

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



## SCHAEFER ON WINE : Palmina: 'Wine is an extension of the plate'

by Dennis Schaefer

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Winemaker Steve Clifton is a busy guy. You may have heard of him: He's one-half the team of the near cult winery Brewer-Clifton. You may not know that he's been involved with making wine in Italy, Argentina and Washington state. But along with his wife, Chrystal, he also has an interesting winery called Palmina, solely devoted to Italian varietals. The couple's interest in all things Italian is so great that they were wed in the Friuli region of Italy four years ago.

Mr. Clifton emphasizes that he's not trying to mimic the Italian version of those grapes; rather, he's trying to take those Italian grapes and reinterpret them, given the growing conditions and vineyard sites of Santa Barbara County, which remind him of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia grape-growing region of Italy. While he truly respects Italian tradition, he doesn't go strictly by the book. Instead, he makes the wines with a nod to how wine is viewed in Italian culture, meaning every wine is made with food in mind. Or as Mr. Clifton likes to put it, "Wine is an extension of the plate."

Some thoughts on recent Palmina releases:

- Pinot Grigio, Honea Vineyard 2007 (\$22): If you have sipped that popular pinot grigio imported from Italy, you might be interested in the Santa Barbara County Palmina version, which tastes like the real deal. Stainless-steel fermented to preserve the delicate aromas and flavors, it's spritzy and refreshing with great natural acidity and shows a fine concentration of pear, peach and apricot flavors, with just a tinge of honey, as well as minerality and a deft herbalness.
- Tocai Friulano, Honea Vineyard 2007 (\$24): You may not be familiar with this Italian varietal, though it is related to sauvignon blanc, but the result is decidedly different. Like the pinot grigio, this wine was fermented in stainless steel to retain its varietal character. The perfume is of apple, pear and white flower blossoms, while the flavors are of lush pear and peach, along with a seasoning of fennel, tarragon, almond and honey. Tocai friulano is perhaps the most versatile white wine to put on your dining table.
- Arneis, Honea Vineyard 2006 (\$22): I hate to make this analogy for fear of misleading you, but arneis (from the grape of the same name) is Palmina's "chardonnay." In other words, this is a bigger, bolder and richer white wine that easily complements the same dishes that chardonnay does. It starts with white acacia, jasmine and honeysuckle on the nose. Two-thirds of the wine ages for about six months in neutral oak, which lends a creaminess to the palate. Flavors of lemon peel, kiwi, tangerine and almond are engaging and the Averna bitters-like twist on the finish is a savory surprise.
- Dolcetto, Santa Barbara County 2006 (\$20): Dolcetto is Italy's beaujolais, but, again, maybe that's a bad analogy. However, the Palmina version is just so exuberant on the nose (like a good beaujolais), it jumps right out of the glass, with raspberry, cherry and red plum aromas. Most of the fruit aromatics are echoed in the flavors, with raspberry and plum leading the way to a mid-palate sweet spot. This wine comes on like a liquid fruit tart without the crust, and it's ready to quaff right now. Chill it just a bit before serving.
- Barbera, Santa Barbara County 2006 (\$22): The barbera is a sturdier wine with more stuffing, beginning with its ripe plum, blackberry and black currant nose and a top spin of black shoe polish (remember the old liquid Kiwi brand?). This mouth-coating wine is also more concentrated with blueberry, dark plum and black cherry flavors, bolstered by sweet oaky vanilla and hints of mushroom and cocoa powder. Well-balanced with integrated tannins, this is definitely a go-to wine for pizza, polenta and pasta.

- Nebbiolo, Stolpman Vineyard 2004 (\$40): Nebbiolo is the prized grape of Italy's long-lived barolos and barbarescos, and it's the big kahuna of the Palmina lineup. After fermentation, the wine spends a year in small oak barrels, half of which are new, and then it spends another two years in large oak oval uprights. After bottling, it rests for several months before release. The wait is worth it. Cranberry, plum and rose petal aromatics give the impression of lightness, delicacy and sweetness. But, once in the mouth, it comes through with depth and power. Black cherry and raspberry are the flavor calling cards mixed in with a sense of under brush, mushrooms, summer Mediterranean herbs and orange peel. Decant an hour before drinking to bring out all the nuances of this beauty.
- Savoia 2005 (\$50): Savoia is the name given to this unconventional red wine blend: half nebbiolo, with the remaining equal parts of barbera and syrah. According to Mr. Clifton, nebbiolo gives the wine structure, barbera contributes acidity and syrah brings on a comfort zone of fruit. Sweet, ripe fruit is immediately evident with both red and dark plum, raspberry and blackberry in the mix. Swirl again and black cherry, mushroom and baked cherry pie might come through. Then like a symphony crescendo, the oak spices rise to soften the wine up on the finish. This one comes at you in layers and while it's a great palate-pleaser right now, it will evolve with some time in the cellar.
- Santita 2005 (\$50, half bottle): This is the Palmina version of vin santo, a dessert-style wine, made in the traditional way, by harvesting malvasia bianca grapes and then setting them out on mats and drying racks for 120 days to dehydrate. As it does so, the moisture of the grapes evaporates, leaving only the concentrated sweetness behind. It's then pressed and put into a single neutral oak barrel for two years where it slowly oxidizes. Burnished almond in color, it shows flavors of orange blossom and nectarine aided and abetted by orange peel, clove, dried apricot, vanilla and almond. Viscous with great length and depth on the palate, this is truly what the honeyed nectar of the gods must be like.

*Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. E-mail him at [life@newspress.com](mailto:life@newspress.com).*