



Raise Your Glass: New Wines Can Thrill, Even Old Ones

By Warren Johnston
For the Valley News

Tuesday, February 21, 2017

Fortant Cabernet Sauvignon, 2013

Sete, Languedoc, France, \$11.99

Part of the fun of writing this column is that I often need to look for largely undiscovered, good affordable wines.

It's a quest that I enjoy and that can be rewarding when I do find something that's new and exciting in the sea of wines on the market.

I recently tried Fortant Cabernet Sauvignon, and I was blown away. The finely crafted wine is light, dry and refreshing with layers of bright flavors. It is relatively low in alcohol content, unlike the other cabs I've been drinking lately from California and the Southern Hemisphere.

I was exuberant, nay giddy, about my discovery of this fine, new wine. That is until I found out it had been around for decades, seemingly well known to everyone but me.

The Fortant wines are groundbreaking, and they have not only brought distinction to their region of France, but they also have changed the way many French wines are produced.

Before Fortant founder Robert Skalli went on his campaign to improve things in the 1980s, the Languedoc region in Southeastern France was known for its not very good bulk wines and little else in the wine world.

At age 22, Skalli, a modern French wine industry pioneer, took over the family wine business with holdings in Languedoc, Algeria and Corsica, just eight years after his 39-year-old father was killed in a plane crash.

While still in his 20s, Skalli spent time in California's Napa Valley, and he started the St. Supery winery. During his time in the state, Skalli was inspired by Robert Mondavi to become a fan of single varietal wines, which weren't being made in France at the time.

Convinced that coastal Languedoc had a climate and soils similar to California, he returned to his native region to produce and promote wines made from one grape variety, something that was anathema in France, particularly in Bordeaux and Burgundy, where blends were *de rigueur*. With the help of other progressive winemakers, he led the campaign to establish the Vins de Pays d'Oc designation, and he convinced wine growers to cut yields and commit to quality. He also moved them toward planting such varietals as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

When Skalli started Fortant de France in 1988, he produced the country's first 100 percent varietal wines, which have since gone on to win awards and garner international acclaim.

For more than 30 years, Skalli has worked in partnership with farmers across Languedoc-Roussillon, the world's second largest wine growing region behind La Mancha, Spain, to share programs, develop organic and sustainable practices and to strive for excellence, the company's website says.

By 2013, winemakers in Languedoc-Roussillon were producing almost three-quarters of France's quality wine, the company says on its website, and 68 percent of those wines were single varietal.

Jean-Charles and Nathalie Boisset, a brother-sister duo who also own wineries in California and Burgundy, purchased Fortant de France in 2011. The family shares Skalli's vision and has pledged to continue his work in Languedoc, the website says.

The Boisset family also is known for hiring top winemakers and not micromanaging, giving them freedom to be creative and to produce the best wines.

Fortant Cab is made from grapes grown in two hillside areas facing the Mediterranean, each with distinct soils and climate conditions. The result is wine with a deep purple color, aromas of blueberry and violet and flavors of black fruit, winemaker Laurent Sauvage says in his tasting notes.

Sauvage has degrees in agricultural engineering and winemaking from the University of Montpellier in France. He oversees the vineyards as well as the wine production with a strong understanding that good wine begins in the vineyard, the website says.

To preserve freshness, the grapes are picked at night. Each vineyard lot is fermented separately in stainless steel tanks for four days, and selected lots are then fermented in French oak barrels. After three months of aging, the components are blended to produce the final wine.

I found out a couple of days ago that Fortant wines had a renewed international marketing push in 2013, which expanded the line's availability in the U.S. Apparently, I hadn't overlooked it for so long and was just fashionably late to the party.

Fortant Cabernet Sauvignon is widely available. I found it on sale for \$9.99, but it's still a great buy at the full price of \$11.99. Also, if you are a white wine drinker, check out the Fortant Chardonnay. It's a terrific, dry wine that's good any time of the year.

