

Coro Mendocino: Wine Notes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

Eight years ago a group of Mendocino winemakers challenged themselves to create for the world a wine derived from Mendocino's wine heritage, individual diversity and best grape varieties. These veteran winemakers with decades of experience created Coro Mendocino.

"Coro means chorus in Italian," says third generation winemaker Greg Graziano of Graziano Family of Wines in Redwood Valley. He represents one of eleven wineries who currently produce their version of Coro Mendocino. Each Coro is a blend that includes Zinfandel and other varietals as determined by the winemaker following Consortium Mendocino's Production Protocol.

Coro is unique not just because it is made in accordance with a prescribed protocol inspired by fine wine categories like Chateau Neuf de Pape and Italian Chianti Classico. Coro Mendocino stands alone because of structured peer reviews and blind tastings to ensure all wines bottled have made the quality standards.

"There is no other wine designation in the world made like Coro," says Dennis Patton, who has been making wine in Mendocino County for 30 years and makes Coro Mendocino for both Fetzer Vineyards and Golden Vineyards. "When we sit down for tastings we can vote a wine out if it isn't good enough. That can't happen anywhere else in the world."

"The tastings are brutal," says Guinness McFadden of McFadden Vineyards in Potter Valley. Periodically over the three years from grape to release, each of the wines is evaluated by fellow winemakers in order to reach the quality and flavor profile CORO is known for.

Last weekend the 2006 Coro Mendocino wines were officially released at the Little River Inn. On one of those rare balmy Mendocino coast evenings, a sleeveless temperature and sunny sky reigned over the calm ocean. All of the Coro winemakers, clad in houndstooth shirts with the distinctive CORO logo were on hand. They were joined by wine lovers at the third annual sold-out dinner created by Little River Inn chef Marc Dym.

As guests sat down for a first course of roasted beet, risotto and goat cheese cakes, George Phelan, winemaker at Dunnewood Vineyards in Ukiah and Mendocino Vineyards Coro welcomed everyone. Known as Commander Coro, Phelan is the current chair of the Coro Consortium. He raised a toast to the 2006 release and explained that every wine was tasted and evaluated by the Coro wine tasting panel at least four times. "The wine has to be a high enough quality to pass," he says.

The common varietal in every Coro Mendocino wine is Zinfandel, which can be as little as forty percent or as much as seventy percent. "One of the best wines in Mendocino County is Zinfandel. It has history and quality and a lot of wines blend well with it," says Graziano. His Coro is fifty-six percent Zinfandel. In addition to some Petite Sirah, he blends in Barbera, Dolcetto and Sangiovese giving it a pronounced Italian accent and a salute to his Italian heritage.

Phelan adds Petite Sirah, Syrah and Charbono to the Zinfandel for Mendocino Vineyards Coro. McFadden's 2006 Coro is a blend of Zinfandel grown on his Potter Valley farm plus Petite Sirah and Syrah from Joe and Julie Golden's Fairbairn and Heart Arrow ranches.

"Each Coro wine has a "house palate" that distinguishes it," says Patton. The two Coro wines he makes have similar blends of about half Zinfandel and the other half fairly evenly split between Syrah and Petite Sirah. The flavors, however, exhibit subtle differences that evoke the terroir of their vineyards.

"Coro is perfectly suited to me," says Sally Ottoson, winemaker at Pacific Star, about twenty miles north of Little River on the coast side of Highway 1. She currently makes wine from 15 different vineyards all over Mendocino County. "My first Coro had six or seven different wines and I love that I'm not stuck with one

vineyard.” She looks for balance in her blend. For this vintage she added Charbono because it’s “age-worthy”, Petite Sirah for color and body, and Pinot Noir for an elegant “perfume” at the end. The 2006 Pacific Star Coro also includes Syrah, Dolcetto and Grenache.

“It’s fun to try different combinations,” says Brutocao’s new winemaker David Brutocao. “Most of Brutocao’s wines are one hundred percent varietals,” he explains, “but we grow a lot of different grapes and this is a chance to combine the best of what we like.” Brutocao’s 2006 Coro combines Barbera, Syrah and Dolcetto with sixty percent Zinfandel.

Another lover of blending wines, Heather McKelvey, of Philo Ridge Vineyards in Anderson Valley, says, “I am inspired by Cotes du Rhone blends and, like a chef, I like to play with different flavors.” Her blend includes such Rhone varietals as Syrah and Petite Sirah along with a dose of Carignane. At the dinner she raved about Coro with Chef Dym’s entrée of roasted herb-stuffed saddle of lamb, rice pilaf and earthy braised Brussels sprouts.

Protocol and Heritage

Continuing the chef analogy, Graziano compares the protocol for making Coro with the recipes for classic sauces and provincial dishes of France. “Each is made by prescription with certain techniques and ingredients,” he said adding that the recipes come from a place, just like Coro.”

“Each Coro wine reflects the place we are each comfortable with,” says Bill Crawford of McDowell Valley Vineyards in Hopland. As the Syrah impresario of Mendocino County, Crawford, not surprisingly blends about one-third Syrah into McDowell’s Coro, which is a little over half Zinfandel. He continues the Rhone theme by adding Petite Sirah and Grenache Noir to the mix.

“Making Coro is a humbling experience,” says Rich Parducci, winemaker at McNab Ridge Winery south of Ukiah and grandson of Mendocino’s winemaking 90-year-old patriarch John Parducci. Describing the “blind” tastings of the wines during their obligatory reviews Parducci says sometimes he doesn’t like his own wine. “Other times I really like one of the wines and hope it’s mine!” he laughs.

Bob Swain, Parducci’s esteemed winemaker jokes that Coro is “like a twelve-step program to make yourself Cabernet-free.” Admittedly that isn’t hard for Swain. He prefers the southern Mediterranean blends to Bordeaux’s Cabernet Sauvignon centric wines. Parducci’s 2006 Coro includes a little over half Zinfandel mixed with Syrah, Petite Sirah, Grenache, and a touch of Charbono.

Bottled in sleek dark green bottles, the Coro package is stylish with ochre and slate colored labels and embossed slate-colored capsules. Each includes the name of the winery and the signature of the winemaker as well as the percentage of each grape varietal in the blend. A classy lead-like stamped “cartouche” logo made in Spain sits below the neck.

“It’s all about bringing Mendocino County’s uniqueness to the forefront and getting consumers to understand Mendocino varietals,” says Julie Golden, who keeps the momentum going for the Coro Consortium. She stays inspired by Coro because it is such a wonderful collaborative effort that showcases the quality of Mendocino County’s winegrapes. .

Coro Mendocino is made to age but it is quite easy to drink at three years old, says Neil Wilensky, a dentist from Mendocino who was enjoying the dinner. He doesn’t consider himself a wine collector but likes the idea of buying wine to drink now or as an investment. He and his wife Joy, an attorney, gravitated toward the Coro Mendocino event because it fits into a “European” sensibility they admire and live by.

Another couple G & B Bokelund, here for their second Coro release dinner, are Coro devotees. A few years ago on a wine excursion from their home in Sunnyvale they discovered Coro at McDowell Valley Vineyards' tasting room in Hopland. "We became followers," they said and serve Coro Mendocino regularly to their dinner guests.

At a nearby table Dave Gilmore, who grew up in Ukiah, was enjoying his second year at the Coro Mendocino release party. He and wife Terry, who now live in Sanger near Fresno, were joined by his mom Nancy Glimore, a Ukiah resident for 42 years. "I love that they are doing something with Zinfandel, a grape that does so well in Mendocino County," Gilmore pronounced, adding, "Coro is a great idea."

For more information on Coro Mendocino visit the Mendocino County Winegrape and Wine Commission at www.truemendocinowine.com or the Mendocino County Promotional Alliance at goMendo.com or coromendocino.com

Heidi Cusick Dickerson writes Wine Notes on behalf of the Mendocino County Winegrape and Wine Commission.