

When Friends Make Wine



Having been a wine journalist for over 12 years, I have met a lot of people and made a lot of friends in the industry.

From time-to-time, some of those friends end up making wine, and some winemakers become good friends. Inevitably, some of those friends will ask me to “review” their wines. Occasionally, it can lead to awkward moments of silence. After all, how do you tell someone you like and respect that their proverbial baby is ugly? However, most of the wines made by my friends are actually pretty good.

I don’t mean to sound shocked or anything – but I am always pleasantly surprised when one of *my* friends puts decent juice in the bottle.

Here is an assortment of wines made by producers that I have the pleasure of calling “friends.”

One of my closest friends from high school, **Blair Pence**, became a successful real estate developer in Los Angeles. So, of course, he felt compelled to turn a large fortune into a small one by purchasing a ranch just outside of Santa Barbara, California, and planting a vineyard on part of it. Impressively, the investment paid off and today, Blair is making beautifully crafted pinot noir and chardonnay. But my favorite is his **2013 Pence Ranch Rosé**, made exclusively from Pinot Noir grapes. This wine has a beautiful pink, salmon color with pretty white floral and fresh red fruit aromatics. On the palate it has surprising weight particularly since the aromas are so delicate. 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 salmon, I’d be happy enjoying it alone in a hammock. **\$18.**

Skip Coomber had a name destined to be in a fraternity, and that is exactly where I met him. In college, Skip wanted to be an attorney. Check. Then he wanted to rescue stray dogs. Check. Lastly, he wanted to make a wine he could share with his friends and be proud of. Double check. Coomber produces his eponymous wine, Coomber Family Ranch, at the ultra-modern Terravant Wine Company in Buellton, California. His **2010 Coomber Family Ranch Private Reserve Santa Barbara County Chardonnay** had alluring aromas of fresh apples and ripe nectarine scents that 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**

Local wine distributor **Constantine “Gus” Kalaris** could very well be one of the nicest people in the wine business. We met about a decade ago at the release party of his first vintage of his flagship wine, Axios, where he gave me a bear hug that nearly cracked my spine. His broad smile and deep laugh are genuinely infectious. I had a hunch back then that Gus would one day be a big deal in the wine world. I was right. In 2012, Gus launched the Kalaris brand to introduce an artisan approach to making wines with minimal intervention. The **2011 Kalaris Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** is a ripe, succulent wine made with fruit grown in the southern most region of the Sonoma Coast. It offers up flavors of dark plum, chewy cherry and black raspberry that feel both delicate and powerful at the same time on the tongue. The finish is lovely and structured, featuring a hint of wild strawberry on the back of the tongue. **\$55**

I first met **Charles Mara** five years ago as a rookie wine judge in the San Francisco International Wine Competition. My first impression was that he knew more about wine than I did. I was wrong. It turns out that he knows more about wine than most people! And even better, he is willing to share his knowledge in a down-to-earth manner that puts you at ease. He applies that same knowledge and passion to his winemaking. **The 2007 Mara Russian River Valley "Old Vines" Zinfandel** from the Russian River Valley, is an amazing wine. Aromas of bright cherries, blueberries and ripe raspberries explode on the bouquet. The mouthfeel has a rich, smooth texture on the palate that supports lovely flavors of Rainer cherries, raspberry liqueur, orange peel and baking spices. The pop of black pepper on the back of the super-long finish reminds me that I need a steak on my plate. **\$59**