

ESTHER MOBLEY

Buy me some peanuts & Cabernet

More online: Esther Mobley samples the Red Stitch wines. See her tasting notes at www.sfchronicle.com/food

In a south Napa industrial park, Rich Aurilia is swirling and sniffing four glasses of red wine. After careful deliberation, the former San Francisco Giants shortstop makes an assessment: "I liked the front-end fruit on 'C' the best," Aurilia says, "but not the mid-palate."

Across the table Dave Roberts, onetime Giants outfielder, nods enthusiastically. "A Cabernet's gotta have a mid-palate. And when you're talking about aging, you need that tannin structure."

Aurilia and Roberts, once teammates, are now ostensibly rivals: Both retired as Giants — Aurilia in 2010, Roberts in 2009 — but while Aurilia is now a CSN Bay Area sports broadcaster, Roberts currently manages the Los Angeles Dodgers.

What most fans don't know is that Aurilia and Roberts are still teammates off the diamond. They own a wine label together, along with their wives, Amy and Tricia, and friends John and Noelle Micek. Their winemaker, Rolando Herrera (Mi Sueño Winery; Herrera Wines) helps them craft Napa Valley Cabernet and Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot

Noir and Chardonnay. They call the winery — what else? — Red Stitch.

Front-end fruit and mid-palates might not be conversation topics you'd expect from two Major League Baseball veterans. But for these three couples, this discussion marks one of their favorite annual traditions: the Cabernet blending session, in which Herrera presents the three couples with their vinous raw material — finished Cabernet samples from three of Herrera's vineyards — blended together in various proportions. After hashing out the virtues of each sample's tannin structure and pH level, the group will collectively decide which of Herrera's blended creations should be bottled as the 2014 Red Stitch Cabernet Sauvignon.

So far, Wine A is the least favorite; "it smells medicinal," Noelle Micek says. Wine D, too, is dismissed outright: too boozy. In the lead is Wine C, though it isn't perfect either. "I wish it had the elegance of B," says Trisha Roberts.

Herrera takes two of his code-marked test tubes and measures out a new concoction in a beaker. *I know exactly what*

to do, his smile seems to say.

What are they seeking in a Cabernet? "The Red Stitch style is really about consistency," says Roberts. "For 10 years now we've stayed true to our style."

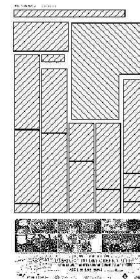
"Our style is big, but always elegant," Amy Aurilia adds. But ultimately, she says, they just know it when they see it. "When you open a bottle of Red Stitch, there's no mistaking it."

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To understand the genesis of Red Stitch, we'll need to dispense with one long-held cultural assumption: that baseball players are beer-guzzling, snuff-dipping Philistines incapable of discerning a Bordeaux from a Burgundy.

On the contrary, the major leagues love Northern California Wine Country. Mets Hall of Famer Tom Seaver owns a vineyard on Diamond Mountain; Ron Darling, once of the Oakland A's, makes Syrah (whose proceeds fund diabetes research) with Santa Rosa's Donelan Family Wines. Not to mention the MLB's own line of branded wines, which have included Giants-exclusive cuvées from Cline, Mumm and

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Wattle Creek.

During Aurilia and Roberts' tenures, the San Francisco Giants was a particularly wine-erudite group. "We always had this challenge," Aurilia says: "Who could bring the best wine on the plane?" (A privilege that the rest of us, hostage to the liquid-averse TSA, can only dream of.)

Dave Roberts won that game during one plane ride in 2007, when he brought a Mi Sueño Cabernet. The wine was the unanimous team favorite.

By then, Herrera had become something of a cult phenomenon in pro-baseball circles. The first player to discover his wines, in 2006, was Chili Davis, who played for the Giants in the 1980s and now coaches the Red Sox. "Chili Davis was in my winery!" exclaims Herrera, still giddy about Davis' first visit. They exchanged autographs: Davis' on a jersey, Herrera's on a 6-liter bottle.

Davis spread the word. Before long, Herrera was getting calls from Barry Bonds, Shawn Estes, Bruce Bochy, Vince Coleman and, eventually, Rich Aurilia and Dave Roberts. They all wanted to visit Mi Sueño; they couldn't get enough of his wine.

In 2007, his final season, Bonds invited Herrera and his son, Rolando Jr., to a home game, and brought them onto the diamond before the game started. The moment held particular meaning for Herrera, who had come to Napa from Michoacan, Mexico, as a 15-year-old without his parents. For two years he slept in a plant nursery ("It was like camping!") and worked after school as a dishwasher and as a laborer at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, breaking rock. Then-owner Warren Winiarski offered Herrera a harvest job while he was still in high school; within three years he was cellar master.

Owning his own business was already more than Herrera had dreamed of growing up. To be recognized by sports heroes like Barry Bonds — to step onto the diamond at AT&T Park with his son — was something else. "I couldn't believe it," he says.

Meanwhile, that same year, Aurilia and Roberts had joined a wine tasting group in San Francisco. It was there that they met John Micek, a hedge fund manager who was only just discovering his own love of wine. The three hit it off. Their favorite grape variety, which they studied extensively in the tasting group, was Malbec — Herrera's specialty.

When knee and elbow injuries during the 2007 season forced Roberts to retire earlier than he would have liked, he itched for something to do. He and Tricia dreamed of starting a winery. To float the idea, he called Aurilia, who immediately committed — "I'm in!" — before Roberts could even ask. Micek, their new friend, was game, too.

As word got around that the trio was planning a wine label, a number of local winemakers expressed interest in collaborating with them. But they already had their guy. Aurilia, Roberts, Micek and their wives met with Herrera at Bacco, the Noe Valley restaurant, to seal the deal.

"It would be an honor," Herrera told them.

It's not clear who was more starstruck: Herrera, getting to work with two of his baseball idols, or Aurilia and Roberts, getting to work with the guy who made their all-time favorite wine.

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Back at Mi Sueño, Herrera presents the couples with a final concoction: Wine E. As everyone puts the new glass to their noses, the room grows

silent. This wine has the rich, fruity exuberance of Wine C, the structured elegance of Wine B and, somehow, something more — expanse, depth, chocolate, cherries. It tastes complete.

"That's a Red Stitch Cab," says Micek.

The Cabernet base now finalized (they always blend in a little Malbec — but that comes later), conversation turns to the business. In its decade of existence, Red Stitch has stayed small, just brushing 1,000 cases now. They want to grow modestly, but more important, they want to reach new wine drinkers. How could they reach younger consumers? Could they make a by-the-glass pour — a less expensive, larger-volume wine for restaurants?

Being a "baseball wine" comes with baggage. "Now that we've been around for 10 years, I think people are starting to understand that we really are involved in the business," Amy Aurilia says. "At the Michael Mina Super Bowl event, Rich is always getting up and talking about pH levels."

"We do bottling, we help with harvests, we sell the wine," her husband continues. "I'm the one packing up the cooler and dragging it to La Folie and House of Prime Rib."

Despite his broadcasting gig, Aurilia considers Red Stitch his full-time job. And he's on a wine-proselytizing mission. Last year, while at spring training with the Giants as a guest instructor, he surreptitiously placed wine bottles in players' lockers. Just to spread the gospel.

"It used to be 'where's the beer cooler?'" Aurilia says. "But in the last two or three years, the players or managers will come up to me after a game asking if I have any wine."

For the three couples of Red Stitch, their own wine journey is just getting started. They've

traveled together to the Rhone Valley (where they tasted a 20-year vertical at Chateau Beaucastel) and Tuscany (the highlight: Castello Banfi). Those were opportunities to learn as vintners — but more

crucially, to spend time together.

“At the end of the day, this is about friendship,” Micek says. Being the non-major leaguer in the group presents only one challenge for him: autograph-

ing wine bottles. “My signature is terrible on circular objects, but Rich and Dave have been signing bats and balls their entire lives.” He laughs. “Unfair advantage.”



Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

The Red Stitch wine team, from left: Rich and Amy Aurilia; Dave and Tricia Roberts; John and Noelle Micek at a tasting at Mi Sueño Winery in Napa. Top: A Red Stitch Sierra Mar Vineyard Pinot Noir.