

### A College Road Trip Leads to Old School Wines

Last week, my wife and I took our high school junior on a familiar right-of-passage: a college campus tour road trip. Of course, he was not interested in visiting any of the local colleges. Oh no. He wanted to venture a little further afield. Well, maybe a lot further afield. He wanted to go to California and visit campuses up and down the west coast.

Now, I can't say as I blame him much. After all, both his mother and I are not only California natives, but we also went to college in Southern California, just a stone's throw from the Pacific Ocean. In addition, his older brother is firmly ensconced at school in the Central Coast of California, and routinely reports back on his amazing adventures, further fueling the fire to move out west.

So we dutifully made plans to fly out to San Francisco, rent a car and make our way down the coast to Los Angeles, visiting colleges and universities along the way. But as we started to finalize our itinerary, it occurred to my wife and me that we should probably have a little fun ourselves. After all, it's been a while since we have seen some of our old friends. And, as it turns out, my best friend from high school, as well as a fraternity brother from college, are both in the wine business. Better still, both of their wineries happen to be located right by one of our planned campus tours in Santa Barbara. How lucky am I?

Our first stop was at my high school friend's ranch. Yes, ranch. A 180 acre ranch, to be exact, located just outside of Santa Barbara in the rapidly up and coming wine region near Buellton. He met us at the gate with three horses saddled and ready to go, expecting us to climb on and ride off into the hinterlands, presumably to herd cattle. Cindy, being the smartest of our entourage, immediately opted for a tour of the tasting room with Blair's partner, Holly. After our ride, we all met back up at the ranch where Cindy and I climbed aboard what appeared to be the John Deere equivalent of a four wheel-drive golf cart on steroids, and took a tour of the 60 acres of pinot noir and chardonnay vines planted on the ranch.

When we returned, we were greeted - gratefully - with a glass of **2013 Pence Ranch Rose**, made exclusively from Pinot Noir grapes. This wine has a beautiful pink color with pretty white floral and red fruit aromatics. It is produced using the saignée method of bleeding the juice off of the grape skins, and then fermented in neutral oak barrels and stainless steel tanks. The fresh flavors of strawberry, raspberry and bright citrus notes are fresh and crisp in the mouth. Made to be enjoyed with lighter fare, such as salads or a summer picnic, I'd be happy enjoying it alone in a hammock. \$18

Dinner under the stars that night included Blair's **2011 PENCH RANCH ESTATE PINOT NOIR**, which Blair says, "represents the essence of Pence Ranch, with grapes sourced from each block of our vineyards... blended as an approachable, friendly wine and intended to over-deliver at a reasonable price." That it does, with aromas of strawberry and cranberry that fill the bouquet and rich flavors of jammy strawberry and black raspberry that cover the entire palate. Sweet tannins provide great structure and the touch of savory spice on the silky finish lends itself as a perfect pairing with Peking duck. \$30

As a special treat, Blair pulled out the **2011 Pence Ranch Uplands Pinot Noir**, made from grapes grown from three specific blocks at the ranch's highest elevation. Twenty percent of the wine is fermented using whole-cluster berries, which produces a nose featuring ripe cherry and cola aromas. The plush mouthfeel is full of dark cherry, ripe plum and cherry cola flavors that seem to float over the tongue, one their way to an elegant finish featuring a touch of minerality and baking spices. \$40

A day later, our next stop was literally four miles up the road, where college buddy Skip Coomber produces his eponymous wine, Coomber Family Ranch, at the ultra-modern Terravant Wine Company in Buellton. When I arrived, I had a delightful surprise. Skip had invited several fraternity alumni and their spouses up from Southern California and arranged for a min-reunion and barrel tasting of his latest releases.

Skip shared a few of his finished products during dinner at the famous Hitching Post II restaurant (the original was featured in the movie *Sideways*), where we started with his **2010 Coomber Family Ranch Private Reserve Santa Barbara County Chardonnay**. Aromas of fresh apples and ripe nectarine scents dominate the bouquet while rich flavors of buttery apples, pears and brioche toast play out nicely on the medium-bodied frame. Notes of roasted nuts and vanilla on the end provide a stylish finish that would make a piece of roasted halibut proud. \$35

I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Skip is also making two cabernet sauvignon wines. The entry level cab, the **2011 Coomber Family Ranch Vintner's Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon**, is a lesson in value. Drinking like a wine twice the price, it sports a fragrant bouquet of cassis and blackberry. The rich mouthfeel has nicely integrated flavors of blackberry, dark cherry, black plum and roasted coffee on the front of the palate and old-world notes of tobacco and leather on the lush finish. Ready to drink now, but I bet in a couple of years it will be even more gratifying - if you have the patience. \$22