

# INTENSE RED WINE CLUB



## Odisea “Unusual Suspects” Red Blend

California (Mendo and Lodi) 2008 \$17.99

## Odisea “Wanderer” Syrah

Sonoma Coast 2007 \$24.99

**WARNING: Both of these wines benefit greatly if decanted.**

Adam Webb is the man behind this wine. I'll never forget the first time I met him. I was writing notes at home (as usual) and had him come to the house for his tasting appointment. It was a gorgeous morning in Napa Valley, the fog just coming off the valley floor revealing sunshine and blue skies. I met him at the gate in my pajamas – my normal tasting note writing uniform - at around eleven that morning and directed him to the deck to where we were going to taste his line-up. We sat at the picnic table. I brought out glasses but no dump bucket, “just dump in those bushes over there, they like all my excess wine”. I do not even know what this guy thought of the infamous Todd Miller at that point. I saw his eyes rolling a few times but he is a young, sorta hip looking kinda dude. Who wouldn't want to have their wines tasted by some crazy looking dude who has been up since three in the morning writing tasting notes – dressed in his PJ's – ready to drink wine at 11 am on their deck overlooking the beautiful Napa Valley? So he rolled with my eccentricities, I guess. Anyway, he pulled cork after cork, all Rhone (my fav, as you know) and wine after wine tasted just unbelievable. It was one of those moments that will be etched in my wine buying memory forever. Everything tasted incredible. I was very impressed. I bought everything we could afford. He left a little shell shocked, I feel, but in a good way. Adam named Unusual Suspects wine for the unusual looking, gnarly, 90 year old head pruned vines that compose the majority of this blend and are depicted on the label. These old vine vineyards are becoming very rare in California as modern technology takes hold and grape farmers see the higher profits in trellised farmed vineyards. Also Unusual are the varieties that make up the blend, rarely are these varietals seen together outside of some small producers in Northeastern Spain. The core of this wine comes from Bill Crawford's Gibson Ranch vineyard in the McDowell Valley appellation in Mendocino where he farms a 90+ year old block of head trained vines planted in 1919, and dating back to 1894. This block contains Carignane, Durif, Syrah, Grenache and other rare varieties whose dry farmed roots to go

deep to search for sustenance and naturally struggle, producing intensely flavored fruit. Yields are typically less than 1 ton to the acre. The Grenache in the blend also comes from 90 year old vines at Gibson Ranch grafted to the Alban clone as well as 29 year old

vines from Lewis Vineyard in the Clements Hills Sub-Appellation of Lodi known for its rolling hills, rocky soil and vines grafted to Tablas and Caldwell clones. This provides the bright fruit and liveliness to the blend.

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The Tempranillo from Las Cerezas vineyard, organically farmed and also in the Clements Hills, provides a complexity and richness to the wine from a clone originating in the Ribero del Duero of Spain. This wine is full bodied and delicious with black cherry, bramble, wet stones, black pepper, and currants. It really needs to breathe, so set it open on the counter for a few hours before trying. I like this wine with long braised meat dishes like Pot Roast. The Wanderer is sourced from the Petaluma Gap region of the Sonoma Coast AVA. It comes from a hillside, organic vineyard that is blended with 5% Viognier from Lodi. The Viognier helps give the wine a delightful mouthfeel and increases the aromatics. This wine reminds me so much of the Wind Gap Syrah I tasted at Hospice du Rhone last May made by the famous Pax Mahle. It was by far the best Syrah I tasted all year and I served it at our Company Christmas Party. It is highly allocated and much more expensive than The Wanderer. This wine is VERY close in flavor, and half the price. The nose is so indicative of cool-climate Syrah with that wet stone minerality and dried lavender flowers. Dark in the glass, I get blueberry pie, pencil lead, white pepper, and a hint of clove. Long rich, yet balanced finish with nice tannins and great acidity. Have with Leg of Lamb.

## Bacio Divino Cellars “Pazzo” Red Blend

Napa Valley 2007 \$24.99

Getting this wine at this price for the club was a surprise. A very nice surprise. What a package, no? I LOVE this label – and the juice inside of it. A blend of mostly Sangiovese (74%), Syrah (6%), Cab (6%), and Viognier (6%). The epitome of a “Super Tuscan” (which the definition of is Sangiovese blended with either Cab, Merlot, or Syrah, or all three). This wine is produced by Claus and Diane Janzen. Claus, a marketing dude, helped put Caymus on almost every single wine list in the world, got the winemaking bug in 1993 when he was offered some Sangio for almost nothing. Bacio was founded on a Cab heavy Super Tuscan with the Sangio playing second fiddle. Then the Pazzo came along, flip flopping his original game plan, and creating one of the Napa Valley's most unique and delicious blends. He is a smart dude too. He knows he must hire good people to make a good product and got help with the winemaking from Nils and Kirk Venge, the former was the first winemaker to ever score a perfect 100 points from Robert Parker for his 1985 Groth Cabernet, and the latter, his up-and-coming rock star winemaking son. To round out the dream team, he has David Bertolucci as his vineyard manager. Impressive staff, impressive wines. This wine is yummy, with the elegant Sangio taking center stage with its red fruits of cherry, currant, and cranberry coupled with some spicy pepper notes, roasted herbs, and a meatiness that undermines every nuance. I had this wine with an Eggplant Parmigianino lunch at one of my favorite spots in St Helena, Cook Restaurant on Main Street today for lunch.....yum.

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## **Puccioni Old Vine Zinfandel**

Dry Creek Valley 2007 \$24.99

A classic California viticulture story repeated many times in these notes; Italian immigrants making their way to Sonoma County in the late 1800's, this time its Angelo Puccioni and the year is 1889. He is from Lucca. He crosses over on the vessel "Roma" and winds up at the Italian Swiss Colony, an agricultural commune started by another Italian immigrant Andrea Sbarboro. In 1881 he founded the Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony with the purpose of aiding Italian and Swiss immigrants to settle in their new land. Many of these were vineyardists by trade and a 1500-acre tract was chosen in Sonoma County, suitable for the planting of vines. The land was named Asti after the town of that name in Piedmont, Italy. Each immigrant was provided with room, board, and wages, in return for which a contribution was expected toward building up an equity in the land and eventually becoming an independent farmer. The immigrants objected to the last condition; they were willing to work, but not to take a chance. Sbarboro decided to operate Asti privately. He set the immigrants to work, planting vines with the idea of growing and selling grapes. The price of the latter soon dropped below the cost of production. It was then decided to press the grapes into wine. The first crush was a disaster; owing to carelessness in handling, the wine turned to vinegar. Angelo learned from his time in Asti and bought a tract of land in 1904 in Dry Creek and planted it to Zinfandel. This wine is from those vines planted 106 years ago. Angelo used a mule to plow his rows back then and his descendants continued the tradition until 1968, when the last mule died. The family was the last use a mule for plowing in Sonoma County. Louie Puccioni was as stubborn as his deceased mule it appears, because he strapped the old plow onto the new tractor he bought and plowed the rows like he had with the mule. This is classic Dry Creek Old Vine Zin, with black pepper, blackberries, and a hint of chocolate. Dried violets on the nose, extremely balanced wine with nice minerality on the finish.

## **Peiriano Estate "Immortal"**

### **Old Vine Zinfandel**

Lodi 2008 \$15.99

Yet another story of an Italian immigrant to California's wine history; this time the immigrant lands in Lodi, instead of Sonoma. Giacomo Pieriano came over the Great Pond with \$50 in his pocket to make his fortune in the Gold Rush. He never made to the gold fields, instead (wisely) decided to make his fortune in the mercantile business supplying those gold diggers in Lodi, just down the hill from all the excitement. And he did make his fortune. When he sailed back to the old country to find his bride, he brought with him cuttings of Zinfandel (Primotivo) from Italy. He purchased 300 acres of land and planted his vineyard, one of the first in all of Lodi. Today, 4 generations later, you get to taste the wine from these grapes. Still farmed by the same family. These stories really makes me love the wine biz in California. History in a glass.

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These grapes are from the largest single block of old vine Zin in California, planted over 113 years ago. Several passes were made through the vineyard, cherry picking only the best grapes at maximum ripeness. Zinfandel is a finicky grape, sometimes having bunches turning ripe while others are not yet ready – all on the same vine. I once asked Ehren Jordan, uber – cult winemaker, most famous for his Turley Zins, what are the first grapes that one picks at harvest time? "Zinfandel", he replied. And what are the last grapes you pick? "Zinfandel". This wine exhibits interesting red fruit components such as cherry, strawberry, currant, and rhubarb. A silky mouthfeel, with a mid palate flavor of cocoa powder, clove, and briar. This is not a flabby, jammy, over the top Zinfandel, but rather an elegant food wine that would pair well with a Veal Saltimbocca shared with your loved one by a flickering candlelit dinner.

## **Burnside Road Syrah**

Sonoma 2006 \$24.99

This is the last of the "repo" wines that I scored from Joe Otos, the winemaker for the Owl Ridge and Willowbrook labels and the Manager of the large custom crush facility in Graton, near Sebastopol along the Russian River. If you recall, I selected six different wines in the December club that were from producers who didn't pay Joe for their custom crush fees. The only thing Joe can do to recoup his loss is to seize the wine, re-label it under one of his DBA's, and sell it. Sometimes it is still in barrel and he has to bottle it. Sometimes he has to soak the labels off and run the bottles through the label machine. I once went into Ballentine to taste my wine from barrel and when I went into the winery I found everyone who worked there including the winemaker hunched over half ton bins that were filled with bottles sitting in water, everyone scraping labels off with their fingernails. That was a site! I couldn't reveal who made the wine or what winery didn't pay their bill – for obvious reasons. I had an amazing array of wines to choose from – thanks to this Nation's financial crisis – and some of the wines were, incredibly, from very famous vineyards and rock star winemakers that had me scratching my head. I thought if THESE dudes can't pay their bills, the wine industry is in deep doo doo. And it is, that is for sure. Right now, there has NEVER been so many wineries for sale, ever. There are rumors out there that there are over 300 wineries in California that are filing for bankruptcy. No one can afford a \$65 dollar bottle of fermented grape juice anymore. If you produce say 10,000 cases a year, and you keep it in barrel for 2 years (at about \$7500/mo storage fee), and all of a sudden there is no market out there that wants your wine – you are SCREWED, my man. You now have 2 or 3 vintages stacked up – that's 30,000 cases mind you – or 360,000 bottles (times \$65/btl is 24 million shekels) – that no one wants? Yikes. You can sell it at a loss, lower your price, and screw your brand. Or pack up your tent and move on down the road. So, I can't say who made this wine or what vineyard it is from, but it was a shocker to find out who made it. Super extracted and masculine. Meaty, viscous, and grippy. Deep garnet in color, bacon and roasted herb on the nose. Tar, leather, mushroom, and pencil lead on the palate, with blackberry, plum jam, and dried flowers. Long concentrated finish. This wine needs meat, or a stinky cheese to stand up to it. Try it with a Leg of Lamb with plenty of garlic and rosemary.