takes some coaxing to show personality. The nose wafts strawberry, pink florals, gravel, and lime zest. Nearly full bodied, it's round and shiny on the palate with a nice core of lip-smacking acid. Flavors include strawberry, watermelon, kiwi skin, slate, and white pepper. This offers a nice dose of substance to go with the refreshing acid and mineral grip. Tasty, easy, enjoyable. 90 points. Value: A.

2022 Il Poggione Rosso di Montalcino - The nose wafts sweet cherry, black plum, black currant, violet, tar, and leather; the aromas tend to be bashful until swirled. Medium bodied, the modest tannins are quite flexible and smooth and get lost a little


CHI VUOL ESSER LIETO OGGI
DI DOMAN NON VI È CERTEZZA
Brancato
Rosato di Toscana
Indicazione Geografica Tipica
ROSÉ WINE
2023
IL POGGIONE
ESTATE BOTTLED BY
FRANCESCHI s.a.
MONTALCINO - ITALIA
750 ML - PRODUCT OF ITALY - ALC. 12.5% BY VOL.

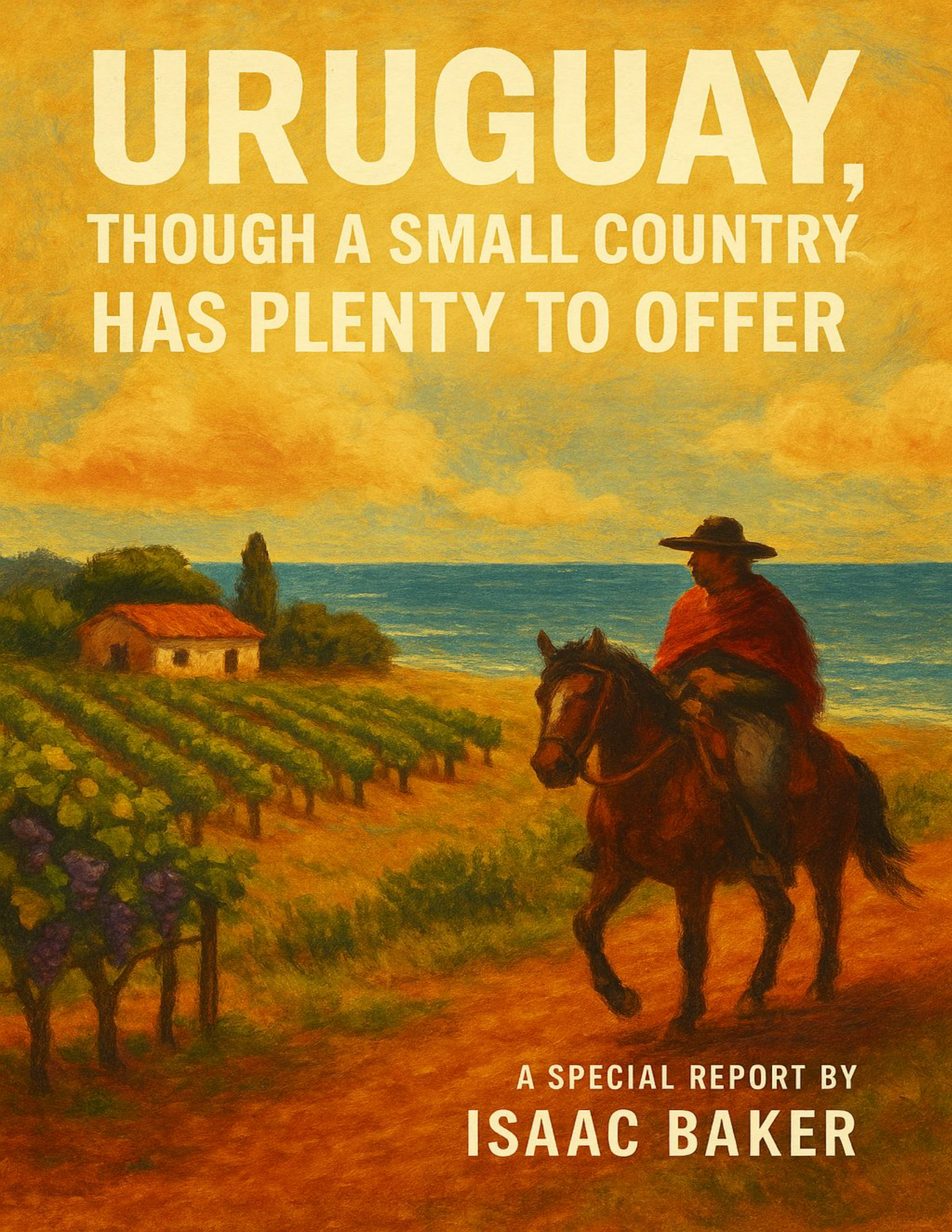
to extended air, while the acid is similarly modest in stature. Structurally, this is on the more meager end of things. Flavors include tart cherry, rhubarb, salmonberry, clay, and white pepper. It went nicely with a veggie pizza, and generally is a well-made wine, but on its own there's not a whole lot to it that impresses. 89 points. Value: C.

2019 Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino Riserva Vigna Paganelli - The fairly straightforward nose features cherry compote, toasted barrel, and cinnamon. Medium bodied with very smooth, modestly dense tannin and polished, modestly bright acid. It's surprisingly thin and not very texturally engaging. Flavors include semi-sweet cherry and red plum, red currant, sweet cedar, dusty dark cocoa, and leather. I think this is already in its dumb and developing phase as it's not as complex or engaging as the 2019 normale. The evidence of extended French oak aging is strong, and erases too much of the DNA that for me makes Brunello so special. Given the vintage I imagine it could wow in 15 or 20 years, and I wouldn't open it any sooner. 93 points. Value: D+.

2010 Il Poggione Vin Santo Sant'Antimo Riserva - It smells of raisined grapes, sherry, custard, poached apricot, and bruised yellow peach. Full bodied, the sugar adds some weight while the acid is plump and juicy. Flavors include orange marmalade, sweet lime zest, apricot, pear, strawberry, cinnamon, and nutmeg. It finishes on a slightly tart and very pure orange note. This is tasty, though the flavors seem a bit weathered for how bright the acid is. 93 points. Value: A.


MORTON
KOSHER
SALT
Nutrition Facts
Calories 0
CHI VUOL ESSER LIETO SIA
DI DOMAN NON V'E' CERTEZZA
SANT' ANTIMO
DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA
VIN SANTO
Riserva 2010
Tenuta
IL POGGIONE
WHITE DESSERT WINE
ESTATE BOTTLED BY
FRANCESCHI S.A.
MONTALCINO - ITALIA
PRODUCT OF ITALY

URUGUAY, THOUGH A SMALL COUNTRY HAS PLENTY TO OFFER



A SPECIAL REPORT BY

ISAAC BAKER

Note: This piece is written by Guest Writer Isaac Baker.

Uruguay seems like a gnarly place that I'd love to visit. I'd likely spend my time on the coast chasing some waves, birdwatching, and visiting wineries.

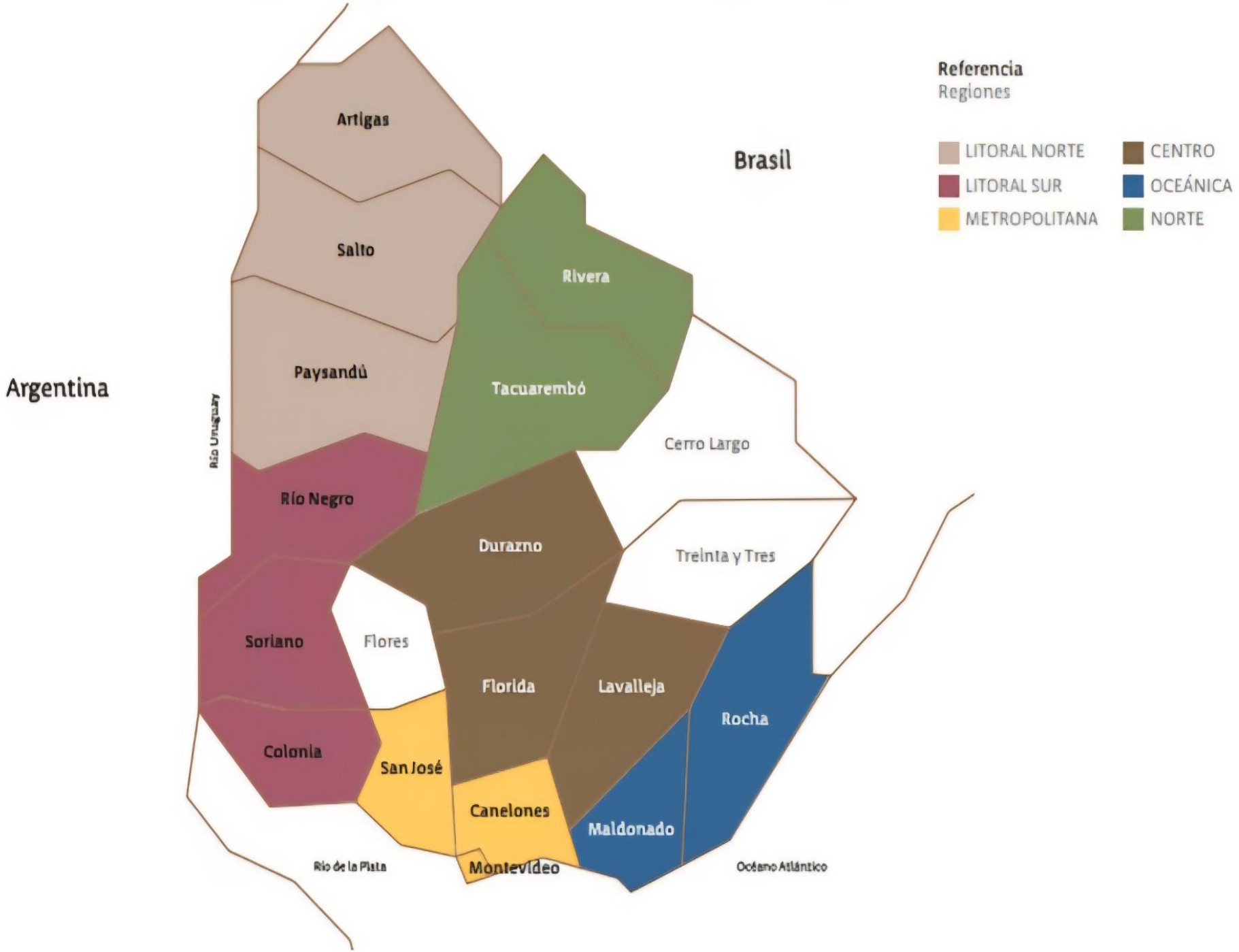
It's a smaller country, with about three and a half million people, and levels of wine production obviously dwarfed by South American countries like Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. But a unique terroir, history, and culture make this an exciting place in the wine world.

It can be difficult to speak broadly about wine styles. The sample size is just too small – there are fewer than 40,000 acres planted to vine. But that can also be a blessing, as it allows a producer with a singular site, vision, or grape to define their own style. To see what works and run with it.

Let's touch on a few fun facts to get a big picture view. Much of the population trace their heritage abroad, with Spanish and Italian immigrant families playing a large role. This has also had a big impact on the winemaking culture and the types of grapes planted. Uruguay has a shockingly high literacy rate of more than 98%, and the country maintains a mature democracy.

In terms of wine production, about 80% of it is, basically, jug wine. To be clear: there's no shame in that. The remaining 20% of production is Vinos de Calidad Preferente, which means the grapes must be vinifera and the wine sold only in bottle. It's here, in that small slice of a small pie, where the quality lies. But

Winemaking regions of Uruguay



beyond that, growers and vintners are not really constrained by typically strict AOC or DOC-type rules. This allows them the freedom to experiment and blaze their own path.

Soils range from lowland, calcareous soils with clay mixed in to alluvial sites and vineyards that stretch out into higher elevations. The vineyards are heavily skewed towards the regions of Canelones and Montevideo. Coastal influence is a huge factor in the terroir. Several large ocean currents meet off the coast, which causes cycles of heat and humidity. But aeration of vineyards is key, fueled by the confluence of those currents and the changes in altitude, which can make for blessedly windy summers, and a distinct place to grow grapes. And, for comparison's sake, Montevideo has a similar latitude to Cape Town.

I've tasted a few dozen Uruguay wines over the years but had a recent opportunity to dig deeper during an online tasting with several Uruguayan winemakers. Take Daniel Pisano, whose family immigrated from Italy about 100 years ago. He is one of three brothers, representing the fourth generation of his family making wine in Progreso area of Canalones. They scattered his father's ashes throughout his family's vineyards and the family feels a deep connection to this land. Though he doesn't make a lot of wine, or money for that matter, he said winemakers long to make a name for themselves and their small country. "We are not competing on the volume side," he said. "We don't conquer the markets. We gain a space."

One space I'd like to see Uruguay gain ground is with Albariño. This grape offers a bit of a larger sample size to explore. Albariño has a great ability to deal with humidity and harness coastal influences in its genes, so it seems like a great choice for Uruguay. And I love the salty, floral, tropical vibes and expression I get from some of these wines. Hailing from Galicia, the Bouza family were the first to plant Albariño in Uruguay, and one of their wines is featured in this report. I'm certainly glad they had the foresight to plant this grape, as it has been taking off.

At a trade tasting webinar last year, Christian Wylie, winemaker

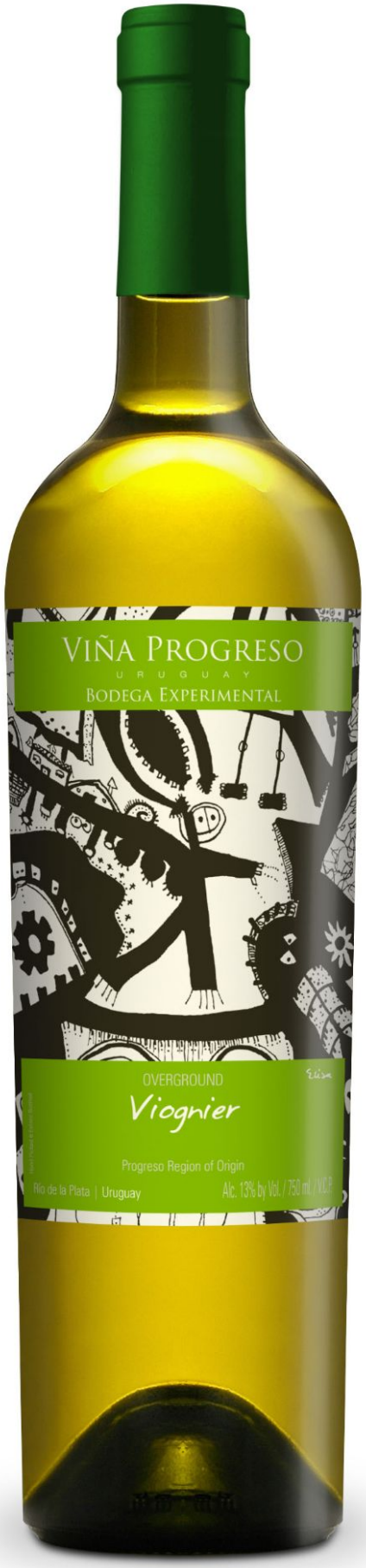
at Garzon, said Albariño demand has been growing. And for those who love Albariño and may be looking for some new iterations, there are some great options from down in Uruguay.

"I think there's a lot of potential in Albariño," he said, especially for newer wine consumers who may like Sav Blanc or Chardonnay but want to dig into something different. It's only the third most planted white grape, but it's a hit for me.

Viognier also seems like a great option, as it deals well with heat and humidity. I've dabbled in plenty of these wines, from the Rhone heavy hitters to Virginia's finest, and I'm still generally a Viognier not-enjoyer. The thickness and tropical richness can be too much for me – but I think Uruguay may be onto something here. There must be some convergence of factors (moderating ocean influence, soils, winemakers who went for it), but I think a lighter, fresher take on the grape is a great thing.

Though there's only white wines in this tasting report, we must talk about Tannat, another European expat that has flourished in Uruguay. This grape from Southwest France was first planted in the country in the 1870s, although it likely spread from Basque immigrants who first planted it in Argentina. The burly, thick-skinned, tannic grape hailing from Southwest France fits well into the country's terroir, climate, and culture.

Though we've discussed the importance of coastal influence, Uruguay has a lot of cows. "We are beef-eaters," said Daniel Pisano. "By nature." And a fine cut of beef is perfect with a solid



Uruguay Tannat is a perfect pairing.

At another trade event on Uruguayan Tannat, Master of Wine Tim Atkins said: "Tannat is Uruguay's signature grape, and deservedly so."

I agree. The grape requires a lot of work in the vineyard. It needs to achieve full ripeness to get the right ripeness in the tannins. It needs lots of sun, leaf plucking to help with aeration, and green harvesting to limit yields. But the results are dark, inky, saucy wines that sport tangy black fruit and lots of cool peppery, spicy, black tea kind of flourishes.

I came away from a deep dive into Uruguay excited about their future and

hoping we here in the U.S. can highlight some of these unique wines. For me, I'd certainly want to see (and order) a Uruguay Albarino or Tannat on a by-the-glass list.

Below are notes on some recent summery Uruguayan white wine samples.

2024 Familia Traversa Sauvignon Blanc (Uruguay, Canelones, Montevideo, SRP: $16) - Pale lemon color. Spritely aromas with lemon zest, orange peel, and green apple skin, along with notes of white flowers and freshly cut flowers and nettle. Crunchy and racy on the palate, with juicy flavors of guava, pineapple, and lemons. Nice nuances of chalk dust, mint, celery seed, and some rushing stream vibes. Pure and crisp but like the depth, too. Great value. 90 points.

2023 Viña Progreso Viognier Experimental Overground (Uruguay, Progreso, SRP: $26) - Light yellow color. The nose is bright and inviting with lots of sea salt and chalk dust over top of pineapple, yellow pears, and kiwi. The palate sports a crisp and zesty appeal with crunchy green apples, juicy white peach, and tangy kiwi. Notes of hay, white flowers, saline, some nuances of honey and almond skin. Floral, crisp, fresh, impressive. I'm a confirmed Viognier not-enjoyer, but I enjoy this very much. Wow, a unique take on this wine, and I'd love to have it on a BTG list at a tapas place. 91 points.

2024 Bodega Bouza Albariño (Uruguay, Canelones, Las Violetas,SRP: $28) - Pale lemon color. Interesting aromas of

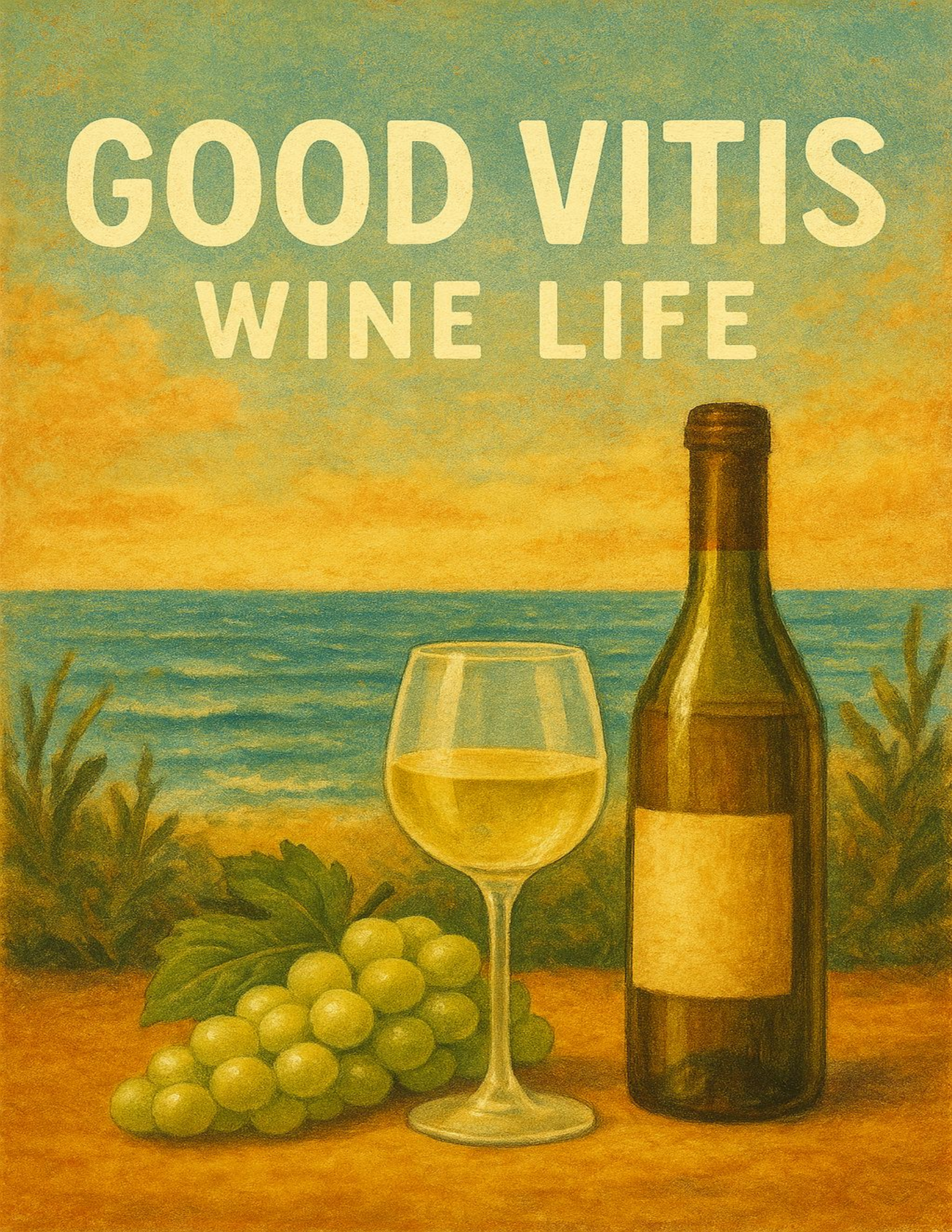
lemons, white peach, papaya, with all sorts of yellow flowers, clover, sea spray, and some honeyed white tea. The palate is racy and crunchy with green pears and apples, ruby red grapefruit, and kiwi, along with plenty of nuanced floral and celery seed tones, and a welcome dose of sea salt, minerals, and chalk. A lovely expression of this grape. 91 points.

2023 Bodega Garzón Albariño Single Vineyard (Uruguay, Maldonado, SRP: $35) - Medium yellow color. Aromas of papaya, lemon pie, honey, white flowers, all sorts of vibrant but tropical tones. On the palate, I love the bright and crisp appeal, with plenty of textural depth, and flavors of papaya, kiwi, and white peach. Nuances of minerals, celery seed, white pepper, and steely, salty notes add complexity. Lovely balance and nuance packed into this wine. 91 points.

2024 Familia Deicas Albariño Atlántico Sur (Uruguay, SRP: $20) - Pale lemon color. Peachy keen aromas of lemon zest, papaya, with daisies, honeysuckle, and notes of fresh laundry and sea spray. The palate is crisp and vibrant with juicy white peach nectar, along with crunchy green apples, and tangy limes. Fresh, zippy goodness with cool elements of basil, hay, oyster shells, and honeysuckle. A really cool iteration of this grape, this wine begs for salads and oysters but has enough depth to hold up to lots of other foods as well. (90 points)

2023 Los Cerros de San Juan Riesling Familie Lahusen Single Vineyard (Uruguay, Colonia, Costas del San Juan, SRP: $25) -

Rich yellow color. The nose bursts with peaches, green apples, orange peel, along with white floral perfume, mint, hints of sea salt, and dried honey. The palate sports crunchy acidity on a medium-bodied frame with a dry feel and flavors of juicy kiwi, white peach, and nectarine. So fresh and floral with cherry blossoms and lilies, backed up by talc and minerals, and finishing with this mountain stream goodness. Very cool stuff that, if blinded on, I may have guessed a high-end Clare Valley or Margaret River Riesling. From now the oldest winery in Uruguay, this old vine Riesling is special. (91+ points)


GOOD VITIS
WINE LIFE


Good
Vitis