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What's new in the Grapevine this week?

- **New arrivals**
- **A case for nutrition labels**
- **Spectacular Tuscan vertical**

New arrivals

Yesterday we received the last case of the **2016 Humberto Canale Estate Malbec** our distributor had. Combining Malbec fruit and spicy oak aromas and flavors, the 2016 Estate Malbec was produced with fruit from Los Borregos, the vineyard that was planted back in 1969. Humberto Canale Estate Malbec is a beautiful red wine gem from the southern reaches of Argentina. The Canale Family vineyards in the Rio Negro Valley of Patagonia are among the most southerly in the world. A dry growing season with hot days and cold nights helps produce wonderfully ripe and generous fruit. The grapes were picked by hand in mid-April and delivered to the winery, just 1 km away. Careful selection with an extremely low yield of 6 tons per acre assures maximum concentration of fruit. The wine itself embodies the purest expression of the Patagonian terroir and the Argentine Malbec. It shows off a very refined style, both in the nose and in the mouth. Its careful oak cask ageing gives the wine an ultimate dimension that turns it into an irresistible wine. This is a characteristic Malbec varietal, a full-bodied wine, with a complex structure, with surprising notes of red berries, eucalyptus, spice and black pepper. Well-structured and complex, it offers beautiful balance, silky texture and a smooth, lingering finish. **90 points Wine Advocate, \$17.95.**

If you need one more nearly perfect white wine for summer, check out the **2018 Mont Gravet Blanc**. I tried it chilled from the cooler the other day and it had me enchanted. It is made from 100% Columbard grapes

from the Gascony region of Southwestern France. Mont Gravet has a pale, bright yellow color, with a very intense and refreshing nose. It displays flavors of citrus fruit and a silky smooth peach nuance that will leave your mouth watering. This wine will express itself best as an aperitif or with any seafood. A couple of other points to stress: 1) the wine is only 11.5% alcohol so it is great for hot weather cuisine; 2) it retails for \$10!!

A case for nutrition labels

There is no doubt in my mind that wine making is much better and much more consistent than it was 40 years ago. Some of the improvement is from better agricultural practices, some from climate change and some from having more highly trained wine makers in the winery.

But like many foods and beverages, the newer technology involves additives to the finished product. Wine makers can add tartaric acid to wines that are too flabby from over-ripeness that resulted from too much heat during the growing season. They may forgo the expense of new oak barrels by throwing a 50 lb. “teabag” of oak chips into the stainless steel tank. A few may add water to bring alcohol levels back down to balance with fruit and tannin. Speaking of tannin, it can be supplemented too by adding powdered tannin.

But until wine producers are required to list ingredients on the label, we may never know what they did. By far the best kept secret for red wines is the concentrate additive Mega Purple. Giant wine conglomerate Constellation owns the brand and the concentrate is produced from a red fleshed hybrid grape called Rubired. Some winemakers use Mega Purple to enhance the color of their red wine. Just a few drops can transform the color of pinkish or light red wine into a much deeper red. It’s often used as a colorant in inexpensive, “not-so-great” wines, though high-end winemakers occasionally use it as well. Some use it to add a bit of sweetness and ripe fruit flavor.

There isn’t any reliable data on how many wines contain Mega Purple; Constellation Brands declines to provide data on how much they sell. And since winemakers don’t have to list most additives on the label, consumers most likely won’t know if a given bottle contains it. The winemakers have plenty of reason to use Mega Purple: consumers think that a richer color connotes higher quality, and the concentrate can add a

touch of sweetness as well. The good news for consumers: It can't hurt you. It is probably organic and it is 100% grape juice.

Part of the mystery of how much Mega Purple is used is because Mega Purple is a concentrate. It comes in one gallon bottles and 5 gallon pails. It is 65% sugar and has a viscous consistency. In concentrations of less than .2%, it will make a \$10 wine taste and feel like a \$30 wine. No one but the manufacturer knows how many pounds or tons of grapes it takes to make a gallon of Mega Purple but my guess is it's a lot. To put it into perspective, there were 252,000 tons of Rubired in the 2017 California grape crop. California produced the same tonnage for Rubired, Pinot Noir and Merlot that same year. Or to give you another measure, the total tonnage for the entire grape harvest in the State of Washington (#2 wine producing state in the US) was a record 272,000 tons in 2016. The year before and the year after Washington produced 227,000 tons. Rubired is planted a lot more than you'd ever imagine when it equals that sort of production.

Accepted lore in the wine industry concedes that most Mega Purple is used in wines that retail for under \$10. It adds color, texture and a fruit flavor that appeals to many consumers. There is one winery in particular that I suspect uses a lot of Mega Purple because all of their wines are dark, slightly sweet and thick-bodied. They also leave a tell-tale purple stain on your teeth. Because they are so imprinted with Mega Purple, one wag in the wine business conjectured that the labels for the Cabernet, Petit Sirah, and Zinfandel were interchangeable. It all tastes the same to him.

Now, I have nothing against using grape products to make wine taste better. I really don't care if the salt I put on my eggs is iodized. I just want the full ingredient list to show so consumers know when they are getting a wine with "natural" additives like tannins, tartaric acid, special yeasts, and Mega Purple. I doubt wine has as many additives as most processed foods but I would still like to see exactly what is in a bottle of wine other than just the alcohol percentage and the sulfite content warning.

Spectacular Tuscan Vertical

Yesterday we received a vertical (2014, 2015, and 2016 vintages) of the **Fontodi Flaccianello Della Pieve**. The Fontodi wines are 100% organic and the Flaccianello is 100% Sangiovese from Tuscany. The Flaccianello is also one of the finest wines in the world consistently garnering scores from 95-100 points from major wine publications.

The **2016 vintage** shows amazing depth and poise, with a sheer sense of elegance that comes from the undisputed quality of fruit achieved in this balanced vintage. The bouquet opens to dark cherry, blue flower and tilled earth. That depth is what stands out most. Until the 2013 vintage, Flaccianello was aged in barriques for 24 months. After that vintage, six months of the total aging time is spent in botte instead. The 2016 vintage includes a small part from clay amphorae for the first time. This slight change in the relationship of wine to barrel size has resulted in a more elegant and finessed wine. That point is especially underlined in this vintage. Because of cool spring temperatures during the flowering, yields were reduced by 20% in 2016 compared to 2015. Some 65,000 bottles were made. Wine Advocate gave it a full **100 point rating** and Wine Spectator pegged the 2016 at **98 points**,

In comparison, the **2015 Flaccianello Della Pieve** is slightly broader in the shoulders and heavier in the gait. There is more meat on these bones, and the 2015 vintage presented vintners with near-perfect growing conditions in which one textbook part of the vegetative cycle transitioned directly to the next. The wine is dark, exuberant and profound, and the quality of the tannins is superb, fine and firm. One difference with the 2016 vintage is that the 2015 is a tad more accessible and ready. You can wait and cellar it for thirty years, or pop the cork sooner if you don't have the patience to wait. Again, Wine Advocate had the 2015 vintage at **98 points** and Wine Spectator weighed in at **96 points**.

The **2014 Flaccianello Della Pieve** is definitely more elegant and compact than the recent past editions that were largely driven by much warmer growing conditions and thicker concentration. This wine is instead ethereal and almost fragile with aromas that veer toward forest berry, wild cherry and rose hip. Giovanni Manetti, the winemaker, says this challenging vintage gave Fontodi a chance to prove its mettle. The 2014 vintage aged in oak a bit longer than usual in order to give the wine more time to flesh out and gain in volume. Yields were down considerably in 2014, and there is 30% less Flaccianello in this vintage compared to average. What saves the day is the wine's fresh acidity. It acts like a glue, connecting all the various parts of this wine and infusing them tightly together to form a complete and compelling whole. In a tough vintage, it still got **95 from Wine Advocate** and **94 from Wine Spectator**.

The 2016 and 2015 retail for **\$169.95**. The 2014 would be just **\$149.95**.