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## WINE OF THE MONTH!



**Kono Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, 2009**  
\$9.99 cash

Tech: 13% Alcohol. 100% Sauvignon Blanc tank fermented using no ML and no oak. Green straw in color with good legs; dry, medium light-bodied with crisp acidity. Fresh and alive with citrus and pomegranate fruit. Lovely, sweet fruit and plenty of minerality. Crisp, vibrant, and alive.

### Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

By Charles M Bear Dalton



I write this on Monday March 1st at the desk in my room at the Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel west and a bit north of San Jose California. I'm here because I'll be joining the folks at Ridge Vineyards tomorrow to celebrate that winery's fiftieth anniversary. That's what got me to California when I would normally be preparing for opening night of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. While the events at both Ridge wineries - Monte Bello on Tuesday and Lytton Springs on Wednesday - will surely be the highlights of this visit to California, I had another highlight event earlier today.

Yesterday I drove down from Napa to Modesto. This morning, I had something of a "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" moment as three of us arrived at the Gallo Winery administration building for a tour of two of Gallo's central Valley wineries (Livingston and Modesto) and of their glass bottle manufacturing plant. I didn't need a golden ticket because I had an invitation. Nevertheless, I felt like a truly privileged guests as not too many people outside of Gallo employees get to visit these facilities.

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Inside This Issue: *Deli Specials, Delicious Mischief, Wine and Cheese of the Week & more!*

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With apologies to our tour guide Jordan Van Horn (a young, enthusiastic, and very knowledgeable Gallo Wine Ambassador and Modesto native son who for the purposes of my metaphor is consigned to the role of head oompa-loompa), Director of Wine + Spirits Education/Trade Hospitality Pat Dodd gets the role of host Willy Wonka. Our tour started with a drive out to the Livingston winery which our oompa-loompa Jordan informed us crushed 520,000 tons of grapes in the 2009 harvest. Five-hundred-and-twenty-THOUSAND TONS! That makes it the largest single location wine processing facility in the world. Almost as large is the Fresno facility which we did not visit. Gallo says the Fresno and Livingston wineries together process more grapes than all of the wineries in Australia combined. A contact in the wine-tech field had warned me that during harvest, driving down the road to Livingston was like walking across the floor in a movie theater badly in need of cleaning. Grape juice leaks everywhere and the truck tires carrying the grapes try to stick to the sticky surface.

The Livingston facility is a winery like any other except that it is HUGE. Rank after rank of tanks holding up to 600,000 gallons. Bladder presses that could hold a Ford F350 and a good-sized trailer. A computerized pipe switching board called "MOM" (Mother Of all Manifolds) to facilitate moving wine from tank to tank. An open-air "pilot winery" where everything is small-to-normal-sized in contrast to the massive scale of the rest of the facility. Bicycles everywhere because that is how the employees move around the facility. Something I have never before seen or even heard of: A "drag press" that gently moves grape pumice across a screen allowing more wine to run out without actually pressing the skins.

The winemaking operations that take place here are the same as those taking place at a typical boutique winery except some boutique wineries, equipment and all, could fit into one of those 600,000 gallon tanks. I did note that this winery looks like the winery equivalent of George Lucas "used space" found in the Star Wars movies. Everything is functional and even sturdy looking but it all looks well used and like it will be used again. Since now is a down time of the year for most Northern hemisphere wineries, there was lots of maintenance in process. By the way, the Livingston winery uses lots of oak but it is all in the form of chips and hanging staves (used along with micro-oxygenation or MOX). We didn't see any barrels at Livingston until we were leaving. Only then did we see two old barrels out in front near the sign-post. Jordan said they are the only barrels at that facility.

After Livingston, our oompa-loompa took us back to Modesto where we saw that facility's thirteen bottling lines at work and checked out the world's largest underground wood aging cellar. While down there, we tasted a bottle of one of my favorite Gallo wines – Hearty Burgundy (more about which later). We also got a tour of the warehouse. While it was conducted in a Suburban driven by oompa-loompa Jordan rather than in a train, we did twice cross a railroad track that runs through the middle of the forty acre warehouse. Our final stop of the morning was one of the five furnaces of Gallo's own glass plant in which they make all their own bottles and plenty to sell to other clients. I am not certain what I expected – certainly not Wonka's river of chocolate – but I was not disappointed.



After lunch at a good wine-oriented restaurant in Modesto (a booming city of over 250,000 including a 3,500 strong Gallo workforce) we went back for a tasting in Gallo's laboratory tasting room where Ernest and Julio used to meet the young winemakers and approve their blends. Due to my position as Spec's fine wine buyer, I think the Gallo folks were reluctant to serve me much that was made at the Central Valley facilities so, with associate winemaker for coastal winemaking Deborah Juergenson and Pat "Willy Wonka" Dodd, we tasted some of Gallo's north coast brands including MacMurray Ranch, Louis Martini, William Hill, Rancho Zabacco, and of course Gallo Estate. I like all of that (and some notes will follow but I was also hoping for some Rossi Merlot (silver medal at the 2009 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Wine Competition), Fairbanks White Port (my favorite cooking wine and not a bad sip on the rocks with a squeeze of lime), Fairbanks Red Port (the communion wine at the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany), Livingston Sangria (a 2010 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo medal winner), and of course, more Hearty Burgundy.



Why am I telling you all this? Because I think Gallo sometimes gets an undeserved bad wrap. Here are three Gallo Central Valley wine stories to make my point.

1) Back in the 1980s, I put together a small tasting of the best jug wines in the market. I bought 1.5 liter bottles of Gallo Burgundy and Chablis, Robert Mondavi red, Paul Masson Red, the red and white wines from "zipcode Burgundies" Valbon, Cuvee St. Pierre, l'Epayrié and more wines from Australia, Chile, and other value spots. The Gallo Hearty Burgundy easily won the red tasting with Paul Masson Burgundy a not too close second. The best white was the Cuvee St. Pierre. To this day, Hearty Burgundy – snob considerations aside – is still on of the world's greatest "bang-for-your-buck" quaffable reds. If you don't believe me, try it. A 1.5 liter bottle will set you back all of \$6.21 cash at Spec's on Smith Street.

2) Last year Gallo's Carlo Rossi Merlot won a silver medal at the 2009 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Wine Competition. Glazer's manager Wayne Hannah brought a bottle by for me to taste. I thought it was pretty good, especially for \$12.42 for a 5-Liter box. Then we got onto other business which included tasting some more wines. One of those other wines was a highly-rated, over \$50.00 Merlot. Not being able to resist, I poured some more Rossi and tasted it next to the fancy wine. Wayne and I both agreed that regardless of price, we preferred the Rossi. We got a couple of others to try both wines and they agreed as well. This wine is shockingly good – and much better than it has to be for the money.

3) At this year's Rodeo Uncorked event at Reliant center, I noticed that Livingston Sangria was one of the buckle winners being poured. At the end of the night, I wanted something to DRINK (not taste) so I went back and got a glass of Sangria. It was delicious and refreshing, alive with fruit and citrus flavors. Several people asked me what I was drinking. When I told them, some went and got glasses of the Sangria and quite enjoyed it. I can geek with the best of them but sometimes you just want something to drink. What's not to like?

So this was one of the coolest winery visits I have ever made. Seeing an operation that makes as much wine as they do at a high quality level – especially considering price – is impressive. Seeing the matter of fact way in which they go about their business and the dedication of the people involved makes it even more so. Here are my notes on the wines we tasted.

### MacMURRAY RANCH Pinot Gris, Sonoma Coast, 2008 12x750ml \$15.99 \$179.01

Tech: 13.9% Alc. 100% Pinot Gris fermented in stainless steel using no ML. Pale straw in color, bright and clear with well-formed legs; dry, medium-light-bodied with fresh acidity. Offers citrus and tree fruit with lime and pear, mineral earth, and accents of floral and a subtle spice. Very long finish. Delicious, vibrant, alive-in-the-mouth. *Really Fine. BS: 90. (Note: Class Champion buckle winner at 2010 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition.)*



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### MacMURRAY RANCH Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, 2008

--- Coming Soon ---

Tech: 14% Alcohol. 99% Chardonnay with 1% mixed white grapes, barrel fermented using full ML, sur-lie and batonage and aged six months in mixture of French, American and European oak. Yellow straw in color, bright and clear with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with balanced acidity. Offers banana-peach-apple-citrus fruit with earthy mushroomy terroir, discernible oak, and accents of floral, cream, and subtle vanilla. Very long finish; rich but still fresh. **Really Fine. BS: 90.**

### WILLIAM HILL ESTATE Chardonnay, Napa Valley, 2007

12x750ml \$19.50 \$216.81

Tech: 13.4% Alcohol. 99% Chardonnay with 1% mixed white (its a Gallo thing) fermented 25% in tank-and 75% in French and American oak barrels (50% new) with full ML and aged 7 months sur-lie with batonage. Yellow gold in color, bright and clear with well formed legs; at the threshold of dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity. Full of juicy, lively, rich, citrus-stone fruit-tree fruit with earthy mushroomy terroir, discernible oak, and accents of floral and creamy butter. Very long finish; delicious, refreshing, lovely-in-the-mouth. **Fine. BS: 89+.**

### WILLIAM HILL ESTATE "Bench Blend" Chardonnay, Napa Valley - Carneros, 2007

--- Coming Soon ---

Tech: 14.2% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay (Weimer Clone) fermented and aged 17 months in all oak barrels (83% new) fined and filtered bottling. "Bench blend" refers to the grapes being grown on a "bench" above the valley floor. Yellow straw in color, bright and clear with well formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity. Juicy, ripe, rich, citrus, tree fruit, tropical fruit Chardonnay with mushroomy earth, obvious oak, and accents of floral and lactic notes. Very long finish; focused, satisfying, lovely-in-the-mouth. **Excellent. BS: 91+.**

### GALLO FAMILY VINEYARDS Estate Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, 2005

--- Coming Soon ---

Tech: 13.8% Alcohol. 100% Chardonnay barrel-fermented using full ML, aged sur-lie for 12 months in all oak barrels (all French; all new). Yellow straw in color, bright and clear with well formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity and very light phenolics. Offers focused citrus, stone fruit, and tropical fruit with an earthy mineral, integrated oak, and floral accents with a subtle lactic note. Lively, clean, very long finish. Delicious, elegant, refreshing, alive-in-the-mouth. **Excellent. BS: 93+.**

### MacMURRAY RANCH Pinot Noir, Central Coast, 2008

12x750ml \$17.23 \$189.68

Tech: 13.7% Alcohol. 100% Pinot Noir. Purple-deep red in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-bodied with fresh acidity and medium plus phenolics. Dark, juicy, red & black cherry fruit with earthy mineral terroir, subtle oak, and accents of cola and black pepper. Long lively finish; refreshing, elegant, exciting. **Excellent. BS: 91+.**

### MacMURRAY RANCH Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, 2008

12x750ml \$19.97 \$219.78

Tech: 13.8% Alcohol. 100% Pinot Noir. Fermented in open tops with punch downs and aged 9 months in new and used French, American, and European oak barrels. Black-red in color with well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and medium plus phenolics. Dense, dusty, lively, juicy, red & black cherry berry fruit with mineral stony earth, dusty oak, and a note of cola. Very long finish. Delicious, elegant, focused. **Excellent. BS: 92.**

### WILLIAM HILL Estate Merlot, Napa Valley, 2006

12x750ml \$19.97 \$219.78

Tech: 13.8% Alcohol. A blend of 92% Merlot, 6% Dornfelder, and 2% Malbec aged 21 months in French oak barrels (38% new). Deep purple-red-black in color with well formed legs; dry, medium-full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Dense, developed, dusty black fruit offering black cherry & dark berry with earthy terroir, discernible oak, and accents of chocolate, black pepper, and dark spice. Very long finish. Focused, big, chunky-chewy but not inelegant. **Fine. BS: 89+.**

### WILLIAM HILL ESTATE Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 2006

12x750ml \$21.28 \$236.52

Tech: 82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 4% Petit Verdot, and 2% Cabernet Franc aged 17 months in barrel. Deep purple in color well formed legs; dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Dark, dense, rich, black & red fruit offering black raspberry, black cherry, and blackberry with dusty earthy, subtle oak, and accents of chocolate, black pepper, and tobacco. Long finish. **Really Fine. BS: 90+.**

### THE MONTE ROSSO ZINS

We tasted side by side three Zinfandels, any of which I am happy to drink on its own, from one of California's greatest vineyards - Monte Rosso - which the Gallo family got as part of their purchase of the Louis Martini Winery which had owned the vineyard since 1938. Monte Rosso is at the top of a ridgeline at the southern end of the Mayacamas mountain range that divides Napa and Sonoma. While it is technically in the Sonoma Valley AVA, there is nothing "valley" about this vineyard. While it was originally planted in the 1880s, several current blocks go back as far as the 1890s. It ranges in elevation from 700 to over 1200 feet. On a clear day, you can look south and see downtown San Francisco.

We tasted LOUIS MARTINI Monte Rosso "Gnarly Vine" Zinfandel 2006, RANCHO ZABACO Monte Rosso Zinfandel 2006, and RANCHO ZABACO Monte Rosso "Torreador" Zinfandel 2006. Each of these wines comes from different blocks in the Monte Rosso vineyard, each has a unique alcohol content and while the first two contain 2% Petite Sirah, the last contains 4% "Pets". I was anxious to taste all three in one tasting. Even though I have liked the Gnarly Vine before when drinking it by itself, I had a problem with it in this line up as it was a bit over the top for me with a pronounced volatile acidity character. Having said that, I would note that it was the favorite of the three for two of four my fellow tasters including Mr. Wonka. I was torn between the classic, even elegant Zabaco Monte Rosso Zinfandel and the riper, richer Torreador. I think I would prefer the former with dinner and the latter after dinner. These are classic wines from a classic vineyard with a several decade reputation for producing great Zinfandel (and Cabernet). I'd like to give you detailed notes on these but the truth is we got too busy enjoying them and discussing their similarities and differences.

I didn't leave with an "everlasting gob-stopper" but the memory of tasting those three 2006 Monte Rosso Zins may be the next best thing. ■



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