Get Your (Wine) Geek On
by Charles M. Bear Dalton

Geek. When I was growing up, a “geek” was not what you wanted to be. Then somehow in the late 1980s, being a geek became OK. Computer geeks were beginning their rise. The company I worked for wanted us to be wine geeks (of course I already was). People who were good in their fields were called geeks in a non-dogrotory way. Suddenly we had physics geeks, math geeks, sci-fi geeks, movie geeks, theater geeks, music geeks, art geeks, philosophy geeks, literature geeks, and so on. In addition to wine geeks, we now have beer geeks and cocktail geeks. Many of our best chefs are food geeks. Embracing your inner geek is OK. We now recognize geeks as having peculiar and valuable expertise in their chosen area of obsession or endeavor.

Wine geeks come in professional and amateur versions with some overlap. Regardless of sub-type, we are wine drinkers who are often out in front of trends – and sometimes way out. Often youngish (which keeps meaning something older as I get older), mostly tech-savvy, always looking for the next interesting thing, wine geeks are the heirs of those who embraced the Rhone Ranger movement in the 1980s and flirted with (but ultimately abandoned) California Ital-Varietals in the early 1990s. They are the wine drinkers who originally sought out the best small Pinot producers in California. We geeks knew about Pinot Noir, Kosta Brown, Gary’s Vineyard and Almarosa before anyone else. We knew the release dates of all the Siduri Pinots and coveted a better spot on the Williams Selyem mailing list. I once heard a geek brag that he had Merry Edwards’ cell number. The geeks are the market that enabled today’s Pinot producers to get the publicity that allowed Sideways author Rex Pickett to create the wine character Miles. Geeks drove the Riesling revival (which, like Pinot Noir, has Jumped over to non-geek wine drinkers). Geeks “get” California Syrah.

Real wine geeks are not trophy hunters looking to bag the very rarest and most expensive for their showcase cellars where the wines will be displayed and petted but rarely drunk. Most wine geeks are wine drinkers and maybe “wine keepers” – wine drinkers who keep wine to let it develop before they drink it. These real wine geeks are interested in where and how the grapes were grown (terroir and technique), who made it and how, what varieties and/or clones were used, and anything else that may effect the way the wine tastes. It used to be that the geeks and their precursors were into Bordeaux and especially Burgundy. Then they were more into California and Oregon with side excursions to Champagne (geeks like Farmer Fizz), Germany (Riesling rocks!), even Australia (Mornington Peninsula or Tasmanian Pinot anyone?). Just as Bordeaux and, to a lesser extent, Burgundy lost their geek-chic, so went new world Merlot and, for some, even Cabernet Sauvignon. Although they still love American Pinot Noir, many wine geeks are restless because in the post Sideways wine world it seems like everyone is in to Pinot. They are looking (as if they ever stopped looking) for the next thing.

Most, if not all wine geeks, are value hounds. They want to use all that accumulated knowledge to drink better for less money. And mostly they do. Because they are willing to leave the well-worn path, they get wilder, sometimes more rustic wines with more and different flavors than can be found in the safe, clean world of commercial releases. That is not to say that all geek wine is cheap but it is hard to think of many wines with real geek bonafides that don’t offer value at their price point.

In addition to the wines listed above, there is a new buzz about Burgundy. The Loire, especially the formerly unfashionable appellations of Muscadet and Savennieres, Chinon and Bourgout but also Pouilly Fume and Sancerre. Riesling is still in favor. Minerald, un-wooded or lightly-oaked whites are in focus. The “other” sweet white areas of Bordeaux - Cadillac, Loupiac, and St. Croix de Mont - are newly fashionable. There is once again interest in fine wine from the Languedoc – which just a few years ago was as dead as it seems much of Australia is now. (Of course Australia being down now just means that it is ripe for a geek comeback.)

Spec’s has always carried its share of geek wines. In fact, the Smith Street mother-ship in Houston and the Brodie Lane store (290 at Mo-Pac) in Austin are wine geek heaven. Nevertheless, we have often done a poor job of marketing geek wines. It is time for that to change. We are going to “get our geek on” and do a bit more to show off some of these very interesting, sometimes edgy wines. Next time you come into one of these two flagship Spec’s stores, ask us where “the geek wines” are (“Where the geek wines at”) and get your geek on too. Here are some of our current favorite geek picks. We have more coming soon.

Bubbles
The geeks love grower’s estate bottled Champagne (what’s not to like?), which all but one of these are. So we’ll start with the one that’s not.

DEMOISELLE Brut Millesime 1er cru, Champagne, 1996
12x750ml $89.99 $1,013.38
This is the luxury cuvee from Demoiselle that with the 2000 vintage is now called “La Parisienne”. We tasted both this 1996 and the 2000 and chose the 1996 because of its extra development and richness. The 2000 is also excellent and we will likely carry it at some point after the 1996 is sold out. It is just that the 1996 is a rare find that is drinking beautifully. Tech: 12% Alcohol. 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir exclusively from premier cru vineyards fermented using Methode Champenoise and aged 60 months on the yeasts. Straw in color with a hint of gold, bright, clear, and sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity and very light phenolics. Offers developed fruit and toasty bread that is very well integrated with the chalky mineral component. Very long finish. Satisfying, complete, and delicious; lovely-in-the-mouth. Richer and quite developed with something older as I get older. Really Excellent. BS: 95*.

PIERRE MORLET Rosé Grand Reserve, Champagne, NV
12x750ml $43.23 $486.78
Tech: 12% Alcohol. 100% Pinot Rosé obtained by saignée given a minimum of three years of “sur lie” aging in the deep caves before being disgorged and dosed three months prior to shipping. Pale pink with notes of orange in color, bright and sparkling; dry; full-bodied with balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Juicy and ripe, toasty yeasty offering citrus strawberry, cherry, apple, and lemon with dusty-minerally-limestone earth. Hints at chocolate, red flowers, and just a touch of black pepper. Very long, lively finish. Delicious, precise, quite satisfying; supple and alive. Super food Champagne offering richness and complexity along with super flavor. Quite Excellent. BS: 94. Geek fact: This is the family estate of current Peter Michael winemaker Nicolas Morlet and his brother former Peter Michael winemaker Luc Morlet.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 2
LANCELOT ROYER “Cuvee des Chavaliers” Blanc de Blancs
Grand Cru, Champagne, NV 12x750ml $47.98 $540.36
Tech: 12% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay all from Grand Cru vineyards in Cramant in the Cote de Blancs. Straw in color, bright and clear and fully sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with crisp acidity. Fresh but ripe mixed citrus with a hint of tree fruit accented with chalky children’s vitamins mineral terroir; long and clean, fresh finish. This is a toasty, yeasty, focused, rich Champagne offering citrus and spice. Classic Chardonnay bubbles. Long and alive in the mouth. Excellent. BS: 94+.

LANCELOT ROYER “Cuvee RR” Blanc de Blancs, Champagne, NV
12x750ml $40.30 $453.84
Tech: 12% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay from the estate’s vineyards in and around Cramant in the Cote de Blancs. Straw in color, with green and yellow highlights. Bright, clear and sparkling; dry, medium light-bodied with fresh acidity; very light phenolics. Offers citrusy fruit with chalky children’s vitamins mineral notes; long refreshing clean finish. Fresh and yeasty; bright with citrusy fruit. Exactly as expected: toasty and delicious. Excellent. BS: 93.

PIERRE MORLET Brut Grand Reserve, Champagne, NV
12x750ml $38.99 $439.20
Tech: 12% Alcohol. A blend of 74% Pinot Noir and 26% Chardonnay with components from the Morlet family’s terroirs of Premiers Crus Avenay-Val-d’Or, Bissey and Mutigny and of Grand Cru Ay; it is partially fermented in French oak “demi-muids” (500-liter barrels). Yellow straw in color, bright, clear, and sparkling; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity. Yeasty-biscuity with developed citrusy fruit and minerally earth. Very long finish. Completely, satisfying and delicious. rich and lovely in the mouth. Excellent. BS: 92.

PIERRE BONIFACE Rousette De Savoie, 2008
12x750ml $13.99 $157.97
Until we introduced the 2000 vintage eight years ago, virtually no one in Houston had heard of this delightful, off-the-beaten-path, balanced, super-fruity, fresh, delicious dry white. Tech: 12% Alcohol. 100% Altesse grown on estate and leased vineyards fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks with full malolactic. Pale straw in color, bright and clear with good legs; dry, light-bodied with fresh acidity. This 2008 features plenty of mixed tree fruit (peach, yellow cherry, etc.), pomegranate, and wildflower perfume over a beam of minerality. It has a lovely refreshing texture and feel in the mouth with a thrilling balance. The long finish hints at lemon-drops. Although it is perfect as an aperitif, it also handles lighter dishes, cheese, and quiches and is perfect for picnic dry. Delicious and refreshing. Really Fine. Bear’s Score: 90+ Points.

DOMAINE MASSAMIER La Mignarde “Cuvee de Oliviers” Rosé, Vin de Pays des Coteaux de Peyriac, 2008
12x750ml $9.76 $109.95
Tech: 13.5% Alcohol. A blend of 80% Cinsault, 10% Syrah, and 10% Grenache macerated on the skins for 1 day and then fermented cold for 30 days. Red-pink-salmon in color, bright and medium clear with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with crisp acidity; showing very light phenolics and a gravelly mineral character. Pure, elegant mineral and fruit Pinot with spicy citrus fruit and hints of pear, apple, and toast, all underpinned by a mineral layer. Lovely feel with good weight and depth. Delicious with a touch of the exotic. Excellent. BS: 91+. VHR.

Dry White
Must … have … minerals …

Bodegas WEINERT Carrascal White, Mendoza, 2008
12x750ml $13.99 $157.97
Tech: 14% Alcohol. A blend of 70% Sauvignon Blanc and 30% Chenin Blanc (both less than fashionable with no old world precedent for blending them) given partial malolactic fermentation (75%), and aged sur lie with no oak exposure. Yellow straw in color, bright and clear with well-formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with balanced acidity. Focused, elegant, ripe, spicy-sweet citrus and tree fruit offering lemon lime orange apple pear & peach with lots of mineral and a floral accent. Very long finish. Delicious, bright, exotic, focused. Alive-in-the-mouth; vibrant & pure. Really Fine. BS: 90VHR. Delicious and refreshing. Really Fine. Bear’s Score: 90+ Points.
Red
Geek reds may be closer to the mainstream but they still have their twists.

**NADIA Santa Barbara Highlands Red,**
Santa Barbara County, 2005
6x750ml $27.95 $157.38
Tech: 14.4% Alcohol. A cooler-climate blend of 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc aged 20 months in oak barrels (all French; 65% new). Purple-deep red in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity; moderately chewy phenolics. Dusty, lively, spicy, red & black cherry berry fruit with minerally terroir, well integrated oak, and accents of black pepper, tobacco, cedar, subtle cocoa, and sweet spice. Really long finish; alive-in-the-mouth; delicious, elegant, exciting, and complete. Classic cooler climate Cabernet (which is pretty geeky). Gains richness as it opens in the glass. Excellent. BS: 94+. PLUME BLEUE Rouge, Vin de Pays d’Oc, 2005
12x750ml $9.43 $105.18
Tech: 14% Alcohol. Approximately 1/2 Syrah and 1/2 Grenache made by Domaine de Pegau owner/winemaker Laurence Feraud from grapes grown near Nimes (you know, where denim – “de Nimes” - cloth originated) fermented and aged in temperature controlled concrete tanks. YUM! 'Nuf said? No? OK, this is a sweet grapey, un-wooded fruit bomb of a red with notes of cherry and raspberry and hints at garrigue, earth, and mixed black and white pepper with a touch of meaty richness. With a fine sweet feel in the mouth, this is a delicious everyday drinker for anyone who loves the taste of the Rhone and the south of France. Fine. Bear’s Score: 89VHR.

**Domaine CABIRAU “Serge & Tony” Grenache,**
VdP Cotes de Catalanes, 2007
12x750ml $14.76 $166.16
Tech: 14.5% Alcohol. 100% Grenache fermented in concrete and aged without any wood exposure. Medium-red-purple in color with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Delicious, rich, supple, lovely sweet mostly red fruit accented with notes of garrigue, meat, and a hint of fresh tomato. Long and delicious. You’d never know it wasn’t Gigondas and really good Gigondas at that. Excellent. BS: 92+. *I have never been to this property but when I tasted this with owner Dan Kravitz, he gave me a “virtual visit” as he google-mapped me through the area to and around the vineyards. What could be geekier?

**MONPERTUIS "Cuvee Counoise", VdP du Gard, 2004**
12x750ml $12.95 $146.65
Tech: 13% Alcohol. Made from 100% Counoise, perhaps the best of the many “other” grapes (other than Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvedre) allowed in Chateauneuf du Pape, grown on 30-year-old vines. It would be labeled “Cotes du Rhone” (instead of Vin du Pays) except that Monpertuis raised the yield level to the vineyard into “balance” to increase the fruit character and reduce extraction. I know it is counter intuitive to think that you can make better wine by raising the yield but that is the case here. (Maybe some Bordeaux producers could do this as well.). Medium weight with fine richness offering red and black fruit with a spicy-earthly character and notes of violet, gravel, black pepper, and rustic wood. Yum. Unique but familiar, Satisfying, and delicious. This is a real "geek wine" that anyone can enjoy. Fine. Bear’s Score: 89+VHR.