

Vinography: A Wine Blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world.



Wine Reviews Restaurant Reviews Activities & Events Ramblings & Rants Wine News

July 30, 2006

Cameron Hughes Wines, San Francisco: Current Releases

The continued evolution of the global wine marketplace has made many things possible for many people. Small regional wineries are now thriving because there are folks out there like me and you that are looking for just the type of wines they are producing. Likewise, the proliferation of estateless wineries (bonded, licensed wineries that own no land and may even rent their winemaking facilities) has exploded in California. A relatively recent phenomenon for California and the US (though old news to the negociants in France) has surfaced in what I will call surplus winemakers. These folks don't buy grapes to make into wine, *they buy wine to make into wine.*

Many consumers are unaware of the large amounts of wine that get made but never get bottled and sold to consumers. This wine is instead sold to other businesses who do everything from make vinegar to make those hotel branded bottles you see in your suite. Increasingly, however, there are a whole class of folks who are searching out that surplus wine and turning around to bottle it themselves.

Cameron Hughes is exactly that type of guy. Over the years he heard many times from winemakers who had multiple barrels of finished wine that they couldn't sell for some reason — either there was no demand in the marketplace for it, or the winery ended up with more wine than they wanted. The message sank in — there was lots of wine out there, and some of it was really good wine, and it was available dirt cheap.

Cameron decided to start a label to sell these wines at an “extreme value level.” Though he won't ever advertise them this way, in public he'll affectionately refer to them as “ten buck chuck.”

His wines, made from vineyards and wineries that by contract cannot be disclosed, and blended by winemakers who by contract cannot be identified, are designed to have an extremely high QPR — or Quality-to-Price-Ratio. *Typically, the wine that Cameron bottles would sell for two to three times the price he puts them on the market for.*

Cameron has been so successful with these wines that he's not only being opportunistic and snapping up wine when he hears about it, but is proactively working with winemakers to arrange for their excess juice, and to have some of them help him with final blends. Sound too good to be true? Well, there's a slight catch

to all this. You can't exactly run down to any local wine shop and pick these wines up. Most of Cameron's inventory is sold to Costco and on his web-ite, www.shwine.com.

This is the second batch of Cameron's wines I've tasted, and I continue to be amazed at the value his wines present. These wines are mostly jammy and fruit forward, which is a conscious choice on Cameron's part, and which may be responsible for why they fly off the shelf at Costco, but they may not be to everyone's taste. *Compared to nearly every other wine in their price range at your local supermarket, however, they are truly excellent buys.*

Full disclosure: I received these wines as press samples.

TASTING NOTES:

2003 Cameron Hughes “Lot 11” Petite Sirah, Paso Robles

Dark garnet in the glass this wine has a warm nose of roast fig and leather aromas. In the mouth it is jammy with flavors of fig newtons, dates, and stewed prunes. The tannins are subdued for a Petite Sirah, and grip ever so slightly on the moderate finish. Score: 8. Cost: \$10

2003 Cameron Hughes “Lot 13” Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa

Medium to dark garnet in color, this wine has a chocolate, tobacco laced nose that also incorporates floral and oak aromas. In the mouth it is balanced with a decent acidity and primary flavors of cherry. The classic green bell pepper signature of Cabernet creeps in a little, making for a slightly less desirable flavor profile through the finish, but many will hardly notice this light element among the mix of classic Cabernet fruit. Most of the fruit comes from Dry Creek Valley. Score: 8.5. Cost: \$10

2004 Cameron Hughes “Lot 17” Barbera, Lodi

Medium purple in the glass this wine has a slightly reductive, raisined nose of dried currants and dates. In the mouth it is soft and velvety with flavors of light plum, raspberry, and other red fruits. This wine is slightly over-ripe to my taste, but not flawed. It too has just been bottled and some of the cooked character may have been emphasized by bottle shock. Score: 8/8.5. Cost: \$9