

With ten years in the wine industry, Von Hurson is a wine educator who has been involved in every aspect of wine from the grape to the bottle. She now teaches wine enjoyment classes, and can be reached at: wynelady@sonic.net



by Von Hurson

## IN WINE COUNTRY

### FINDING TREASURE!

And they said it couldn't be done! A surprisingly delicious gallon of wine! Yup, you heard that right -- not bottle, but gallon -- a jug! If the word "jug" makes you cringe, call it a 3-liter bottle in the shape of a jug. Either way, it's filled daily by hand, so you won't find this wine in any store -- only at the winery. It can be your own personal secret. Well OK, I'll share the secret later, but shhhh!

There are some points to consider here, so let's give this whole subject further discussion.

Quite frankly I never thought I'd buy jug wine. In fact, when I bought this nectar, I was torn. Half of me wanted to furtively sneak out to my car with it -- clutching my treasure -- attempting to hide the gallon jug which couldn't be concealed in any of the winery's bags. The other half of me wanted to hold the jug on high, proudly proclaiming my utter delight in this "discovery" and screaming "Look what I found!"

But you must be thinking, "How could she?" How could anyone who claims to love good wine be seduced by a jug? Well, everyone loves a good bargain, and making a find like this is something people long-enamored with wine take great pride in. OK, so it doesn't have the com-

plexity and lingering finish of a Chateau Lafite, Chateau Haut-Brion, or Romanee-Conti. It did pass the test of holding true to the belief that "Life's too short to drink bad wine", and that's enough to make one giddy with delight.

Interestingly enough, since this wine is the (assistant) winemaker's special blend, it could actually be called a "Reserve" -- in the truest of tradition. The wine comes from a small stainless steel tank that the winemaker adds to and adjusts weekly until he's happy with the way it tastes. Yes, it's his own "Private Reserve" of sorts. -- always changing, blended with whatever's on hand or whatever came in with the latest load of grapes.

While some level of consistency is a goal, at any given time the wine could contain anywhere from five to seventeen different varietals. Just think: at some point, practically every red varietal that found its way into California will find its way into that mix! Now that's enough to give one pause. Seventeen varietals! Besides all the more common suspects, you might find malbec, tempranillo, carignane, barbera, nebbiolo, mourvedre, montepulciano, dolcetto, grenache or alicante bouchet -- just to scratch the tip of the varietal iceberg. Yes, you can definitely call that a "Reserve".

"What?" you say. A bottle with "Reserve" on the label means something special, something more wonderful, something more expensive for sure. Well, brace yourselves. A little known fact is that the term "Reserve", in any of its incarnations (i.e. "Vintner's Reserve", "Winemaker's Reserve", etc.) originally meant a wine that the winemaker of old kept aside -- "Reserved" for his family. It could be the best of what he made, or just the wine that wouldn't make up a barrel on it's own, and so got blended into a house wine for the family.

Since we're into revealing less-known facts, the term "Reserve" is one of only two terms that you'll find on a wine label that isn't regulated by the government agency that controls wine and spirits. The other non-regulated term is "Old Vine" -- or any of the many related label terms that hint at scraggly, gnarled vines giving up the last drop of their precious juice. We'll discuss the mystique, merits and value (or not) of these two terms in a future column. In the meantime, "Caveat Emperor".

Now, back to my promise to share the secret. This wine in the aforementioned jug maintains a 50-year California wine tradition that was started by the Martini-Prati families. It has been continued by the Martin Ray Win-

ery who acquired the original facility on Laguna Road just off Guerneville Road in Santa Rosa. It's called "Round Barn Red" and bears a picture of the long-extinct Fountain Grove Winery.

There's a tasting room where you can taste Round Barn Red. And, while California laws won't let you return with your old jug to refill it, you CAN get a clean, sanitized, new jug and head for the cellar to fill your own bottle. Make you grin? Or, you can just nab an already-filled bottle and run furtively to your car -- or, like I am doing, you can tell the world.

One more thing about this wine: There are no sulfur adjustments to preserve the bottle for longer storage, so it's a "drink now" wine -- within weeks would be good. That falls right into line with the way most Americans drink wine anyhow. Did you know that 97% of all wines bought are "aged" in the car on the way home from the store? So this is perfect!

To wrap up the story, I shared my secret wine with

some friends the other night. Everyone was suitably impressed. They were even more impressed when I revealed the price: \$12 for the whole gallon! That's proof you don't have to dip into your child's college tuition fund to find wine you can take delight in drinking. I could have put the wine in a decanter to disguise its parentage and keep my secret, but instead I placed the bottle in full view, knowing I could honestly boast about my incredible brilliance at locating such a wine.

#### For planning purposes:

Since Hurricane Katrina, many of us, with our awareness heightened to our own vulnerability here in California, have begun to put together survival packs. Well, as I have a large collection of wine aging in my cellar, I'm putting some of my best wine where I can reach it quickly. If I have to leave, as much of that wine as I can carry is going with me. If nothing else, it will help me survive with a smile.



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