

Bottled Beauties

Umpqua wines sneak under the radar

My sidekick — Mole, we call him, or the Round Mound of Merlot — is one of those sweet

people who is always in the spirit of the moment: Christmas he goes full-on elf, Easter he'll wear bunny ears, spend a week dying eggs to look like Fabergés. His lovely wife, Molly, does nothing to restrain him, in fact feeds and nurtures his impulses, but then she feeds and nurtures everyone. I wonder if she has some secret

stash of seasonal costumes he can dip into at whim. Last month, he wandered through the lab in academic robes for weeks, even wore the funny cap and tassels. Mole's and Molly's daughter just graduated from UO Law; he shed mock tears, claimed it was the "shame of the family," but I know he was beamish with pride.

So I knew we were in for edgy hoopla when I dragged in one morning this week, found Mole rigged as Great Wide Hunter: pith helmet, khaki shorts and shirt, boots, even crossed gunbelts (no bullets), camera hanging from his neck. It was Hemingway, but more nacho than macho. He was



that just havta make it into this summer's picnic baskets, especially **Sienna Ridge Estate 2003 Pinot Blanc** (\$17), gold medal wine at Newport this year, ripe and round and easy to sip with simple fare.

Sienna's 2005 Riesling (\$17) is dry, Alsatian-style, with brightly defined fruit flavors of apples, Asian pears, crisp acidity that invites cheeses and cold meats. The **2005 Gewürztraminer** (\$15) has won a gob of medals, will win more; don't worry about pronunciation — just say guh-vertz — haul out some spicy stir-fry and enjoy aromas/flavors of fresh grapefruit, white flowers, delish.

Gotta have chardonnay? Henry Estate Winery is venerable and has been working on a house-style chard for thirty years. Scott **Henry's Estate 2006 Chardonnay Winemaker's Reserve** (\$25) achieves a fine balance of fruit, oak and acidity; it hits some tropical/citrus notes, offers soft mouthfeel, shows respect for varietal flavors. This wine has been winning medals in tough competition, deserves more. Try with lobster, a win/win combo.

Abacela's wines from Spain's great tempranillo grape are simply world-class.

whistling "Elephant Walk" from *Hatari*.

"Mole, buddy, we going hunting?" I asked him, trying to keep my face straight.

"Shuah, fer great vino in Safari Land, heunh-heunh." Mole's laugh scares birds. "M'morial Day we sent da peeps down ta th' Umpqua, gave 'em a nice tour, but we di'n't really scoop 'em on all dose good wines we bagged down dere. So ... ta-da." He shaded his eyes under the helmet, gestured to the lab, bottles and glasses already prepped.

Mole's right. Our trip to the Umpqua deserves follow-up, 'cause it was a shocker. Fact is, a huge hunk of the wine world knows about great Oregon wines coming out of Polk and Yamhill, even Benton and Lane Counties, but the wines of the Oregon South, beauties bottled in the valleys of the Umpqua and the Rogue (our next big hunt) still sneak under the radar. Now that's both a good thing and sad — sad because the wineries in those areas work hard to turn out super juice and hardly get noticed; good because for the next little while, savvy visitors can drop in and find those places still uncrowded, the tasting rooms welcoming and friendly, while the north-valley roads and facilities are sometimes a mob scene.

Back to the wines, with a cautionary note: Many of these producers are tiny, turning out a few hundred cases with limited distribution, so the wines rarely show up in supermarkets (except for bigger, more established labels like Girardet and Henry Estate). But a little cruising on the Internet makes locating a wine easy, and shipping's fairly cheap (still). On the other hand, it sure is a trip worth the gas.

Take Sienna Ridge Estate, just off the Rice Hill exit. These folks showed us some whites

Rhone Valley white grapes love the Umpqua's climate and slopes. Viognier is a full-bodied, aromatic white that is among our faves for Dungeness crab, any seafood. Two versions: **Spangler 2006 Viognier** (\$16) is just superb, the aromas so inviting it's hard to stop sniffing to sip, but the flavors and balance match up with scent. Melrose Vineyards sells out of its tasting room and online, and their **Melrose 2006 Viognier** (\$18) is well worth tracking down; self-described as a "fruit bomb," it's lush with pretty floral aromas and flavors of white peaches, tropical fruit, with just enough residual sugar to lend depth to the flavors and heft to the body.

The Umpqua, says Wayne Parker of Melrose, "is the land of a hundred valleys," each distinctive for slopes, sun exposure, soils, and one of the most intriguing of those valleys is home to Abacela Vineyards, where Earl Jones is determined to manifest Oregon's rendition of Spain's best grapes. **Abacela 2007 Albarino** (\$23) rivals some of the best versions of this dry white, those from the Rias Baixas region; it's floral, with distinctly peachy notes, food-friendly acidity — fine wine for seafood stews. Abacela's wines from Spain's great tempranillo grape are simply world-class, but if we're going to picnic this summer (assuming summer ever comes), we'll take a bottle of **Abacela 2007 Rosado** (\$14), a rosé with character and depth of flavor (red berries with a tangy citrus edge).

We're not done with the wines of the Umpqua, have hardly skimmed the surface, haven't begun to do them justice, because Umpqua reds will blow stuff UP! Mole's words: "We'll be baaack." **EW**



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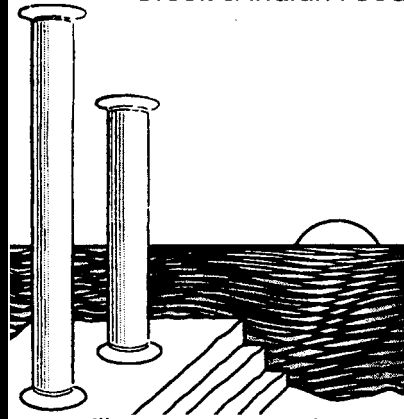
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