



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

SUMMER 2011

# Conversations with Chris

by Ashley Ludwig

Enjoying friends and a good conversation has always been Chris Johnston's touchstone when it comes to wine. Even the back labels on his wines are a conversation between Chris and friends – sometimes whimsical, other times educational, and always they speak to the heart of Middle Ridge Winery owners, Chris and Melody Johnston.

One might not expect to sit and have a deliciously juicy burger with one of Southern California's most intriguing winemakers, but in June, the weather was ideal, and he was hungry – so to Mad Madeline's in Old Town Temecula we went. It's right across the street from his home away from home: The Collective, a premium wine lounge that serves as the Middle Ridge's tasting room.

Today, we catch up on a conversation we started a few weeks ago on the subject of the great flavors in one of my favorite Middle Ridge wines – the 2009 Mistik – and we end up discussing, of all things, the wonder of wine barrels.

**Me:** This time of year, I'm a huge "deck wine" fan.

**Chris:** Mmm. (*He nods.*) Deck wines. There's nothing like sitting out on the deck on a lazy afternoon with the wind in the trees, good friends, and a great wine like a crisp, clean Sauvignon Blanc or a Blue's Creek Pinot Grigio.

**Me:** The 2009 Mistik, that's my new fave deck wine! Loved it at the Taste of Temecula Valley, although my deck experienc-

es are a little different than yours – more around the fire pit while the kids are playing on the swing set! The Mistik is perfect in its clarity, and it's so distinctive with its almost clear color and refreshing flavors – like white grapefruit and lemongrass!

**Chris:** Those are surprising, aren't they? They're a product of the fermentation and the final cold-stabilization processes. It's all about watching, testing, and monitoring the fermentation process, and loving the wine along until it's perfect.

**Me:** I love the color. I mean the total clarity. Just like breathing fresh mountain air!

**Chris:** Keeping it mountain-air friendly is what it's all about.

**Me:** The whites are one thing, but your reds! I've fallen in love with the Cabernet Franc, and now – Devil's Slide Merlot! I know the barrel plays a part in that lovely balance, and developing a wine's personality...

*(Chris's eyes brighten as he waits for me to finish, but I can tell he has a word of wisdom, something more to teach.)*

**Me:** There's more to it than that. I can tell by the look on your face.

**Chris:** It's not just the barrel, but where the wood is grown, how, and why. (*Chris leans back in his seat, chomping thoughtfully and continues.*) Our barrel rep is a French guy – his name's Arnaud Marjollet of Tonnellerie d'Aquitaine (*the French accent rolls off his tongue with ease*). Arnaud knows more about French oak than anyone I've

ever met. In fact, the barrels we use were made from forests that Napoleon originally planted for the purpose of growing ship masts. (*A history lesson commences!*)

**Me:** (*Listening, while my mind wanders to the forests of France.*) And, how does that help the wine?

*(Chris can spy a willing student, and thus my education on barrel creation begins. I leave with an audio file of Arnaud Marjollet's dissertation on barrel making, visions of rich fruit aging in slow toasted woods, and the amazing creations this winemaker concocts by trial, error, and that all powerful "secret sauce" of his award winning process.)*

**Me:** So, you've obviously found your secret ingredient.

**Chris:** One of my secret ingredients... You betcha. (*He winks, then adds*) It's mostly patience and care.

We finish our burgers and talk on life, the universe, and everything. We say goodbye, and I drive away thinking of our conversation.

Chris Johnston is not just a master conversationalist and a student of life and all things wine, but he makes our lives a little better by making great wine for us all to enjoy.



IDYLLWILD

# Wine in the Times

# OVERHEARD

## @MIDDLERIDGE...ON YOUTUBE

**Middle Ridge wine started a conversation that just keeps going.**

Recently, we created an array of videos from events and conversations with the winemaker that are now available for viewing online. The following clips are “overheard” segments. Check our newsletter’s list of links, or go to our Facebook Fan Page, to see for yourself what’s cooking at Middle Ridge.



ON CORKS

*“...I know right when we hear the cork pop open, [ploikk!] we’re gonna have a good time.”*

**Michael Bommarito**  
Anela Apothecary

**Chris Johnston** dishes on cork: “...synthetic [corks] just look cheesy. Natural cork, that’s the way to go. I get mine from a Portuguese company...clean cork with a low failure rate. Cork taint happens, but it’s rare — you lose about 1% of your bottles. I look at technical cork with disdain! Bad cork falls apart in the bottle...you have to push it in, and then you have cork floating about. That’s no fun.” [View the whole video on YouTube.](#)

“One of my favorite things to do is cook with my Middle Ridge wine, tag teaming it with good food and keeping it fun. It’s just a natural combination. Pair wine with whatever you enjoy. Just enjoy the wine.” ~**Chris Johnston**, cooking up something tasty in the kitchen! – [View the whole video on YouTube.](#)

**Marilyn Wrye-Tipps** discusses why she enjoys Middle Ridge’s white wines:  
*“...[Middle Ridge’s white wines are] crisp, clean, great after a long day of work. Refreshing and relaxing...”*



ON WHITE DECK WINES

Chris Johnston agrees: “At Middle Ridge, we like to call them deck wines. Each bottle is light, crisp, refreshing on a hot summer day, and meant to be consumed in good company. Designed for drinking while you’re outside, enjoying life.” [View the whole video on YouTube.](#)

**We couldn’t agree more! Follow these and other conversations on YouTube. Sign up for Middle Ridge video updates!**

# Summer Releases

Hold on to your hats. The reserve wines are coming. Aside from the “Wow!” factor, these reserve varietals are some of the finest you’ll taste. What makes a wine a reserve?

**Chris had this to say:**

*Excellent balance. Balance, as in extended barrel aging for tannin management, careful harvest planning for acid balance, and the proper oak choices for color management and aroma and flavor input. With first-use barrels, you also have the added benefit of savoring fruit aromas first, before the aromas leached by the barrel. Each reserve wine is lovingly managed with proper care and feeding, as you would expect from Middle Ridge wines.*

One almost gets the feeling that Middle Ridge is stirring up conversation by pairing dueling varietals from different parts of Southern California. Paso Robles is being matched, grape for grape, with Temecula Valley! Here’s the lineup:

**2008 Reserve Merlot**  
*Paso Robles*

Thick and rich, with essence of black blackberries, black cherries, and black pepper, with a touch of vanilla on the finish.

**2008 Reserve Merlot**  
*Temecula Valley*

Black currant, well balanced, with a lingering, velvet finish.

**2008 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**  
*Paso Robles*

Black currants, dark blackberries, and coconut aromas.

**2008 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**  
*Temecula Valley*

Aromas of black cherries, ripe plums that morph into licorice, vanilla, and even mocha.

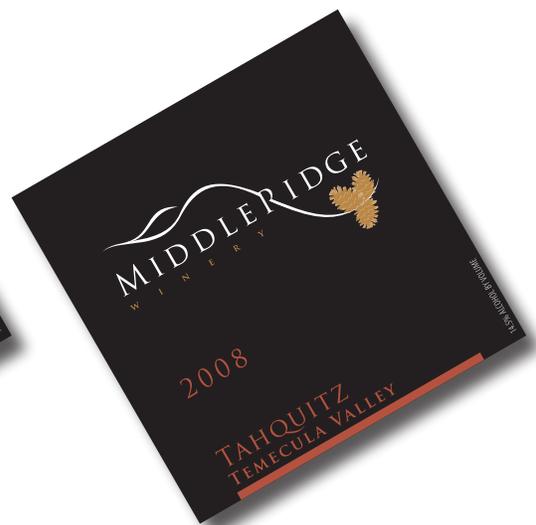
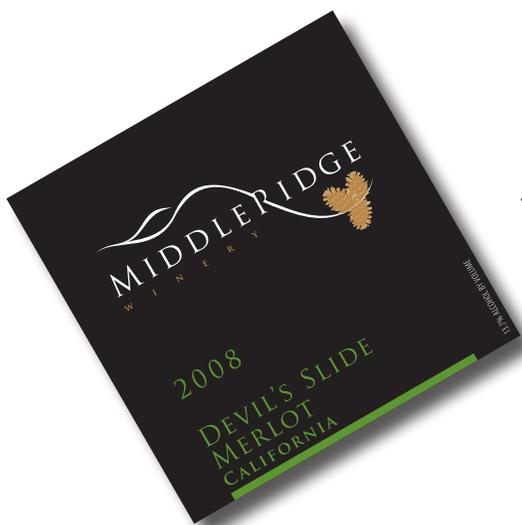
**2008 Reserve Petite Sirah**  
*Paso Robles*

This limited edition wine is from a vineyard given over to rescued, wild horses. Truly special, with lush berry nose, tannin smoothness that comes from aging in French oak, and a deep, black color.

**Stay tuned to weigh in on what’s sure to be a lively discussion at upcoming summer events!**

# What's in a Name?

Middle Ridge Winery – of Idyllwild, California – when it comes time to create the label and name the wine, artisan winemaker Chris Johnston sticks close to home, naming many of his wines after landmarks and favorite Idyllwild haunts. If you haven't had the pleasure, make your way up the mountain to taste them, or see them, for yourself!



**DEVIL'S SLIDE** – a California Merlot named for the hiking trail up to Tahquitz peak, which has been overheard to be called "...a significant and spectacular all day adventure."

**Wine Notes:**

Merlot is always a fan favorite. This one is so easy on the palette, it slides right down. With the smooth tannins and good acid balance, you can see what 24 months in French oak will do for you. Thank you, may I have another?

**DARK CANYON** – This delicious California Cabernet Sauvignon is named for one of the more popular campgrounds in Idyllwild's San Bernardino National Forest.

**Wine Notes:**

Ah! This Cabernet delights with aromas of black currants, plums, spice and mocha. Fit for royalty – the label rightfully declares.

**TAHQUITZ** – a Temecula Valley Cinsaut blend – named after the legendary Idyllwild rock outcropping, and a focal point of all things Idyllwild, the headquarters of Middle Ridge Winery.

**Wine Notes:**

Well named for a wine that can stand on its own feet. The gold medal award winning 2008 is going fast and only a few cases remain! With bright cherry and allspice aromas and soft tannins, this wine is delightful. To be expected of a wine allowed to age in 100% French oak for 18 months.

**WINE CLUB MEMBERS' CORNER**

Wine club members, Rich & Kelly Dickerson, have this to say about Middle Ridge wine:

*"[Chris Johnston] was behind the bar, pouring, the first time we walked into The Collective. He was warm, social, easy to talk to, and I could tell he was very passionate about his wines. We had such a great time, we joined his wine club on the spot, and he didn't even ask!"*

~The Dickerson's



**SUMMER WINE CLUB SHIPMENT**

**MIXED CLUB** (all new releases)

- 2010 Pinot Grigio (Temecula Valley)
- 2008 Dark Canyon, Cabernet Sauvignon (California)
- 2008 Devil's Slide, Merlot (California)

**RED ONLY CLUB**

- 2008 Dark Canyon, Cabernet Sauvignon (California)
- 2008 Devil's Slide, Merlot (California)
- 2008 Syrah (Temecula Valley)



**Middle Ridge wines available at:**

Middle Ridge Winery at  
The Collective  
28544 Front Street  
Temecula, CA

In Idyllwild at:  
Selected Restaurants,  
Idyll Awhile Wine  
Shoppe & Bistro, and  
Mountain Top Liquor Store

Online:  
[www.middleridge.com](http://www.middleridge.com)

## RIVERSIDE INTERNATIONAL WINE COMPETITION

**2008 Tahquitz**  
*Cinsaut*  
Temecula Valley



This is our second Tahquitz, named after a legendary rock outcropping in Idyllwild, California, the headquarters of Middle Ridge Winery. True to the characteristics of a Cinsaut, Tahquitz is a medium bodied wine with lots of fruitiness and soft tannins. It exhibits bright red cherry aromas and flavors along with a touch of raspberry and a hint of rose. It also has a nice allspice aroma that's the result of aging in 100% French oak for 18 months. Tahquitz is a wonderful drinking wine – it's designed to enjoy alone, but it works well with many foods, especially a wood-fired grilled chicken or grilled whitefish. Also try it for brunch with a bell pepper and ham omelette or pasta alla carbonara.

\$26/bottle Production: 50 cases

*Note: Low inventory of this wine. If it is sold out, Chris suggests trying the 2008 Syrah.*

**2008 The Mountain**  
*Cabernet Franc*  
California



Cabernet Franc is known for its smooth drinkability and spicy nose, and this one is no exception. It has fruit-forward aromas of red cherries, blueberries, and a hint of raspberry along with a slightly dusty nose. It has good Cabernet Franc spice in the nose with a burst of fruit on the palate. The oak integration is wonderfully smooth with a nice fruit finish and a gentle vanilla aroma wrapped around it all. The acid structure combined with the tannins help this wine stand up to just about anything. The Mountain is screaming for a nice thick steak. Add some mushrooms sautéed in garlic butter and a baked potato, and you've got a meal fit for a king (or queen!). Or if you're like Winemaker Chris, you'll just drink it all by itself.

\$28/bottle Production: 44 cases

*Note: Extremely low inventory of this wine. If it is sold old, Chris suggests trying the 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon.*

Come taste Middle Ridge wines at  
The Collective wine bar in  
Old Town Temecula,  
which serves as our tasting room,  
and at special events in Idyllwild.



The Collective  
28544 Old Town Front Street  
Temecula, CA 92590



[www.middleridge.com](http://www.middleridge.com)

## MIDDLE RIDGE GOES SOCIAL



*If you tweet, follow us on Twitter: @MiddleRidgeWine*

*Or, if Facebook is where you hang out, "Like" us on Facebook and see what new videos pop up!*

*Facebook friends of Middle Ridge have the added benefit of being able to chat with the winemaker and Middle Ridge family, as well as getting first hand updates on special events.*

*By the way, if you happen to spy a mythical creature enjoying a glass of Middle Ridge wine in any of our videos, drop us an e-mail!*

*Who knows, there might be a prize for the first responder!*

*E-mail your answer to: [WineTalk@MiddleRidge.com](mailto:WineTalk@MiddleRidge.com)*

### LINKS

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