

Wine of the Week

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FLYING CIGARS AND GREAT WINE

The story behind the name of California white wine Le Cigare Blanc is absurd - but its value is anything but
By Nick Passmore

In 1954 the village of Châteauneuf-du-Pape in France's Rhone valley passed a decree that must rank as one of the world's greatest all-time absurdist legislative efforts and, when you think about it, the competition is pretty tough. It forbade "les cigars volants" - literally flying cigars but more accurately flying saucers - from landing anywhere within the village precincts.

One hesitates to speculate on what might have provoked the honest peasants - and vigneronns too, for it is a famous wine village - to enact this wonderfully bizarre government initiative, but one only hopes it wasn't a surfeit of their excellent wine. Whatever the motivation though, the decree - unlike many such well-intentioned government initiatives - seems to have had its desired affect: CNP has mercifully remained a flying-saucer-free zone ever since.

We must now fast-forward to Santa Cruz, Calif., in 1986 where maverick winemaker, passionate exponent of Rhone Valley wines, founder of Bonny Doon Vineyard, and all-round absurdist himself, Randall Grahm, released his first wine, a red Rhone blend named Le Cigare Volant.

Think Peaches and Cantaloupes

A few years later he followed it up with a white version, Le Cigare Blanc, and it remains one of my favorite California whites. I opened a bottle, Le Cigare Blanc 2007 (\$22), the other day and was once again amazed by the overwhelming explosion of lush, ripe fruit flavors this wine displays - think peaches and cantaloupes in summer, or comice pears in the fall. But it's not just a fruity, sweet dessert wine. Far from it. There's also a fine backbone of citrusy acidity that leads to a long, completely dry, and hugely satisfying finish.

And don't miss the discreet cigare volant looming like a malevolent insect in the upper left corner of the label. Absurd? Indeed, but a delectable wine nonetheless.

WOW Rating: ★★★★★

When to Drink: Now, and for the next couple of years.

Breathing/Decanting: An hour's breathing will help but not essential.

Food Pairing: Richer fish dishes, lobster and crab, and anything in a cream sauce.

Grapes: 64% roussanne, 36% grenache blanc.

Appellation: White Wine of the Earth

Region: California

Country: U.S.

Price: \$22

Availability: Good

Web Site: www.bonnydoonvineyard.com

See more wines at www.nickonwine.com.

Nick Passmore is an independent wine writer and consultant based in New York. For five years he contributed a widely read monthly wine column to Forbes.com, in addition to which his work has appeared in such publications as Forbes, Discover, Town & Country, the Robb Report, the Wine Enthusiast, Saveur, Sky, and Golf Connoisseur. He is currently Artisanal Editor for Four Seasons magazine and contributes the Nick Passmore: Wine of the Week column to BusinessWeek.com. He is also a judge at the widely respected annual Critics' Challenge wine competition.