

# SPEC's UPDATE

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*Spec's Wines, Spirits, & Finer Foods*

**Owned and operated by the same Houston family since 1962!**

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HOW TO . . .

## HOST A WINE TASTING

By Charles M. Bear Dalton

When my son Chip was in second grade, his teacher was pleased with how well her whole class had done on a standardized test. She told the class she was going to give them a reward and asked what sort of party they'd like to have. After a couple of seconds of no response, Chip raised his hand and said "Let's have a wine and cheese party." Mrs. Lemke was still laughing when she called to tell me about it. It only later occurred to me that wine tasting parties and little-kid-birthday-parties were about the only kind of parties Chip knew about. Here I'll cover the topics that will help your wine tasting party come off as well as those my son remembers.

When you plan a wine tasting party, the first things to decide on are how many people will be attending and what the theme is. The theme will dictate or be dictated by the sort of food and wine to be served. Other necessary considerations include glassware, dump buckets, organizing the order of service, opening and serving the wines at the right temperature, the cost of the event and how that will be divided up, and making sure that, while everyone has a good time, no one gets hammered.

Themes might be regional or varietal in nature. You might host a Bordeaux tasting or a Rioja tasting. You might host a tasting of Cabernets from around the world (a fairly broad category) or a

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**This is an updated version of an article that originally appeared in My Table.**

### **SPECIAL ON-LINE EDITION**

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Prices in this publication are subject to change without notice. All prices listed are for Spec's Warehouse and include a five percent discount for cash. (Many items are available at Spec's neighborhood stores where they may be sold at different prices.) All items are offered "first come, first served" and are subject to availability; some quantities may be very limited. Spec's reserves the right to restrict quantities. Any "sale" prices are good from 08-02-2001 through 09-04-2001. Spec's is not responsible for errors in printing. "Spec's" and the rabbit logo are service marks of the C.B. Jackson Company and are registered with the State of Texas.

## CABERNET QUANDRY

By Charles M. Bear Dalton

One thing no one in the wine business will dispute is that American wine drinkers have an unbridled love of good Cabernet Sauvignon. And why not? Cabernet Sauvignon has the potential to make good and great red wines in more areas of the world than any other red grape. It is the backbone of the fine red wine industry in Bordeaux, Chile, and California and is an increasingly important player in Spain, Italy, the south of France and Provence, Argentina, Australia, Washington State, and even Texas. Cabernet Sauvignon has rapidly become the most planted red grape in Eastern Europe. Bulgaria has more Cabernet Sauvignon planted than in all of Bordeaux. Cabernet Sauvignon usually tastes like Cabernet, even when it's blended with its traditional partners (Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petite Verdot, and Malbec) or such non-traditional partners as Sangiovese, Syrah, or Tempranillo.

For most Cabernet aficionados, there are two areas that come up again and again as the best places to grow Cabernet Sauvignon: Bordeaux (especially the left bank area of the Medoc with the great sites in Margaux, St. Julien, and Pauillac) and Northern California (especially Napa and Sonoma counties). For most red wine drinkers living in the western, southwestern, and midwestern US, the love affair with Cabernet focuses on California. Napa and Sonoma each boast several areas that have the potential to make wonderful Cabs. The better known Napa Valley includes such Cabernet friendly areas as the Rutherford and Oakville benches, the Stag's Leap area, the promising Chiles Valley, Howell Mountain, Spring Mountain, Mount Veeder, Diamond Mountain, and Pope Valley. Sonoma County routinely makes great Cabernet in the Alexander Valley but producers such as Kenwood (Sonoma Valley), Beringer (Knight's Valley), Deloach (Russian River Valley), Louis Martini (Monte Rosso vineyard on the western slope of the Mayacamas Mountains), and Michel Schlumberger (Dry Creek Valley) prove that other Sonoma appellations have the right stuff as well.

As to California Cabernet and Merlot vintages, there was a fine run from 1994 through 1997 where most producers made wines that were at least very good and many made wines in excellent and outstanding range. 1998 was a cold, late, small (blame El Nino) vintage that yielded some fine wines (but few with the fat and succulence of the better 1997s) and a lot of mediocre and even some poor wines. The 1999 vintage was also cool and late but the wines are better balanced, riper, and generally better than the 1998s with some promising early releases showing very well.

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## HOW TO HOST A WINE TASTING

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tasting of 1997 Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley (pretty tightly focused). Themes might focus on a particular food and wine pairing. I've had parties featuring lots of grilled seafood and German Riesling. A favorite pairing I've used in the past is Zinfandel and pizza. At this year's Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, I hosted a Champagne and sushi tailgate party (aka Bubbles & Bait). You may want to have a dinner party where every couple brings a dish and a bottle or two of wine to go with someone else's dish. If you want to taste a lot of young red wines of whatever sort, you might ask everyone to bring a bottle and something to throw on the grill and you provide a salad, side dishes, and dessert.

Once you have the theme, how will the wine and food get there? Will you buy and prepare everything yourself, have a caterer provide the food, or pick-up party trays? Will you handle the food and have each guest bring a bottle that fits the theme? Will you provide the wine and have your guests each bring a dish? For me, it's easiest if I do all the wine and food or at least do all the food and have my guests bring appropriate wines. My Bubbles & Bait tailgate party cost quite a bit less than it might have because one of my friends passed his hat (literally) and collected more than enough money to pay for the bait. When I had a Zinfandel and pizza party, I made pizza dough and sauce and cut up or grated a number of toppings so everyone could make their own pizza which would be shared with all. Everyone brought bottles of Zinfandel that fit the parameters (say 1997 Zin under \$20 per bottle. The important thing was that everyone told me beforehand which Zin they were bringing so I could coordinate and eliminate duplications. This advance warning also gave me a chance to suggest better alternatives if inappropriate wines were suggested.

Another logistical question that needs answering early on concerns how the food and wine will be served. Will the food be buffet-style grazing, a sit down dinner, or a combination of the two? Will the wine be self-service or will the bottles be served? Will the guests keep reusing the same one or two glasses or will you need a new glass for each wine? If they reuse the same glass, what will you use for dump buckets? (Champagne buckets or opaque pitchers make good dump buckets.) Will your friends discipline themselves and not over-pour if they pour their own wine?

If you don't have enough glasses, it's easy to rent glassware from various rental agencies around town. Some hosts ask their guests to bring enough glasses for their personal use. If your tasting is a casual, cocktail party-type event, one glass per person is sufficient. Many a clever host or hostess has adopted the practice of using a grease pencil to write the guests' names or initials on the foot of their wine glass. Others use kids' stickers as identifying markers. A new product called "Doodles" offers sets of different charms that can be attached to a glass to identify it to its owner. Tasting glasses should have a capacity of from 6 to 8 ounces and should have no more than 1.5 ounces poured into them. This gives the taster a decent size glass that won't look stingy with an ounce and a half of wine in it but still gives them room to swirl. Smaller glasses are impractical. Larger glasses encourage larger pours which encourages more drinking which may interfere with everyone getting to taste everything and still get home safely.

It is the host's responsibility to make all these decisions and to coordinate whether and what sorts of food, drink, and glassware each guest is responsible for providing. It also is the host's responsibility to make sure the wines can be and are served at the right

temperature to maximize their enjoyment. Ideally, white wines and Champagne should be served in the 45-48° range and red wines should be served in the 55-60° range. It's better to serve both a little too cool rather than too warm. It may seem like a lot of extra trouble to have to have an ice chest on hand to cool reds down while trying not to let them pick-up a real chill but the better flavor you and your guests get from these wines served at the proper temperature will more than reward the effort.

The host is also responsible for making sure that there is enough food and water available. Aside from any food and wine pairing rewards, having food on hand is necessary so your guests can "put down a layer" to help absorb some of the alcohol. Having water on hand allows those who are thirsty to drink the water and taste the wine. If there are more than 5 or 6 wines to be tasted, the host may want to make provisions for those guests who prefer to "taste and spit." Dump buckets work for this purpose but providing each guest with a large (16-20 ounce), opaque plastic or foam cup may be a better solution. Providing food, water, and dumper/spitters shows that you are a friend to your guests and want them to enjoy themselves without getting drunk.

Tastings can be as fancy or as simple as desired. From a practical standpoint, it is possible to put on a simple BYOB, cocktail-format tasting for not much cash outlay at all. The host would need to provide a bottle or two of wine, four or five types of cheese and some sliced baguettes or crackers, some pitchers of water, plastic glasses for water, large foam cups for spitting, and a decent wine glass per person attending with a few spares on hand. Each guest when invited is told that it is a Zinfandel (or Chardonnay, or Cotes du Rhone, or Australian Shiraz) tasting and would they please bring a bottle of their favorite (red) Zinfandel under \$12.00 (or under \$20.00 or between \$18 and \$30) per bottle. Some people will bring more than one bottle or may bring a bottle as instructed and a "ringer" they want to throw into the mix. If ten people are invited, the cash outlay on the part of the host could be well under \$70.00 and each guest would have a minimal expense but all would get to taste eleven or more examples of the selected sort of wine and have what is usually a satisfying and convivial evening to boot.

A more elaborate tasting might involve flights of two or three wines served with small courses picked to complement the wines. A group of six couples might have six courses and 12 or more wines to taste over the length of a four or more hour get together. The host needs to arrange for enough glasses so each person has enough glasses to have all the wines in the largest flight at the same time. Guests can be responsible for emptying and rinsing their glasses between flights.

Some hosts put together catered food and elaborate tastings complete with speakers to talk on and answer questions about the wines. This sort of thing is most often business entertainment masquerading as a social gathering but sometimes an avid social group will want to learn more about a certain wine or area and decide to spend the money to do it.

Wine tastings can be meticulously planned or quite spontaneous. If the host is expecting or needs a lot of help, the more advance notice and planning the better. If the host is willing and able to do most of the organizational work (and bear the brunt of the expense), a great deal of spontaneity is possible. My Zinfandel and Pizza parties required a lot of advance planning. Some guests brought appetizers, three collaborated on a salad, one brought dessert, and they all brought wine. I did all the prep work on the pizza

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## CABERNET QUANDRY (Continued from page 1)

With well over 650 California Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Meritage (US Bordeaux-style blend) wines from the 1995 through 1999 vintages in stock daily at Spec's Liquor Warehouse, how do you decide which wine is right for you? Here are some recommendations in all price ranges based on my tasting notes for some of the best Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Meritage wines in the market right now from whichever vintage (including some Fine and even Excellent 1998s).

### LYETH Red Table Wine, North Coast, 1999

12x750ml \$10.29 \$113.22

A blend of 73% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc, and 3% Petite Verdot, this is a fine, focused Cabernet Sauvignon-dominant red made in a medium-weight, balanced style with plenty of mixed cherry and dark berry fruit well melded with notes of tobacco, cedar, new leather, and mixed pepper. Has a

## HOW TO HOST A WINE TASTING

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and coordinated which wines the guests were bringing with what I already had and what was already committed to.

My Bubbles and Bait tailgate party was put together fairly last minute. We began discussing it on a Wednesday and held it the four days later on Sunday. I bought and iced-down the fizz on Friday, and ordered and pre-paid for the sushi on Saturday, and a friend picked it up on her way out to the Dome. Saturday night I boiled and peeled some shrimp and made some cocktail sauce for those who don't eat bait. The fizz we served was an assortment of ten different under \$12.00 sparklers from Spain, France, Italy, Argentina, and Australia. When I bought the wine, I also bought "ranch crystal" - clear plastic two piece disposable Champagne glasses and clear plastic dessert plates - and paper napkins. At the appointed hour we dropped the tailgate, opened some bubbles, and set out the sushi trays and the shrimp. Almost instant party - and a great way to while away a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

### SUGGESTED WINE PARTY THEMES

**Zinfandel & Pizza** - Make a big salad, grill some garlic bread, and make your own pizza (or order some in). Everyone brings their favorite Zin.

**Bubbles & Bait** - Sushi and Sparkling Wine (no one makes their own sushi)

**ABC** - Anything but Chardonnay (or Cabernet and Merlot).

**The Wines of the 19X0s** - Pick a decade and serve one wine from each year. This is still relatively easy (although not necessarily cheap) in the 1980s and 1990s.

**The Wines of (insert region here)** - This tasting (or tasting/dinner) could focus on the wine and food specific to a particular growing area such as Bordeaux, Rioja, Provence, Tuscany, the Loire, or any number of other areas.

**Mixed Grill & Rich, Ripe Reds** - Everybody brings juicy ripe reds and something to throw on the grill to share. You'll wind up with a mixed grill where everyone gets a bit of steak, a bit of sausage, some fowl of some sort, and maybe some grilled Portobello mushrooms. You may get some pork chops or tenders. If your friends are hunters, you may get quail, doves, venison sausage, or even duck or goose breast. Appropriate wines will include Aussie Shiraz and Grenache, Southern Rhone and South of France Grenache-based reds, American Petite Sirah, Syrah, and Zinfandel, and Spanish reds from Priorat and Navarra.

fresh lively feel in the mouth and a welcome bit of chewy tannin and oak. Winemaker Bill Arbios (who's made Lyeth since the beginning) has done a super job of making a great everyday drinking red that tastes much better than it's price would indicate. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 90 Points.**

### LOUIS MARTINI Cabernet Sauvignon, California, 1999

12x750ML \$8.25 \$91.85

(100% Cabernet Sauvignon) This is a rich, classic Cabernet-cassis-berry fruit nose. Medium-weight but really flavorful with a nice feel in the mouth. Hints at tobacco, pepper, cedar, and all the other good Cabernet stuff. Has a nice bit of chewy tannin. Long and clean with fruit lasting to the end. Tastes like it says "Napa" on the label (it doesn't). Really easy to like. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 89 points.**

### BOGLE Merlot, California, 1999

12x750ml \$8.87 \$97.64

Juicy rich Merlot featuring lots of super-ripe dark cherry and plum fruit layered over soft fruit tannins and a balanced oak component. Hints at black pepper and a touch of sur-maturity with a subtle earthy note. The ripe fruit really lasts in the mouth. Clean at the end. Really Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 87+ points.**

### BLACKSTONE Merlot, California, 1999

12x750ml \$8.82 \$97.10

Here's a nicely balanced Merlot featuring plenty of cherry fruit well integrated with a juicy texture and supple oaky tannins. Long and dry with nice bit of chewiness at the end. This is a fine bargain-priced wine that has earned its place as SPEC's third best selling Merlot. Really Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 87 Points.**

### FLORA SPRINGS Merlot, Napa Estate, 1999

12x750ml \$17.33 193.03

(96% Merlot and 4% Malbec) Here is juicy, lively, cherry flavored merlot with lots of fruit and just enough complexity (maybe via the Malbec?) to keep it interesting Long and alive in the mouth with a lovely medium-weight, juicy feel. Delicious. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 91 points.**

### Mt. VEEDER Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 1999

12x750ml \$34.44 \$383.56

Medium-weight, balanced, ripe, juicy Cabernet made in a classic Claret style. Shows lots of juicy blackberry fruit with notes of leather, tobacco, black pepper and oak. Great flavor and texture with a fine, weightless, ethereal feel. Delicious. Perfumed at the end. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92+ points.**

### HALEY'S MILL Merlot, California, 1998

12x750ML \$6.99 \$76.80

Sweet cherry fruit-oriented California Merlot with a nice bit of grapy character. Has some spice and a bit of earth along with good ripeness and a good medium-weight feel. The medium-long finish hints at cherry candy. Finishes clean. Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 85+ points.**

### COLUMBIA CREST Cabernet Sauvignon Grand Estates,

Columbia Valley, 1998 12x750ML \$8.60 \$95.79

A blend of 90% Cabernet Sauvignon with 10% Merlot aged 17 months in oak barrels, this Cab is rich and juicy with lots of earthy, ripe black fruit and a big texture and feel. Fat in the mouth but retains its balance. Nice mix of juice and oak with a welcome touch of chewy tannin. Warm and satisfying. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 88+ points.**

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**CABERNET QUANDRY** (Continued from page 3)

**VERITE, Sonoma/Napa Red, 1998**

**6x750ml \$146.25 \$810.00**

A blend of 98% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Sauvignon made from fruit grown in Sonoma County (62%) and Napa Valley (38%), this Bordeaux-style red spent two years in 100% new French oak barrels. The wine is a ripe, juicy, medium-weight, smooth, very elegant Merlot-dominant red. The wine is so well integrated that it is hard to pull out descriptors. It has a Ch. Lafite like ethereal weightlessness and superb balance. Fine length with a lovely mouth feel. Super Supple. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93 points.**

**FLORA SPRINGS Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 1998**

**12x750ml \$25.52 \$279.45**

Much riper than expected with good richness in the mouth and fine dark cherry and blackberry fruit. Good but subtle tobacco notes with hints of cedar and pepper and a bit of pencil shavings. Long in the mouth. Juicy, flavorful, and quite lively. Fresher and riper than most 1998s. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**

**FLORA SPRINGS Windfall Merlot, Napa Valley, 1998**

**12x750ml \$25.94 \$284.14**

Sweet and juicy with a black cherry liqueur note to the ripe fruit. Good weight in the mouth with a fine feel and lots of class. Again, not like most 1998s. Lots of cherry and dark mixed-berry fruit with hints of earth and tobacco. Ripe and satisfying. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**

**NEWTON "Unfiltered" Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley,**

**1998 6x750ml \$46.60 \$246.60**

Really well focused, flavorful wine featuring plenty of ripe blackberry fruit and a juicy texture. Supple with soft oak and tannins. Good complexity with hints of tea, tobacco, pepper, and leather. Has a medium-weight, ethereal style. Well integrated and complete. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93 points.**

**FLORA SPRINGS Trilogy, Napa Valley, 1998**

**12x750ml \$43.99 \$482.86**

A blend of 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc, and 6% Malbec, this Trilogy is a rich, juicy, ripe, black fruit-oriented red with a great dusty dry texture, good sweetness of fruit, and a fine rich feel. Lively, balanced, and alive, it is lovely in the mouth. Lasts and lasts until it resolves clean and dry. Again, seriously atypical of the 1998 vintage. Delicious and satisfying. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 94+ points.**

**QUINTESSA, Napa Valley, 1998**

**6x750ml \$88.19 \$482.93**

**12x375ml \$45.36 \$496.80**

Medium-weight, fairly concentrated, almost juicy, Bordeaux-like Cabernet featuring dark berry and cassis fruit with good tobacco notes and a nicely chewy weight to its tannin. Nicely balanced with good focus and intensity; more elegant than rich but it lasts and lasts. Dry at the end with perfume hanging on. Should develop and improve nicely over the next 2-3 years. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**

**OAKVILLE RANCH Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley,**

**1998 12x750ml \$46.92 \$513.91**

Juicy, balanced, flavorful Cabernet featuring ripe dark berry and grapy fruit along with ample dusty oak flavor. Has a fine juicy texture with medium-weight, chewy-grapy tannins. Good length. Rich and Satisfying. Solid. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92+ points.**

**FRANCISCAN Oakville Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa**

**Valley, 1998 12x750ml \$21.99 \$242.96**

Ripe, somewhat juicy, balanced, well-focused flavorful cabernet Sauvignon featuring good dark berry, grapy, blackberry fruit over layers of dusty oak, leather, cedar, and tobacco. with a hint of black pepper. Balanced and flavorful with a surprisingly rich feel. Long and elegant. Fine+. **SPEC's Score: 90+ points.**

**PHELPS Insignia, Napa Valley, 1998**

**12x750ml \$98.68 \$1,093.10**

(78% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot primarily from the Stag's Leap and Rutherford areas) This is one of the best wines of the 1998 vintage. While it doesn't taste like the truly outstanding 1997, it does offer fine fruit, weight, and ripeness. Like most vintages of Insignia, it starts a little closed but it opens in the mouth to reveal ripe black fruit with notes of pencil shavings, tobacco, earthy minerals, black pepper, and a hint of leather. It has a rich feel and a dusty dry Cabernet-and-oak texture. The flavors last and fill the finish. It doesn't have the density of the best Insignia vintages but the flavor is there along with some real elegance. Still, Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93+ points** (and may improve).

**ATALON MOUNTAIN ESTATES Merlot, Napa Valley,**

**1997 12x750ml \$58.83 \$651.60**

Atalon Merlot is a blend of 98% Merlot with 1% Cabernet Sauvignon and 1% Cabernet Franc (80% of the fruit is grown on Howell Mountain with the balance coming from Mt. Veeder, Diamond Mountain, and Atlas Peak) aged 18 months in French oak

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# Spec's Notices

## Classes, Dinners, Events, etc.

SAVE THE DATES for these upcoming events (details to follow via email and at [www.specsonline.com](http://www.specsonline.com))

12-05-01 - Wednesday - FRENCH FIZZ: The Sparkling wines of France

12-10-01 - Monday - PORT Class

12-17-01 - Monday - 1999 ZINFANDEL: Part III (Ravenswood and beyond)

The best way to find out about SPEC's **upcoming events** is via email! Add your name to our email list when you sign up for a **SPEC's KEY**. If you already have a **SPEC's KEY**, just send an email with your **name and home phone number** or SPEC's Key number to [bear@specsonline.com](mailto:bear@specsonline.com). For more on events, please log onto [www.specsonline.com](http://www.specsonline.com) and click on **UPCOMING EVENTS** or call **SPEC's** at 713-526-8787.



**CABERNET QUANDRY** (Continued from page 4)

barrels, 40% of which were new. The result is a dusty, juicy, almost Cabernet-tasting Merlot featuring fine ripe fruit in the black cherry and mixed-berry range and notes of spice and cedar with a little bit of a tannic bite. Features plenty of ripeness but the mountain-side vineyards give it real structure and a fine medium-to-full-bodied feel; good length. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**

**ATALON MOUNTAIN ESTATES Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 1997 12x750ml \$77.81 \$861.84**

Atalon Cabernet is a blend of 96% Cabernet Sauvignon with 2% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc (60% of the fruit is grown on Mt. Veeder with the balance coming from Howell Mountain, Diamond Mountain, and Atlas Peak) aged 24 months in French oak barrels, 60% of which were new. The result is a big, juicy Cabernet full of lovely black cherry and blackberry fruit and a nice bit of black pepper and tobacco complexity with a good dose of oak flavor and lots of fresh chewy grapy tannin. Juicy and alive in the mouth, it has a fine classic Cabernet-and-oak dustiness and a fine texture and feel. This big, well structured wine lasts in the mouth and really holds the interest. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93+ points.**

**DELOACH O.F.S. Cabernet Sauvignon, Russian River Valley, 1997 12x750ml \$37.79 \$413.86**

This juicy, ripe Cabernet Sauvignon has a Zinfandel-like feel to it. It is warm and satisfying in the mouth with fine blackberry, almost briary fruit and a rich feel. It is big but not heavy or overly chewy. Has a bit of dust from earth and oak. This is a well integrated, complete wine. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93+ points.**

**KENDALL-JACKSON Great Estates Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley, 1997 12x750ml \$34.57 \$382.90**

(A blend of 86% lower Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the hills with 14% Dry Creek Valley Cabernet aged twenty-two months in French and American oak barrels including 31% new wood.) The wine is rich and ripe and full of sweet, juicy blackberry and black cherry fruit. There is a neat, sweet Bourbon-like note in the aromatics. In the mouth, it is medium-bodied and balanced with a dusty-chewy texture and a fine feel. Everything is there. Good length to the dry finish. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92 points.**

**KENDALL-JACKSON Great Estates Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 1997 12x750ml \$38.99 \$433.30**

A blend of fruit from four Napa vineyards (Rutherford Bench, Oakville To-Kalon, Howell Mountain, and Veeder Peak) aged twenty-four months in French and American oak barrels, 32% of which were new, this wine is big and ripe but very well-structured, dusty dry, and full of flavor in the dark berry-Cabernet fruit range with highlights of leather, tobacco, and black pepper. The mountain (Howell and Veeder) fruit gives it the weight and structure to balance the valley floor's ripe, juicy fruit and richness. Has a good dose of the classic Rutherford dust character I look for in Napa Cab. Long and dry. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93 points.**

**KENDALL-JACKSON Stature Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 1997 6x750ml \$105.55 \$584.57**

A blend of Mt. Veeder and Howell Mountain fruit that was allowed an extended post-fermentation maceration that ranged from 5 to 8 weeks (depending on the tank), and then racked into 100% French Oak barrels (45% new) where it stayed for 22 months. The wine is big and juicy with lots of ripe black fruit along with nice

terroir notes. The blackberry and black cherry fruit is well-integrated with the oak and complemented by notes of tobacco, cedar, pepper, and leather. Very rich in the mouth with a great feel and a super texture. The ripeness is evident from the first whiff to the last bit of fruit perfume in the long finish. Well-integrated and complete. Really Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 95 points.**

**LANCASTER Reserve, Alexander Valley, 1997 6x750ml \$66.14 \$362.18**

Solid juicy-ripe red with good berry and pencil-shavings perfume and lots of dusty blackberry flavor. Good dusty oak component is well married with chewy but supple tannins. Long, dry, and satisfying, this is a delicious Cabernet-dominated blend that you can drink or hold for 3-5 years of development. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 94 points.**

**NEWTON "LE Puzzle" Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 1997 6x750ml \$66.14 \$362.18**

Super juicy and ripe with great black fruit aromas. Rich and satisfying. The fruit dominates but is complemented with fine notes of tobacco, cedar, and black pepper. Great texture and feel in the mouth. Succulent but not at all heavy. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 93+ points.**

**BERINGER Cabernet Sauvignon, Knight's Valley, 1997 12x750ml \$51.23 \$283.75**

This is the last of the really good, low \$20s 1997 Cabernets in the market. The wine has a dusty blackberry nose with ample blackberry fruit and notes of dust, minerals, subtle tobacco, and cedar filling the mouth. Fine medium-weight feel with a nicely chewy texture. Really lasts in the mouth with generous, almost sweet fruit holding on to the end. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 92+ points.**

**KENWOOD Artist Series Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma, 1996 6x750ml \$60.69 \$332.37**

Very classy, elegant, medium-weight Cabernet featuring lots of sweet red-and-black-cherry and mixed-berry fruit well-integrated with cedar and subtle tobacco, ripe tannins, and dusty-chewy (but not heavy) oak. Fills the mouth with flavor but not weight. Long, subtle, classy wine; almost ethereal. The sort of bottle you finish and wish there another two glasses left. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 94 points.**

**SIMI Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Alexander Valley, 1996 12x750ml \$65.17 \$713.74**

Graceful, balanced, rich and juicy Cab with perfume featuring black cherry and blackberry fruit, tobacco, pencil shavings, black pepper, and new leather. In the mouth, the medium-to-full-bodied, elegant Cabernet is balanced with a dusty, moderately chewy texture, good richness, and plenty of flavor. There's ample fruit on the palate that nicely follows the trail blazed by the aromas. Lasts and lasts in the mouth; Lovely Feel. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 94 points.**

**Mt. VEEDER Reserve, Napa Valley, 1996 12x750ml \$50.58 \$553.93**

Juicy, rich, cedary-dusty, medium-weight Cabernet Sauvignon-dominant red (blended with Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petite Verdot) featuring lovely black-fruit and blackberry character with lots of cedar, earthy terroir, tobacco, and new leather complexity. Juicy but balanced with an elegant texture. Dusty dry with oak and tannin but the fruit lasts through the long finish. It has a lovely feel. Solid and flavorful. Excellent. **SPEC's Score: 94 points.**



# SPEC'S DELI CORNER

Here's what's going on in the SPEC's Warehouse deli . . .

## WHAT'S NEW?

SPEC's burgers are back!

Single or double with all the fixings. Great additions like bacon, bleu cheese, avocado, jalapenos, and more.

Philly-Dillies - our version of the Philly cheese steak with fresh bell peppers, onions, and melted provolone.

Pumpkin nut bread. Now baked fresh here at Spec's.

Light tarragon chicken salad - with all white meat chicken, fresh chopped tarragon, and a light dressing.

Come check out our prices! Spec's downtown is your headquarters for German Christmas Cookies.

## SPEC'S SPECIALS

Imported Zerto prosciutto only \$10.66 a pound.

Navidul Serrano Ham on sale for only \$11.99 a pound, regularly \$15.78 a pound.

Colavita Extra Virgin Olive Oil 25 oz, specially priced at \$6.99, only \$5.99 with your Specs Key!

Colavita Balsamic Vinegar 17 oz. specially priced at just \$2.09.

Imported from Italy, Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, just \$8.39 a pound.

Compare our prices on Oebel brand Stollen - German fruitcake.

We have several varieties including sugar-free for diabetics. 17 ounce cakes starting at \$2.99.

## Q. & A. ABOUT CAVIAR

**Q.** I recently to choose some caviar to bring to a dinner party. I know very little about caviar, so I bought the most expensive kind, assuming it was the best. I arrived at the party, proudly beaming, with my chilled container of Russian Beluga 000 Caviar in hand, only to overhear that the host prefers oscetra caviar. Now I'm confused. What's the difference? Which caviar is the best?

**A.** The three types of true Caspian Sea caviar are classified according to the species of sturgeon from which the caviar was taken. Beluga sturgeon are the largest, weighing up to 2,000 pounds; therefore Beluga caviar has the largest "berries", or egg grains. Also, the beluga sturgeon does not start producing eggs until she is at least 20 years old. For these reasons, beluga is the most expensive and "the best" according to those who judge quality solely by price. However, to justify the cost, beluga has the most delicate flavor of all the caviar.

Beluga is also unique in that it has sub-categories. The designations 0, 00, and 000, mistakenly thought by some to describe berry size, actually indicate color. 0 grade signifies the darkest black, 000 grade signifies the lightest gray, and 00 grade is an intermediate shade of gray. The color has little to do with the flavor of the caviar, it merely indicates the age of the parent fish. The more mature the fish, the paler the eggs, making 000 beluga caviar the hardest to find and the most expensive.

The oscetra sturgeon grows to about 500 pounds and has slightly smaller eggs than the beluga sturgeon. It begins producing eggs at about 12 to 15 years old, and so the oscetra caviar is slightly less expensive than the beluga. Oscetra caviar ranges in color from yellow to brown and has more intensity of flavor than beluga.

The sevruga sturgeon is the smallest and most abundant of the

Caspian species. They can weigh up to 80 pounds and bear eggs after only 7 years, making their eggs the least expensive of these three caviar. The color of sevruga caviar ranges from dark gray to dark black, and the flavor is the most intense of the Caspian Sea caviar.

As for which one is best . . . the answer is whichever one you prefer. The novice will probably prefer the delicate flavor of the beluga, whereas the connoisseur might prefer more intensity of flavor. Someone garnishing a warm food with caviar will want sevruga, because it stands up better to heat. A person more concerned with cost might opt for none of these three, instead trying American Sturgeon, American black caviar, pasteurized caviar, or lumpfish roe. It all depends on your purpose, your palate, and your pocketbook.

If you have a question for Chef Abby, please write:

Specs Wines, Spirits & Finer Foods

Attn. Abby Fogarty

2410 Smith Street

Houston, Texas 77006-2398

## BACARDI GOLD RUM & NUT CAKE

### FOR THE CAKE:

- 1 cup chopped pecans or walnuts
- 1 pkg. (18oz.) yellow cake mix
- 1 pkg. (3oz) vanilla instant pudding mix
- 1/2 cup BACARDI Gold Rum
- 4 eggs
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup cold water

Preheat oven to 325 F. Grease and flour a 12-cup bundt pan. Sprinkle nuts over bottom of pan. In a large mixing bowl, combine cake mix, pudding mix, eggs, BACARDI Gold Rum, oil, and water. Using an electric mixer, beat at low speed until moistened. Beat at high speed 2 minutes. Pour batter over nuts. Bake 1 hour or until toothpick inserted in the cake comes out clean. Cool 15 minutes, then invert onto a serving plate.

### FOR THE RUM GLAZE:

- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup water
- 1/2 cup BACARDI Gold Rum
- 1/2 stick unsalted butter

Melt butter in a saucepan. Stir in sugar, water, and BACARDI Gold Rum. Boil 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat. Prick top of the cake with a fork. Spoon and brush glaze evenly over top and sides. Allow cake to absorb glaze. Repeat until glaze is used up. If you like, decorate the border with whipped cream before serving.



# Wine-of-the-Month

Want to give a gift of wine but aren't sure exactly what to give? Let us help. Our wine department is one of the most knowledgeable in the industry and they travel the world looking for great wines that will make a big impression on even the most discriminating palate but won't make a big impression on your wallet. Choose from two Wine-of-the-Month programs.

## MONTHLY - \$479.99 (PM 990747)

Each month we'll send out two bottles off wine, carefully chosen from our incredible selection. We'll send complete descriptions of the wines, possible food choices, and even appropriate toasts. Includes delivery in the continental US.

## SEMI-MONTHLY - \$239.99 (PM 990853)

Every other month we'll send out two bottles off wine, carefully chosen from our incredible selection. We'll send complete descriptions of the wines, possible food choices, and even appropriate toasts. Includes delivery in the continental US.

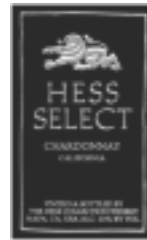
## WINE APPRECIATION KIT - \$99.99 (PM 991075)

Start your gift with this wonderful one-time addition of a wine appreciation kit. It includes 4 reidel all purpose wine glasses, A screwpull corkscrew, a wine decanter, and a can of Private Preserve (a nitrogen - carbon dioxide - argon wine preservation system). SPEC's Wine Appreciation Kit is available with the Wine-of-the-Month programs and separately.

A 5% discount will be given for cash, check or debit card payments. Sales tax is additional. **Please note: Delivery will not be made unless there is someone 21 or older to sign for the delivery.** Redelivery will incur additional charges.

# GREAT BUY ON WINE GLASSES

Sometimes you're good and sometimes you're lucky. On a recent purchase of wine glasses, SPEC's General Manager Mike Sanford was both good and lucky. Mike bought a truckload of **ONEIDA Diva Series** wine stems in four great styles and he got them at a super price. The glasses are a 27-ounce "Deep Red Glass" (a great size and shape for Cabernet, Bordeaux, Zinfandel, Merlot, or Syrah), a 21-ounce "Large Goblet" (super for red Burgundy, Pinot Noir, great white Burgundy and the biggest California or Australian Chardonnays), a 16-ounce "Large Wine" (a fine general purpose glass well-suited to most white wines and a good choice for Pinot Noir and red Burgundy), and a 7-ounce "Tall Flute Champagne Glass." They are lovely shapes and quite practical. All are made of lead free crystal, have smooth fire polished rims, and are dishwasher safe. Each style is just **\$24.95 per BOX OF FOUR** like glasses or **use your SPEC's KEY and pay just \$19.95 per box of four.** This is the best deal we've ever had on quality wine glasses. These will make fabulous gifts. (WHILE SUPPLIES LAST)



**HESS SELECT Chardonnay, California, 2000 12x750ml**

**\$8.25 per bottle \$91.85 per case**

**Come and get it! SPEC's has a great supply of this extremely popular, value-priced Chardonnay!**

## *From Spec's Humidor . . .*

**PARTAGAS BLACK LABEL PIRAMIDE - Dark maduro wrapper, extremely smooth smoke with full body and flavor, excellent draw.**

**CAO ROBUSTO MADURO - A box-pressed delicacy, flavorful and spicy, easy draw, a very fine smoke.**

**CAO GOLD CORONA - Smooth and mild with an excellent draw, quite enjoyable.**

**AVO SIGNATURE LONSDALE - A mild yet flavorful smoke with a very smooth draw.**

**AVO #9 MADURO - Full body and flavor with an easy draw, grows on you with each puff, nice aromas but not for the timid or novices.**

**PERDOMO RHOMBUS NATURAL - A box-pressed delight, flavorful and aromatic with a good draw, "fine stogie," hard to go wrong with this one.**

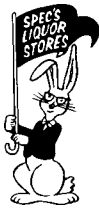
**PERDOMO RESERVE #5 MADURO - Strong, full-bodied, flavor, very aromatic, burns evenly with an excellent draw. A real cigar smoker's choice.**

**DON TOMAS DOMINICAN CORONA NATURAL - Very mild and aromatic, light flavor, good draw.**

**TE AMO TORO NATURAL - A rich and creamy cigar experience. Very, very good.**

Visit SPEC's **INCREDIBLE WALK-IN HUMIDOR** to see these and hundreds of other fine cigars. SPEC's stocks a large selection of high-quality cedar-lined humidors, travel and pocket humidors, Colibri and Prometheus lighters, and cigar scissors and snips. **And all CHEAP! Don't forget SPEC's 5% discount for cash!**





# TWELVE-UNDER-\$12.00

Sometimes you don't really want a "great" bottle of wine. Sometimes you just want a cheap bottle of wine and it wouldn't bother you at all if it were to taste really good. Not only do we understand,

we're in the same boat. We're always looking for that really good, really cheap bottle. "Really good" means the wine tastes like it costs more than it does. "Really cheap" always means under \$12.00. So here are twelve of our favorites, all priced under \$12.00.

**LOREDAN GASPARINI Prosecco Venegazzu (Italy), NV**  
12x750ML \$8.97 \$99.36  
(Prosecco is a dry sparkling wine from northern Italy.) Fresh, crisp, lemony Prosecco with hints of minerals and toast, it is ripe enough to have a rich texture but the minerals and lemony acidity keep it crisp and clean. Fresh and alive in the mouth, this is an excellent alternative to cheap US or Spanish sparkling wines. Very Good+. **SPEC's Score: 87 points.**

**Le FAUX FROG Merlot, VdP d'Oc (Limoux), 1999**  
12x750ML \$6.76 \$74.46  
Here's a clean, fresh, well-focused pure Merlot. Juicy and alive, it has lots of dark cherry fruit along with notes of earth, tobacco, and herbs. Well-structured with good length and a dry, somewhat chewy texture. From Todd Williams of Toad Hollow, this is what a good basic Merlot ought to taste like. Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 87 points.**

**CONCHA & TORO Xplorador Chardonnay, Casa Blanca (Chile), 2000**  
12x750ml \$5.77 \$64.25  
Delicious, balanced, juicy Chardonnay featuring plenty of peach-pear-apricot fruit with a hint of banana, a mineral note, and good mixed citrus acidity. The texture reveals a touch of wood and a nice bit of malo-lactic richness. This clean, focused, well-balanced, lively Chardonnay offers a great bang for your buck. Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 86 points.**

**MONTECILLO Vina Cumbre Blanco, Rioja (Spain), 2000**  
12x750ml 4.99 55.81  
Crisp, juicy white with notes of lemon, pear, lime, and minerals. The clean, lively flavors really linger in the mouth. Nothing fancy but quite tasty, this is a very nice, versatile, cheap white that will serve as an aperitif or go with a variety of seafood dishes. Very Good+. **SPEC's Score: 87 points.**

**CUVEE DE PENA, Vin de Pays des Pyrenees Orientales, 2000**  
12x750ml \$4.99 \$56.88  
(50% old-vine Carignan, blended with Grenache, Mourvedre, and Syrah) Grown about 25 miles north of the Spanish border and 25 miles inland from the Mediterranean, this medium-weight, well-balanced, unfiltered red offers plenty of richness, good dark grapy-juicy fruit and a nice mix of black pepper, subtle spice, and earth notes. Clean and dry, it finishes with a touch of chewy tannin. Very Good and a very consistent **BEST BUY. SPEC's Score: 86 points.**

**GRANT BURGE Shiraz, Barossa Valley (Australia), 1999**  
12x750ml \$9.99 \$110.69  
Ripe with good, ripe fruit and dark earth aromas on the nose. The palate is full of juice and flavor featuring black raspberry fruit accented with mixed white and black pepper. The texture is dusty dry with fresh crushed dark berry fruit tannins. More pepper and spice arrive on the mid-palate. Good length with a nice but not-too-heavy weight. Really tasty. Fine+. **SPEC's Score: 90 points.**

## Special for SPEC's KEY holders:

Buy a mixed case consisting of one 750ml bottle of each of our **November 2001 12-UNDER-\$12** selections for only **\$91.49**, a savings of **\$7.26** over SPEC's already low cash bottle price. **UPC: 00000143701.**

*Special price effective 11/1/01 thru 12/6/01.*

**NORTON Cabernet Sauvignon, Mendoza Valley (Argentina), 1999**  
12x750ml \$6.76 \$74.46  
Dusty dry Cabernet offering plenty of dark berry fruit well mixed with rustic notes of cedar, tobacco, and black pepper. The fruit is almost sweet in the mouth and adds a nice fruit perfume note that lingers into the long, flavorful finish. Really Very Good. **SPEC's Score: 87 points.**

**ECHELON Esperanza Vineyard Viognier, Clarksburg, 2000**  
12x750ml \$10.73 \$119.44  
Dusty perfumed nose. Juicy, rich, and ripe in the mouth with a lovely balance and texture. Lasts and lasts with lots of dry apricot and lemon drop fruit and only a hint of honeysuckle. Reminiscent of Savoie. Lovely light texture. Delicious. Fine+. **SPEC's score: 90+ points.**

**BELVEDERE Chardonnay, Sonoma County, 1999**  
12x750ml \$11.80 \$131.40  
Here's a fresh flavorful juicy Chardonnay featuring plenty of fruit in a classic "California" style - lots of banana with notes of pear and lime. The texture is ripe and rounded with lots of oak and malo-lactic character for a big feel but its cool Sonoma County acidity keeps it in balance. Fine. **SPEC's score: 88 points.**

**JEST Red (from Belvedere), North Coast, NV**  
12x750ml \$9.75 \$108.00  
This blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Carignan, Syrah, and Mourvedre results in a juicy ripe, flavorful red wine packed with sweet, dark, juicy fruit with a fine if somewhat rustic texture. It is fresh and lively in the mouth with good length and a touch of sweet fruit that lingers to the end. Satisfying and Fine. **SPEC's Score: 89 points.**

**Ch. JULIEN Cabernet Sauvignon, Monterey County, 1998**  
12x750ml \$8.25 \$91.85  
Ripe Cabernet featuring ample juicy dark berry-grapy fruit and good chewy purple grape tannin. Dry in the mouth but sweet with fruit, it makes me think of a sort of dry, adult version of Welch's purple grape juice. Does have a dusty oak component. Really lasts in the mouth. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 88 points.**

**MARTIN & WYRICH Moscato Allegro, California, 2000**  
12x750ml \$9.99 \$111.30  
This is a delicious, juicy, succulent, low alcohol (7%), classic (in the style of a good Moscato d'Asti) Muscat full of honey, honeysuckle, apricot, pear, melon, and lemondrop fruit. Long and balanced, it is alive in the mouth with a refreshing touch of carbon-dioxide but somehow manages a rich feel offering great tension and lots of hedonistic pleasure. Fine. **SPEC's Score: 89 points.**