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Shaking up the cab sav status quo

By DALE ROBERTSON, WINE WRITER

Updated 04:52 p.m., Tuesday, November 8, 2011

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CRAIG H. HARTLEY TOP TIER: 2009 Educated Guess Cabernet Sauvignon Photo: Craig Hartley / Copyright: Craig H. Hartley



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WHAT I'M DRINKING

Who: Brina D'Amico Donaldson, co-owner of D'Amico's Italian Market Café, 5510 Morningside in Rice Village and 2802 White Oak in the Heights

What: Sartori Ferdi

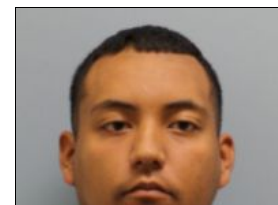
Why: From Italy's Veneto, Ferdi is one of

Mark Albrecht bet his house and pretty much everything in it that he could "upset the Napa Valley wine hierarchy" and bring to market a high-quality cabernet sauvignon made from premium vineyard fruit for less than \$20.

After borrowing all he could from friends and family members - his mother and his wife included - Albrecht even sold his home to raise money so he could launch his Roots Run Deep Winery in 2005. He swears he was prepared to live out of his pickup if necessary to bring the project to fruition.

Albrecht is now five vintages into his big gamble, and he appears to have guessed right. The 2009 Educated Guess, currently at Spec's for \$15.39 cash, could be his best yet, he suggests, and that's

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my favorite white wines right now because of its complexity. Yes, it is a white wine, refreshing and cool, but it is also has body, like a Valpolicella, also produced in the Veneto. It doesn't have the characteristics that we Houstonians are looking for in a "great summer white wine" like sauvignon blanc because it spends time in both stainless steel tanks and oak barrels during its aging process. This is a good choice for white wine lovers year round, pairing perfectly with pastas and meat dishes alike. Buy it: \$27 for the bottle at both restaurants

THE GRAPEVINE GRAND FÊTE

18 courses: Spec's is sponsoring and Stella Sola, 1001 Studewood, is hosting an 18-course dinner at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday. The food will be prepared by chef Brian Caswell, and wines will be presented by Randy Snowden of Snowden Vineyards, Robin Lail of Lail Vineyards, Shirley Roy of Roy Estate and Abe Schoener of the Scholium Project and Clos Thales. Also, Spec's Nate Rose will present three Kapcsandy Family Winery wines, including the 2008 State Lane Grand Vin, a 100-point Parker wine. The evening finishes with Todd Cromwell's presentation of three Ports from Kopke, the Douro's oldest estate, founded some 400 years ago. \$150 plus tax and gratuity. 713-880-1001.

WINING AND DINING

Harvest Celebration dinner: featuring wines from Tenuta Valdicava in Tuscany 7 p.m. Wednesday at Arturo's, 1180-1 Uptown Park Blvd. \$95 plus tax and gratuity. 713-621-1180.

The Mountain Cabernets of Napa Valley: 6:30-9 p.m. Tuesday at Philippe Restaurant + Lounge, 1800 Post Oak; \$130 plus tax and gratuity; 713-439-1000.

Artisan Salumi and Wine Dinner: 7:30 p.m. Nov. 16 at Valentino's in the Hotel Derek, 2525 W. Loop South; \$65 plus tax and gratuity; 713-850-9200.

BEAUJOLAIS SEASON

The annual arrival of Beaujolais Nouveau next week brings with it a dinner and a grand tasting: Beaujolais Wine Dinner: featuring Rosenthal Selection wines 7 p.m. Nov. 17, at Bistro Provence, 13616 Memorial; 713-827-8008.

Soiree Beaujolais and Beyond: 6:30-9:30 p.m. Nov. 17, at the J.W. Marriott Hotel, 5150 Westheimer; \$45-\$75; facchouston.com.

GOOD CAUSE

Charity wine dinner: 6:30-9 p.m. Thursday in Le Grand Salon de la Comtesse at La Colombe d'Or, 3410 Montrose, benefiting TUTS' education programs; \$500, or \$3,500 for a table for eight; 713-942-1073.

saying plenty considering how his 2006, 2007 and 2008 cabs each earned a double-gold distinction in the [Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo's wine competition](#).

Double gold means every judge who tasted a wine awarded it a gold medal. Nothings speaks louder than consensus plus consistency.

"I can't say it's the only wine that's ever happened with," said Spec's fine wine buyer [Bear Dalton](#), whose idea it was to launch the contest in 2003, "but that's pretty special. It got a solid vote of approval from three different judging panels. That's a strong endorsement."

The Educated Guess cab goes for four in a row Saturday and Sunday as judges taste through a record 2,400-plus wines to determine the latest saddle, chaps, belt-buckle and medal winners in a competition that has become one of the country's most credible. No method is perfect, Houston's included, because of the myriad variables, but they aren't all created equal, either. Albrecht entered for the first time with his second cab vintage because he was impressed with the high ratio of entries to medals awarded.

"In some competitions everybody's a gold-medal winner because they don't want to offend anyone," Albrecht said. "Also, sometimes the judges aren't very sophisticated. From what I know about Houston's, they're diverse and knowledgeable."

Industry pros - some flown in from around the country - and passionate consumers do the tasting, broken down into panels of five. Classes, determined by grape varietal, country of origin and/or price, can include up to 50 wines with further subdivision into flights of 10 or 12.

Some wineries won't even tempt fate twice, nevermind four times, after winning double gold, but Albrecht feels like he's playing with house money now. Besides, he believes strongly in his wine, which has become a Houston favorite.

Roots Run Deep's high-quality/bargain-price secret has three components: Top-drawer grapes, an experienced winemaker - Barry Gnekow is the man for Educated Guess - and miniscule overhead.

"We have two full-time employees, Barry and me," Albrecht said, "plus a part-timer who gets paid by the hour - and with wine. Anybody could do it if they did it like I did, by paying yourself no salary for three years and risk everything you own."



Top 5 high school RBs to watch

ROAD TRIPS

Premier Wine Dinner: 6:30-10 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday at Messina Hof Winery and Resort, 4545 Old Reliance Rd., Bryan; \$69.95, \$99.95, and \$39.95; 979-778-9463. Fall barrel tasting and wine dinner: 6-8:30 p.m. Saturday at Pleasant Hill Winery, Brenham; \$65 (gratuity optional); 979-421-3908. Truchard vVintner's dinner: 7-11 p.m. Tuesday at Carol's in Cat Spring; \$89; 979-865-1100.

EDUCATION

Wine 201: Bear Dalton, Spec's fine wine buyer, is offering a four-week series of classes starting Tuesday at the Alliance Française, 427 Lovett Blvd.; \$250 cash or \$263.16 with a credit card. To register, contact Jessica Toner at 832 660-0250 or JessicaToner@specsonline.com.

The Educated Guess fruit comes from Rutherford and St. Helena vineyards with names as prestigious as Beckstoffer. The idea behind the Educated Guess name itself came from Gnekow, who calls winemaking a series of educated guesses.

"Barry told me, 'Mark, it's not about my schooling (UC-Davis, of course) or where the vineyards are,'" Albrecht said. "It's about my 30 years of experience."

Albrecht is married to the double-gold concept that got him this far, swearing he never suffers from delusions of grandeur.

I've told my wife if I ever start talking about a releasing high-priced, high-falutin' cab or about buying a fancy vineyard," he said, "you have my permission to smack me across the face with an open hand."

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