



... WHEN THE CONVERSATION IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE WINE

SUMMER 2015

# The Mad Scientist

## ...ON PERFECT SUMMER WINES

Summer is here and nothing is more relaxing than sitting on the deck with a glass of wine and good friends. Warm weather calls for a lighter wine, preferably chilled, which makes white and rosé wines great choices. And Middle Ridge is releasing two made-for-summer wines just in time – a 2014 Pinot Grigio and our very first rosé, a 2014 Vin Gris of Pinot Noir. We tracked down Winemaker Chris to learn more.

**Q:** *Your new releases are loaded with fruit aromas and flavors. How do you coax so much out of the grapes?*

**Chris:** It's all in the "care & feeding" of the wine. I start with what nature gives me in the fruit. Then I determine which yeast to use for fermentation. Different yeasts yield different aromatic compounds – some not as desirable as others. And, of course, I like to experiment. Starting in 2013, for instance, I used a native (wild) yeast called Zymaflore Alpha for the preliminary fermentation of my Pinot Grigio, and then I hit it with a commercial yeast. The results have been really great.

**Q:** *You use a second yeast? What is that for?*

**Chris:** Sometimes wild yeast doesn't ferment wine to dryness, which means you're left with a sweet wine, and that's just not my style. I add the commercial yeast to continue the fermentation until all of the sugar has been converted to alcohol.

**Q:** *Speaking of Pinot Grigio, how is the 2014 different from other years?*

**Chris:** At first I was a little worried about the 2014 harvest because the grapes were ripening so quickly. They're usually harvested mid-August, but they were ready to be picked almost a month early! The good news is that the timing was perfect in terms of certain measures I target – the ripeness of the seeds

corresponded with a sugar concentration of 23 degrees Brix, which is winemaking talk for 23 percent sugar. That produces a wine between 12 and 13 percent alcohol. At that level, white wine is refreshingly light and makes a great deck wine.

**Q:** *And tell us about the new Vin Gris of Pinot Noir.*

**Chris:** Interestingly enough, the Vin Gris and Pinot Grigio are similar in many ways – both are very aromatic and flavorful and both have a good acid structure that gives the wine fullness in the mouth. The Vin Gris even has pear aromas like my Pinot Grigios often have, although it has lychee aromas, too, and there's strawberry on the palate. It's crisp and refreshing ... and bone dry. If you pick up any sweetness, that's just your brain playing tricks on you because of the aromatics.

**Q:** *Why are some blush wines fuchsia pink and others pale salmon?*

**Chris:** It all depends on skin contact after crush. Most wine grapes have purple skins, and the longer you keep the grape skins in the juice, the deeper the color of your blush wine. However, the color is unstable and some of it will fall out in cold stabilization. It can be a little tricky if you're shooting for a particular color. With our Blue's Creek Pinot Grigio, for instance, the grapes are purple and the juice is a pale blush at crush, but the wine itself has no pink hue. Well, except for one year (smiles).

**Q:** *The new releases sound wonderful.*

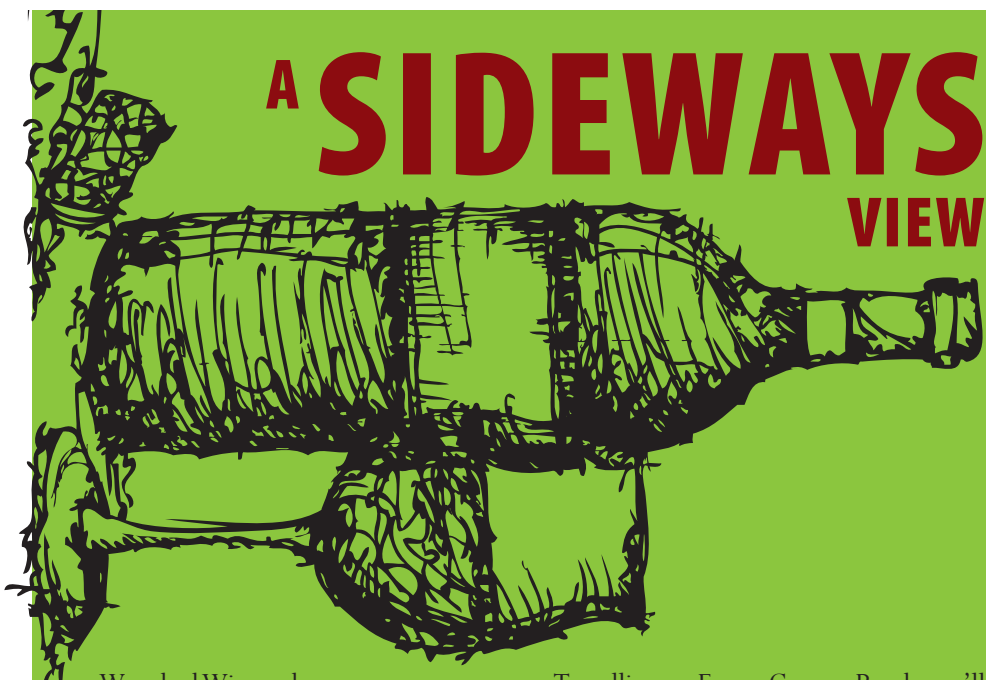
**Chris:** I sure think so. Let's head out to the deck!



Wine in the



# A SIDEWAYS VIEW



We asked Winemaker Chris what he thought about the wildly popular wine flick *Sideways*, and he replied, “Cute movie, but it took Merlot and Pinot Noir wine sales and flipped them, destroying the popularity of Merlot.”

True story. Merlot was disparaged by the character Miles in *Sideways* which led to a real life collapse in Merlot sales. Wine pourers got used to hearing stuffy wine patrons telling them to pour “anything but Merlot.”

What many don’t know is that Merlot got the final laugh in that movie. It turns out Miles’ coup de grâce bottle – the one he had faithfully saved at the bottom of his closet for decades – was a 1961 Cheval Blanc. Chateau Cheval Blanc is located in the St. Emilion appellation in the Bordeaux region of France and is well known for its Premier Grand Cru Classé wines made exclusively from Cabernet Franc and yes, MERLOT!

*Sideways* also spurred the fame of Santa Rita Hills, home to the Pinot Noirs made famous in the movie. This region began its claim to fame as the Santa Ynez AVA with stellar Chardonnays and Cabernet Sauvignons in the early 1980s. However, since *Sideways*, Pinot Noir is widely poured in the tasting rooms, restaurants and bistros of Los Olivos, Solvang and Buellton.

Travelling up Foxen Canyon Road, you’ll find Pinot Noir on the tasting menu of almost every winery.

Pinot Noir grapes are finicky and hard to grow with consistent success. It is a thin skinned grape and needs cool ocean breezes, a temperate growing season and almost perfect soil to reach its potential. It’s a wimp of a grape really... you won’t find Pinot Noir clinging to a steeply terraced hillside like Cabernet Franc or Merlot often do.

Pinot Noir also needs a highly skilled winemaker to turn it into a drinkable wine. Because it is so finicky, it often ripens at undesired sugar levels, called degrees Brix, forcing a winemaker to jump through hoops in the fermentation process to keep enough acid in the finished wine. What worked well on last year’s harvest almost always has to be tweaked for the next harvest because even with age, Pinot Noir vines are known to be inconsistent from year to year.

Two of our new wines are from both sides of the *Sideways* spectrum: Vin Gris of Pinot Noir (a blush) sourced out of Santa Rita Hills and a worthy Merlot from the very well regarded Russian River Valley located in the heart of Sonoma. Both are excellent wines. Enjoy!

## ROSÉ WINE – SWEET OR DRY?

When a rosé is poured, you generally expect the wine to be on the sweet side, but it wasn’t always this way. The first wines made by the ancient Greeks were rosé and extremely dry. As wine methods evolved, rosé wines continued to be popular because the red wines of the day were very tannic.

After World War II, rosé wines took a sweet turn when two Portuguese wine houses introduced sweet, slightly sparkling rosés to the U.S. market. Who doesn’t remember the iconic Mateus bottle?

In the meantime, grape producers in the states were making names for their wines. In 1975, winemaker Bob Trinchero at Sutter Home experienced a “stuck fermentation”, which is what happens when the yeast dies off before turning all the sugar to alcohol. This mistake turned into their well-known White Zinfandel – the mass produced wine that would give rosés a bad name! Middle Ridge’s 2014 Vin Gris of Pinot Noir takes us back to the traditional dry style rosé. It’s a beautiful salmon pink color, has perfectly balanced acids, wonderful lychee and pear aromas, and strawberries on the palate. Yum, start the barbeque!



## Introducing... *Lily Rock Cellars*

There’s a new wine label in the Middle Ridge family: Lily Rock, named after Idyllwild’s most prominent and well-known landmark. Also known as Tahquitz Rock, this huge monolith of granite was made legend by native tribes who told tales of disappearing maidens and boulder battles between braves and an evil chief that tore deep holes in the earth, forming the local lakes. Today it is a favorite of rock climbers as the sheer granite pitches offer some of the best routes for free climbing.

The U.S. Geological Service renamed the rock formation Lily Rock in 1898 and many attribute this to the fact that Tahquitz is used as the name for so many other geological features. Many speculate they chose “lily” due to the light color of the rock and because it resembles a closed lily when viewed from a distance.

Chris laughs when asked why he chose the name Lily Rock over Tahquitz Rock. “Lily Rock easier to say! Also, we use Tahquitz as the proprietary name for our Cinsaut blends. Lily Rock wines are wonderfully aromatic and flavorful, just not as intense – not as big and bold – as our Middle Ridge wines. I think folks looking for a lighter wine – whether it’s to go with a particular dish or whether it’s simply their preference in wines – are going to love it.”



The first wine to be released under the Lily Rock label is a 2009 Merlot.

Merlot is a sibling of Cabernet Sauvignon and both share Cabernet Franc as their proud papa. It is one of the five grapes of Bordeaux used in any combination in the popular Meritage blends. Merlot’s mother is a little known, but prolific grape varietal called

Madeleine de Noire Charentes. She also begat Malbec, another Bordeaux varietal.

The fruit in our Lily Rock 2009 Merlot hails from the esteemed Russian River Valley. An intoxicating bouquet of cherries greets your nose and carries through in the taste of this delightful wine. It is silky smooth on the tongue with flavors of lush Bing and bright red cherries, and finishes with an undertone of well-developed tannins – no bite here! There’s a hint of northern California produce throughout, reminiscent of baby spinach, which adds to the complexity of this wine.

It is the perfect match for a bacon-wrapped filet mignon with grilled asparagus. On the lighter side, a salad of baby spinach, dried cherries, roasted walnuts and crumbled feta with a warm bacon dressing and crusty sourdough garlic bread would pair nicely.

## PUNTS: TRADITION OR NECESSITY?

Have you ever wondered why some wine bottles have a large indentation in the bottom?

The indentation is called by numerous names, but “punt” is the most widely recognized in the wine industry. One popular theory is that Dom Perignon, the French champagne producer, got tired of the bottoms of his bottles blowing out during the secondary fermentation of sparkling wine that takes place in the bottle. Punts strengthen a bottle and allow it to stand up to internal pressure.

Another line of thought holds that punts serve to consolidate sediment at the bottom of the bottle in a ring. Or it could be simply aesthetics, a throwback to a time when bottles were hand blown and the pontil – the iron rod which holds molten glass while it is shaped – left this indentation.

Whatever the reason, wine stewards love them: when mastered, pouring wine while keeping your thumb in the punt is a great visual. It is also easy to have a catastrophic accident if botched!

There is no convention that dictates what wine should go into a bottle with a punt and Winemaker Chris uses both styles when bottling.







# Behind the Cellar Doors



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Come taste Middle Ridge wines at Crush & Brew in Old Town Temecula, which serves as our tasting room, and at special events in Idyllwild.



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While everyone knows how much fun it is to belly up to the tasting bar, many are unaware of what goes on behind the cellar doors – the long hours and hard work that go into bringing grapes from the vineyard to the bottle.

As if making traditional wine isn't difficult enough, Winemaker Chris embarked on a line of ready-to-drink sparkling cocktails a couple years ago that quickly became a hit. It's called Cocktails Sur Lie (CSL) and is made using a technique generally reserved for use at champagne houses – a second fermentation that takes place inside the bottle to create those wonderful tiny bubbles that make sparkling wine so festive.

A new batch of The Mule was recently started behind those mysterious cellar doors! It's based on the classic cocktail called the Moscow Mule which is made with ginger beer and vodka and a splash of simple syrup. Our version is made with Muscat wine grape juice that is co-fermented with freshly sliced ginger and Cascade hops. Imagine slicing 400 pounds of fresh ginger! Fragrant and messy, cheesecloth bags were filled with the sliced ginger, and Chris climbed the scaffolding looking a bit like Santa Claus with the bag slung over his shoulder before tossing it into the tank of Muscat wine grape juice.

The hops were easy – just poured them from the box into netted bags, tied them up, and sent Chris off on another one of his "bombs away" missions.

Once the initial fermentation is completed, the ginger and hops will be removed. The wine will be bottled and a sugar-and-yeast mixture added to each bottle to begin the secondary fermentation. Later, the sediment produced by the secondary fermentation will be removed and the bottle will be topped with vodka made from grapes – the only kind of vodka allowed in winemaking. And voila! More Mule will be ready!

Another popular member of the CSL line is Pomiscuous. It is made from Barbera wine grape juice and pomegranate juice that is co-fermented with hibiscus flowers, bay leaves and black peppercorns, and topped with brandy. Truly unique.

Both are decidedly different and incredibly delicious, and both pair well with grilled foods. So grab a few bottles, chill well and head to the barbeque!