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Always Time for Summer Wine

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It's hot and dry out here in Calif., and refreshing wines are a welcome relief. Here's a wrap up of summer wines which have cooled down the heat and energized many meals. I break the rules by listing by recent geography traveled rather than progressing from white to red.

Touching down in Beaujolais in June, I immersed in the gamay varietal which morphs from light and fruity to tannic powerhouse depending on terroir and vigneron. In Fleurie, the Queen of Beaujolais, I found my summertime fix at Clos des Quatre Vents. Here Patrick Darroze and his family have farmed 30 hillside acres with négociant Georges Duboeuf since 1955. Darroze served his wine in the company of his 100-year-old mother who is beautiful, and an imbiber of Fleurie every day. I want to be like her when I grow up. And yes, I enjoyed a 2012 Beaujolais Blanc (aka Chardonnay) from Georges Duboeuf paired with foie gras custard on a warm day in Mâcon along the Saone River.



I loved Lyon, the launch point for Beaujolais to the north and so tempting to head south for the Rhone Valley. Alas, the SFO flight beckoned. But at home I discovered a GSM from Jean-Luc Colombo, Les Abeilles Côtes de Rhone which was broad-shouldered enough to enjoy with steak but light enough to enjoy on a hot August day. I need to get close up and personal with more grenache, syrah and mourvedre in its homeland.

Who else could bring back the joie de vivre of the French than Jean-Charles Boisset? At the Paulée dinner at DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma during the Pinot Classic in May, Boisset served a refreshing glass of No. 69 pinot noir Crémant De Bourgogne. Another summer wine that caught my eye during the Russian River adventure was the Benovia Chardonnay crafted by Mike Summer. Full-bodied yet finishing with mineral notes, I enjoyed the wine with smoked salmon.

Over the Mayacamus to Napa Valley, I soon fell into a Sauvignon Blanc frenzy. The first stop was Crocker and Starr in St. Helena where Pam Starr makes her mark with the 2013 Sauvignon Blanc which is crisp with minerality and full body from nine months on its lees. Sampling the wine on the sun-kissed porch of the 1918 restored farmhouse off the beaten-Highway-29-path may have made the wine taste even better. Starr seeks out a blend of grapes: "I take warmer fruit from up-valley and cooler down-valley fruit for a blend of flavors, minerality and aroma. Red wine drinkers often

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like our Sauvignon Blanc.”

I also was seduced by the 2013 Sauvignon Blanc at Charles Krug Winery. Yes, I know this historic winery is the oldest in Napa Valley, with cabernet sauvignon from 1944 in the Vintage Selection Room. But the weather, the scene and the history drew me to the white wine. With a nod to New Zealand, the wine shows notes of citrus and pink grapefruit along with white stone fruit. The Sauvignon Blanc has both balance and complexity. I admired the new tasting room in the revamped Redwood Cellar Room and savored every cabernet sauvignon tasted. I want to go back and dine on the “Toscano” sirloin steak panini at the new Cucina di Rosa with Krug reds.

From the oldest to one of the newest winery in Napa, I hopped over the B Cellars in Oakville. Designed as a farm to table winery, the glass-framed “hospitality house” doesn’t have a traditional tasting bar. As says GM Jonathan Ruppert says, “We built a kitchen with a winery around it.” Located by the garden and the vines, the building hosts food demos and tastings. We tasted the food-friendly B Cellars 2012 Blend 23 of chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and viognier. The 2013 rosé of cabernet sauvignon and syrah cooled down several hot summer meals.

At home for a few weeks, I bumped into another summer incarnation of GSM at local Concannon Vineyard in Livermore Valley. The 2011 reserve bottling with Santa Barbara fruit was light enough for salads but with enough red fruit and body to match with burgers on the grill. At nearby Darcie Kent Vineyards the 2011 Rava Blackjack grüner veltliner came as a bright summer surprise with Monterey minerality and light body. The 2012 Darcie Kent DeMayo Chardonnay, Livermore Valley, bigger and tropical, was also refreshing.

Also in Livermore, winemaker Mark Clarin is known for crafting McGrail Vineyards cabernet sauvignon such as the 2008 Reserve which won the highly regarded Red Sweepstakes award in the 2012 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. But on a hot August day, Silvia Baratta, a wine expert from Treviso, Italy, and I gravitated to the 2013 McGrail Family Chardonnay that exhibits creamy vanilla notes with a long, complex finish. Also an accomplished musician, Clarin has a simple winemaking ethos: “I make wines I want to drink.”



Back on the road, a trip to Paso Robles and then Santa Barbara for the Wine Bloggers Conference afforded many summer quaffs. Here are a few notables from Paso Robles: a juicy 2013 pinot grigio from Janell Dusi of J Dusi Wines, the 2011 Esprit de Tablas Blanc from Tablas Creek, 2013 Floyd Rosé from Wild Horse Winery, another GSM and Très Violet from Calcareous Vineyard. The 2011 Fat Boy zinfandel from Tobin James Cellars made me smile in the 89 degree heat.

In Santa Barbara I encountered many refreshers wines. At Cold Heaven Cellars, a small, exciting urban winery in Buellton, Morgen Clendenen poured an aromatic 2011 viognier from the Sanford Benedict Vineyard. Blair Fox Cellars offered another appealing 2013 viognier from the Paradise Road vineyard. Turning to well-balanced reds, I discovered the Hilliard Bruce pinot noir series made by John Hilliard at his stunning new winery overlooking the Santa Rita Hills. The one that quelled my thirst this summer was the fruit-forward 2011 Pinot Sun.

During the world wines tasting at the Wine Bloggers Conference, I chanced upon Domaine Spiropoulos Mantinia. This sparkler has an appealing mix of fruit and acidity. I asked the winemaker, Apostolos Spiropoulos, what makes this wine unique. "Made from 100 percent organically grown grapes, moschofilero has been grown for generations in the Mantinia appellation in the central Peloponnese at 2000 feet elevation."

And speaking of lesser known grapes, I expected to fall for the primitivo while visiting Puglia in late June. But lighter negroamaro captured my attention. A wine that is both fruity and spicier than pinot noir, negroamaro, means "black-black" from the word in Roman and Greek. Belying its deep color, negroamaro is a subtle wine to drink with foods from pasta to meat. Varvaglione Vigne-Vini in Taranto makes a series of wine of 12.5 percent alcohol (12 e mezzo) wines. The 12 e Mezzo Rosato del Salento with 100 percent negroamaro hit the spot in late June.

Summer or winter, I'm going to get more familiar with negroamaro and moschophilero. Meanwhile, I need to dream up a rainmaker dance to bring on some rain—after harvest, of course.



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Deborah Grossman

Deborah Grossman is a Bay Area culinary journalist whose specialty is writing about people and places that craft unique beverage and food. Her gastronomic travel articles depict experiences at the global dining table.

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