



Blind Date with a Wine Thief

This month's 2008 Petit Verdot release is a first ever for Stuart Cellars. Traditionally used sparingly if at all in meritage-style blends, Petit Verdot is one of the five Bordeaux grapes Marshall uses to make Long Valley Red. For the first time, it is available in a special bottling to wine club members as a stand alone varietal.

I made the acquaintance of this year's Petit Verdot while it was in the tank awaiting bottling, having recently been transferred from oak barrels. The color of this wine is an amazing deep, dark purple. As Susan Stuart pulled the wine thief from the tank and poured it into our glasses, I knew we had a future winner.

It is still young and shows tartness and a lot of tannin, as would be expected in a young Petit Verdot. It has strong flavors of dark pomegranate fruit with a hint of ripe bell pepper and orange peel pucker - lots of pucker!

But if you wait a few years, this will mellow and you'll be well rewarded. This wine would be the perfect accompaniment for a summer picnic of hard crusty bread, stilton cheese, olives, Hungarian sausage, fat sweet raspberries and some dark chocolate for desert.

Its beginnings are still unknown - not possessing the cache of Cabernet Sauvignon or Petite Sirah, no UC Davis geneticist has yet traced its ancestry. However, it predates Cabernet Sauvignon's 17th century birth. It is presumed to have been introduced by the Romans when they moved inland from the warm Mediterranean.

This is logical because Petit Verdot's main problem in Bordeaux was its tendency to ripen late... sometimes not at all. When all the other grapes are being harvested and wine is being made, Petit Verdot is still on the vine in France. Even its name "small green" alludes to this problem.

California winegrowers and winemakers have always been pioneers. Turns out our Temecula hot days and cool nights are exactly the climate Petit Verdot thrives on to ripen properly and turn out beautiful stand alone varietal wines but only a few winemakers have dared to make them.

The grapes for this wine are grown in the Watters Vineyard adjacent to the winery and this young wine shows good promise. If you can hold on to it for that long. Salut!