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Wine BY LANCE SPARKS

The Last Gulp

Wines for a courageous departure

Sun. Deep blue sky. Rain-scrubbed air of such crystalline clarity the Cascades looked like kids' construction paper cut-outs; the Sisters gleamed white and jagged as a broken bar of Ivory soap. Even through the grime-streaked windows of my 22nd floor office, I could tell this was the beginning of one of those days in May that make Eugene such a slice, even now, despite all the worst efforts to pave paradise. I leaned back in my creaky chair, propped my bro-gans on the desk, took a deep gulp of Wandering Goat's best coffee. I'm not a smiley-face kinda guy, but I couldn't wipe the grin off my lips.

Then I heard a light tapping on the office door. Through the pebbled-glass window, I could see the shadowed profile of what appeared to be two giant hats. The door swung open. The hats came in. The hats were huge and very red and worn by two women of indefinite age who also wore a lot of deep purple.

"Good morning, Mr. Sleuth," said the

gether a list of fun and affordable wines for Helen's Final Exit Red-Hat Bow-Out Revel.

Lately, we've been exploring the revival of Greek wines, particularly non-retsina whites. Until very recently, most of these wines were kept domestic; only a few filtered into the export market and those mostly to find niches on wine lists of Greek restaurants. But the last five years or so, winemakers have been applying modern techniques to good effect and have found surprising flavors in obscure varietals.

Lafazanis 2005 Roditis (\$10) proves the point: a crisp white with aromas/flavors of lime zest and kiwi, carried on zingy acidity that would liven up cream-sauced dishes and oily fish, maybe some fried calamari. The roditis grape has been around for a long time in the Peloponnese region, and we should be glad that it's found new expression and escaped from that region to find a home here with us. Yum.

New Zealand just keeps discovering new ways to open up the sauvignon blanc grape to find fresh flavors and textures, twists on an



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first. She was tall, black and handsome, with wisps of white hair peeking from beneath the red hat. "Adele and I would like to enlist your help in selecting wines for a very special party."

"Yes, isn't it a lovely morning?" said Adele. She was shorter, round face, skin that could have been pink icing on a cookie. She, too, had a lovely smile. "Our friend Helen — we call her Helen Wheels, our little joke you see" — they passed grins between them — "is going away, and Jeanie and I are organizing a bon voyage bash."

"A blow-out," Jeanie added, grinning. "A sonic boomer, hot music, cool wines. Which is why we need you."

Adele picked it up: "Helen's always loved good wines, been in tasting rooms from Portland to Puglia. She reads your column every month." They looked at each other and shrugged. I bit my lip.

"So," I began, trying to flip a quip, "is Helen taking a cruise, heading for Hilo, winging off to Aussie-land?"

Jeanie shook her head: "Different kinda trip. Helen has the Big C, inoperable, gonna get real nasty and painful. So she's taking early check-out. Found a decent doc with a head and a heart, helped her put together the Last Big Gulp, wants to wash it down with good friends and good wine, something fun and surprising."

"A little this, a little that, some white, some red. We're going to party, laugh, dance ... You're thinking Lawrence Welk, right? We're thinking Cherry Poppin' Daddies."

They played me for a while longer, but before they left, Mole, Mouse and I had put to-

old tale. **Sacred Hill 2005 Whitecliff Sauvignon Blanc** (\$13) is easy to drink, smooth, almost creamy despite good acidity, delivering pretty flavors of grapefruit with tropical notes, hints of herbs. This wine cries out for help from, say, fresh halibut with a butter/caper sauce, maybe some crab, fresh local greens with citrus dressing, lavish sprinkles of feta.

Anti-merlot bigots, just shut up. Sure, merlots are sometimes too cuddly for cab lovers or too simple for pinot-heads, but they have their place in the hearts and homes of many consumers. Some of my best friends like merlots. And our northern neighbors have been doing nice stuff with the grape. **Sagelands 2003 Columbia Valley Merlot** (\$10) is bargain-priced and flavor-packed. Odd thing, though: this wine needs breathing time before serving, a fact which promises that it's going to improve in the bottle for some years. But after a couple hours opened, it offers big, juicy flavors of black cherries, currants and plums accented with notes of toasty oak. A steak, a grill, a glass: formula for springtime patio pleasures.

No way Helen departs this demesne without a slug of big, bad zin. **Joel Gott 2005 Zinfandel** (\$16) is wicked good zin with Napa muscle, bold, booming with blackberry, smoke, sweaty saddle leather, dash of black pepper. Food suggestion: campfire-roasted wild boar. Wow.

The red hat ladies left us with humbling lessons in the love of life and courageous departure from its embrace. We hope she and her sisters get their ya-yas out, have a red-hat, zoot-suit riot and break ALL the glasses. **EW**