

Society of Medical Friends of Wine



NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2021

A Letter from the President

Jim Gallagher, PhD.

February 21, 2021

The migration to presidency of the *Society of Medical Friends of Wine* has been a greatly interesting, fun experience for me, as well as one painted with unexpected challenges, most of which are derived directly from the sustained COVID-19 pandemic. Our past president, Elizabeth Kass, deserves a great deal of credit and respect for her year of negotiating within our new world of restrictions, much of which directly impaired our having the rich activities previously enjoyed by the Society.

I wish to acknowledge and personally thank several members who have been significant in both my membership and active role within the Society.

Drs. **Robert and Marion Blumberg** who introduced me to the Society and encouraged me to apply for membership. The Blumbergs invited me to attend a Society sponsored dinner at Harris's Steakhouse. Bob continues to be a major mentor, a source of support, continuous encouragement as well as a provider of critical information regarding the history, goals, and mission of the Society.

Dr. **Jack McElroy** who, while president of the Society, invited me to participate in the Society at a greater level by joining the Executive Board as Treasurer.

Dr. **Mort Rivo** who was influential and supportive of my Membership within the Society.

Dr. **Dan Bikle** for both encouraging my membership and having the confidence in my ability to serve as a wine chair for one of our pre-COVID dinners, and later as consultant for our 2018 wine tour.

Dr. **Elizabeth Kass** who has continued to lead the Society through its bleakest period in which the Society faced extreme challenges due to the limitations of COVID-19 which deprived us from enjoying most of our previous formats for sponsoring events.

To fellow executive board members, **Drs David Schwartz** and **Maynard Johnson**, for their collegial support for our programs and continuing efforts to put forward proposals for activities to engage our membership within the boundaries of CDC recommendations and California State restrictions.

I would now like to welcome and thank Susan Schwartz for accepting our nomination to the office of Secretary for the Society of Medical Friends of Wine. I look forward to working with you and the rest of the Executive Board members to provide an exciting year of learning about the contemporary wine industry and its modern role in society.

And finally, to the sustaining membership that remained supportive of the mission and goals of the Society while we have had to innovate service offered in view of necessary, but highly restrictive, social limitations. And in addition, I am particularly grateful to the many who have made personal contributions above their dues and participation expenses. Please see the list below.

So, what is in store for the membership in the forthcoming year? A good question, and the answer unfortunately will be couched in a projection of the path of suppressing the COVID-19 pandemic, including its variant forms.

From March through September, we will have a series of virtual tastings. We have produced four virtual tastings to date, and many of our members are supportive of maintaining this venue as part of the Society's programming, even after the suppression of COVID. I am thinking of two types of virtual tastings through the remainder of this year. The first will be an event more akin to a "comparative wine tasting" that will be primarily organized and directed by a member, much like the Dutton-Goldfield event I hosted last year. The second form will include tastings like the "Lodi Tour" organized by Elizabeth Kass or the Palmaz tasting organized by Maynard Johnson in which we will engage one or more wineries to present their history and wines during the initial segment. We will then follow the winery presentation with an exclusive discussion segment for members and their guests so that opinions and thoughts and critiques can be openly shared and discussed.

We retain hope for an in-person Summer Tour should the concern for safety of our members be mitigated by then. I will begin conversations with wineries as "tentative options" and will report in forthcoming newsletters the progress.

We will also work with tentative dates with the **French Club** for our annual sharing a bottle tasting. I am hopeful that we will be able to hold the event in the Fall of 2021. We will also look to reschedule the **Piperade** dinner before the end of the year. We had a stunning menu planned and all the Basque and Iberian themed wines purchased, so we are anxious to reassemble at this excellent restaurant. I will continue to watch for other available venues that may serve for "in

person” wine tastings both with and without paired dinners. I would love feedback and suggestions for events and/or venues.

We are also exploring venues with kitchen facilities that could accommodate our members for a sit-down dinner prepared by a caterer of our choice. Such an event should allow us to gain greater control over the quality and costs of the wines to be served without taking on the added expense of a high corkage fee that can quickly accelerate event prices. Again, suggestions for venues are always appreciated.

Here’s to a great year ahead, with the hope for ongoing health, relief from the COVID pandemic, and a chance for us to again assemble safely in person.

Jim

Donors

We would like to acknowledge and thank those individuals who have made donations to the Society above their dues and event fees. During these challenging times this additional support is vital to the continued success of your Society.

Calendar Year 2020

Dan Bikle
Ed Bloomberg
Robert and Marion Blumberg
Joan Boothe
Robert Dale
Roger Ecker
Richard Geist
Maynard Johnson
Elizabeth Kass
Jack McElroy
Norman Panting
Mort Rivo
David Schwartz
Brenda Shank
Jamie Shapiro
John Traylor

Calendar Year 2021 (to date)

Jamie Shapiro



Wines of interest at the start of 2021.

Jim Gallagher, Ph.d.

For the most part I prefer older wines over recently released wines. I admit this introductory statement is vague, primarily due to the question of what is an “older” wine. For some, six years after harvest is an old wine; for others, a wine ten years after harvest is still a young wine. And of course, varietal matters. Most discussions of table wines benefiting from aging are about the Bordeaux varietals: *Cabernet Franc*, *Cabernet Sauvignon*, *Malbec*, *Merlot*, and *Petite Verdot*.

In the adjoining panel are three Cabernet Sauvignon wines from the Napa Valley that I enjoyed recently that are of various degrees of age: 1980 **Flora Springs**; 1983 **Johnson Turnbull** and a 2007 **EMH** ‘Black Cat Cabernet’. All are produced from

grapes of a single vineyard and 100% Cabernet Sauvignon.

The Flora Springs was particularly interesting to me, as I certainly have not been as consistently fond of this producer’s Cabernet Sauvignon as I have been of both the Johnson Turnbull and the EMH. Never-the-less, I found the 1980 excellent upon release and purchased some; my tasting notes at that time were: *Medium dark red, light purple edge; distinct ripe cherry, plummy, pine tar and sweet oak bouquet; medium body, very good fruit flavors, good acid-tannin balance; dry & lingering, good finish, rich, long, slightly bitter aftertaste, 4-15 years.*

In the intervening 38 years, the wine has matured nicely and now shows warmer fruit with less edges, the pine tar calmed and melded nicely with the fruit flavors, and the wine has added a modest weightiness in the mouth feel resulting in an attractive silkiness throughout a lingering aftertaste. There is now a complete absence of bitterness in the aftertaste. So, while I liked the 1980 Flora Springs Cabernet Sauvignon in 1983, the wine in 2021 was considerably better.

The 1983 Johnson Turnbull was a lovely wine from my notes in 1993, and I remember being much more impressed with the wine than many others were at the time. I had followed this vintner

closely since tasting the first vintage (1979) at a media and trade Spring release event at the **Mount View Hotel** in Calistoga. So, for me, probably at least in part due to my expectations being higher at the start, the improvement in the Johnson Turnbull was less dramatic than in the Flora Springs. It should be noted that 1983 was not a well renown vintage for Napa Cabernet. The **Wine Spectator** vintage rating of 1983 was the lowest of the 1980s decade, a mere 81/100. (Editor's note: In 1983 the Society, under then president Stan Schwartz, M.D., decided to purchase a barrel of Cabernet Sauvignon to age in our cellar and learn and benefit from serial tastings over the years. The 1983 Duckhorn was selected, and I remember years later when it was tasted at an annual dinner with Dan Duckhorn present as speaker, he commented about the challenges of 1983, and he was pleased the wine showed as well as it did then.

In 1993 my notes on the 1983 Johnson Turnbull were: *Dark red, purple-light purple edge; rich cherry/chocolate, mint & sweet oak bouquet--lovely; medium-light body, gorgeous fruit flavors, good acid & tannin--balanced; dry & lingering, excellent finish, long, lush aftertaste--great wine.*

I was, and remain, particularly attracted to the style of bouquet of Johnson Turnbull Cabernet Sauvignon, as they showed throughout the 1980s. This character of bouquet has sustained the 1983, if today it is slightly less intense. The palate has rounded well and to my thought has improved, now showing refinement as well a silky finish. It is less assertive and bold than at early tastings, and while the edges and distinction of flavors are rather less prominent now, the palate and finish are seamless.

EMH is a tiny property whose vineyard is ideally situated on the valley floor between Diamond Mountain and the Palisades above Calistoga. This is an area that has the luxury of requiring a shorter growing season to attain full ripeness, even by a Robert Parker standard. My notes from barrel samples of the 2007 EMH "Black Cat" Cabernet tasted in June 2008: *Dark red, purple edge, brilliant hue. Rich & intense strawberry, raspberry, cherry, chocolate & sweet oak, very concentrated dense scents—lovely, extraordinary! Medium light body, good acid-tannin balance with some barrel tannins showing. Excellent finish: rich, long, luscious aftertaste. It is displaying a typical character of EMH vineyard with heightened fruit expression. My assessment is that the wine is better at this time than most 95+ point wines. Additional notes: the wine was coopered in 20% new oak and is scheduled to be bottled in June 2009 after 22 months of barrel aging.*

In this trio of Cabernets I am discussing today, the 2007 EMH dominated with its massive fruit of blackberry and raspberry, just beaming with a lovely bouquet followed by powerful flavors in the mouth. In my judgement this wine will continue to refine and integrate its flavor with further aging; ultimately developing a weighty and more velvet like finish. The alcohol level is 14.8%, much higher than most Cabernet Sauvignons from 1940 through 1980 produced in the Napa Valley, of which I am quite fond, but still less than many of the high-powered cult wines of California produced in the early part of this century. This level of alcohol is partially the result of the practice of much later harvesting for Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. Merrill Lindquist, the proprietress, is usually the first to pick along the northern corridor of the Silverado Trail off Picket Road in Calistoga. The 2007 was harvested on August 30, at a brix of 25.7. In recent years many of the Cabernet vineyards in Napa are harvested in mid-October

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Attached is a photo of myself and the Johnson-Turnbull winemaker through the 1980s and early 90s, Kirsten Belair. As I mentioned, I have been a long timer follower of this property. At the time of the photo, 1995, the most backward of her wines had been the 1985. It expressed less fruit, lacking the more typical level of integrated fruit and acid, and was considerably less vibrant in the finish. Kirsten noted that the 1985 was the only Johnson-Turnbull Cabernet Sauvignon that was a blend of the two different plantings, the first in 1967 and the second in 1982. The grapes harvested from the 1982 plantings had not been used in the Estate Cabernet Sauvignon before 1985. From 1986 forth, there were two separate bottlings, each designated either 67 or 82, based on the year of



the planting. This strategy continued through 1990, after which both 67 and 82 vineyards were replanted because of the phylloxera infestation. By that time, Peter O'Dell had purchased the Oakville property and had the Eucalyptus trees that sided the vineyard, removed. O'Dell was not found of the minty character that was presumably heightened by the trees; in addition, he was able to increase the number of vines planted within his vineyard.

Oh yes, Kirsten at the time of the above interview, confided that she thought the 1985 was the best of all the wines she made at Johnson Turnbull. My tasting of this wine over the last decade has won me over to that belief. The 1985 for the last ten years, and as recently as last week, is by far the regal Johnson Turnbull Cabernet. As opposed to tasting in the late 1980s, the bouquet now shines with rich black cherry/blackberry aromas, mint tea, mocha and toast--awesome, medium

body, balance with a long, succulent aftertaste. And, as I hope you have now gathered, this is why I like aged wines.

VIRTUAL LODI

by Robert Blumberg M.D.
Cellar Master and Editor

On Saturday January 23, 2021, the Society visited Lodi, thanks to Zoom technology. Our 2020 president, Elizabeth Kass M.D., had planned a tour to select properties in her home countryside during summer of 2020, but the COVID pandemic forced a cancellation of our in-person visit. Never daunted, Elizabeth pushed forward with an alternate plan that for me turned out to be an absolutely delightful, fun, and educational experience.

We had presentations from David Akiyoshi, wine maker at Lange Twins Family Winery and Vineyards, Ryan Sherman, Winemaker and Partner of Fields Family Vineyards and Winery, Stuart Spencer, Winemaker and Proprietor of St. Amant Winery, and Layne Montgomery, Winemaker and Founding Partner of m2 Wines. All four inspired me with their knowledge and passion for their work, and the fact that the winery was indeed the product of their work.

In an era when so much publicity in California goes to billionaires buying properties, hiring rock-star wine makers, and producing clones of wines meant to impress and overpower palates, it is indeed refreshing to see a different side of the world of California wine. Not that the former cannot produce some wonderful wines, but it nice to know there is still room and opportunity for the latter.

Lange Twins Fume Blanc, Jahant Woods 03 Vineyard, 2019: Our first wine of the evening was made from the Musque clone of the Sauvignon Blanc. This clone is known for its aromatic qualities, with tropical fruit rather than the green grassiness found in other Sauvignons. The color was full yellow, the aromatics indeed tropical with lychee and pineapple preserves evident. The mouth feel is light and pleasant, with tropical fruit coming across on the palate. Not at all grassy like a Sancerre, nor grapefruit or gooseberry like a New Zealand Sauvignon. It reminded me somewhat of the Vermentino from Francis Mahoney that we tasted during our 2018 vintage tour that was also grown in Lodi. The wine is aged for months on the yeast in a neutral container, and this sur-lie contact probably adds to the richness of the taste. A wine that should pair great with fresh goat cheese.

Fields Family Wines Cinsault, Bechtold Vineyard, 2018: One of the themes of this event was wines from lesser-known grapes grown in heritage vineyards. The Cinsault is a grape native to the south of France, where its versatility and yield allow it to serve as both a table grape and a wine grape. It is used in both rosé and red wines, and is perhaps best known on our shores as being one of the allowed vines in the Chateauneuf-du Pape area, where it is used in rather small proportions. Its other claim to fame is being one of the two parents (along with Pinot Noir) of the hybrid grape called Pinotage grown in South Africa.

The wine was light in both color and body, with lovely strawberry smells and a raspberry/strawberry nuance to the flavors. It is low in alcohol, especially compared to most modern California wines, having been picked at around 22 brix. Whole cluster fermentation with native yeast contributes to the fruitiness. It is aged in 4- to 5-year-old Burgundy barrels, and bottled unfined and unfiltered in the spring of the year after harvest. The night after opening the wine had faded a bit, so I suspect drinking it within a year or two of release is appropriate, and perhaps with a slight chill to the bottle. From a vineyard dating back to 1886.

St. Amant Alicante Bouschet 2018, Mohr-Fry Ranch: Continuing our theme of wine from lesser-known grapes, the Alicante Bouschet has an interesting history. The grape was created in the 1860's by French viticulturist Henri Bouschet, by crossing the Grenache with the Petit Bouschet. This latter grape had been created by Henri's father, Louis, and is a cross of Teinturier du Cher and Aramon. Unlike most red wine grapes whose color comes only from the skin, Teinturier grapes have red or black colored flesh, and this property from the Teinturier du Cher was passed on to the Petit Bouschet and the Alicante Bouschet. The grape was once widely planted in the south of France, and remains there, though today in much less quantity. It has also found a home in Portugal, and was imported to the United States, where it often ended up in field blends where it contributed color to the wine. Prohibition actually increased its popularity, for its thick skin helped it hold up well during transport to the east coast for home winemaking, which remained legal. And since many people connote color with quality for a red, it helped in that regard as well. This vineyard was originally planted in 1922.

Our wine was indeed a deeply colored, blackish purple. The nose was smokey with black pepper spice, and very slight reduction. On the palate the wine is brooding and deep, but surprisingly not tannic. It is medium in body, light medium in acidity, and with a short finish. Interestingly it was not harvested until early November, and then was aged in neutral barrels. In my mind a great experience to try, but I can understand why the wine is usually used to boost color in a blend rather than to add flavor complexity to a wine. Being a brooding wine, the question was asked of winemaker Stuart Spencer whether the wine would age well. He quite honestly answered, that this being his first vintage as a varietal bottling he was not sure.

m2 old vine Zinfandel 2017: This is a big, ripe, fruit filled Zinfandel with lots of spice and oak overtones. Just over 15% alcohol, the body and tannins are medium full and the acidity is moderate. Deep in color, with a warm lingering finish. Get out your steaks and roasts and ripe cheeses. Grapes were harvested the second week of September, and the wine aged in 20% new American Oak. Most California producers continue to favor the vanilla spiciness of American oak to balance their Zins. The old vine designation on the label is accurate, as this vineyard was planted more than 100 years ago.

We had more than 50 participants from 25 households on our virtual tour and tasting, and judging by the comments and questions, the Lodi vintners did a good job of perking our interest and curiosity. I learned a lot about the unique climate of the region, how nights cooler than you might think help mitigate the effects of very warm summer days and how

miraculously some very old and special vineyards have survived residential development and being replaced by more commercially marketable varietals. Again, I salute the dedication and hard work of those growing and making wine in the Lodi Viticultural area, and thank them for providing us with such a fun and informative evening

Was I pleased with the visit? Absolutely. And if Creedence Clearwater Revival were still recording songs, I would urge them to do a revision of their famous one. Only this time, I would suggest the title be “Oh, to be stuck in Lodi again”.



Wines from the Virtual Lodi Tasting

Jim Gallagher's comments on the Lodi Tour and Tasting

I thought the event was well organized and the winery representatives provided us with an excellent history of the vineyards, vinification strategies, and the distinguishing character of the four different varietals. The price point of the wines deserves comment. They showed considerable value, particularly compared to so many Napa and Sonoma wines. Admittedly, the varietals were not of the "noble" character and for the most part are what most consider "wines to be consumed early"; for some, meaning as soon as we park the car.

Among the four wines, I was mostly impressed by the 2019 **LangeTwins Family Wines & Vineyard** 'Jahant' Fume Blanc. Great flavors, crisp refreshing mouth feel, and sneaky, attractive, near compelling aftertaste. Certainly, a wine I would love to serve at a Summer picnic in any of the Bay Area's blessed regions.

Finally, I liked Bob Blumberg's summary, that these wines are excellent examples of a regional contribution to wining and dining as they are eminently drinkable beverages reflecting their terroir. Further, as Bob suggested, I tried, blending the Cinsault and the Alicante Bouschet, two varietals that have been more frequently blended than bottled as a single varietal. For my palate the resultant blend did elevate my appreciation of the resulting wine.

ALCOHOL AND ATRIAL FIBRILLATION

A Review and a Report on a New Study

by Robert Blumberg, M.D.

Switching hats from cellar master to resident cardiologist, I would like to offer as our scientific article for this edition of the newsletter a brief review of atrial fibrillation and introduce a particularly impressive new study just published on a possible mechanism of alcohol induced atrial fibrillation.

Atrial fibrillation is the most common sustained cardiac arrhythmia, other than the presence of single premature beats. Atrial fibrillation is a condition where the upper chambers of the heart (the atria) are beating so fast that they are actually quivering (fibrillating) rather than effectively contracting. The electrical impulses from the atria bombard the junction box between the upper and lower chambers (the Atrio-Ventricular node) at a rate of many hundred impulses per minute. The A-V node slows this conduction in a normal heart so that somewhere between 100 and 150 impulses per minute reach the ventricles. The result is a fast, irregular heart beat that may cause palpitations, shortness of breath, fatigue, lightheadedness, and chest pain. Since the atria are quivering rather than contracting, blood can pool and stagnate and lead to the risk of blood clots. If a clot from the left atrium breaks loose and travels to the brain, a stroke can result.

Structural changes in the aging heart are one of the recognized risk factors for atrial fibrillation, and thus its incidence is increasing as our population ages. Indeed, about 10% of the population above the age of 70 is likely to experience atrial fibrillation. Other factors beyond age associated with the development of this arrhythmia include high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary artery disease, stimulant drug use, smoking, obesity, obstructive sleep apnea, and congestive heart failure.

Alcohol's role in atrial fibrillation is also well recognized, but the question of alcohol's use versus misuse is less well defined. Any intern or resident in a busy county hospital soon becomes acquainted with dealing with this rhythm in the alcoholic population. And alcohol abuse can lead to an alcoholic cardiomyopathy, or weakening of the heart muscle, with its attendant congestive heart failure and atrial fibrillation. The acute ingestion of high levels of alcohol is also associated with episodic atrial fibrillation, and this can occur at any age level. The unfortunate college student who way overindulges at a party may awaken the next morning to find his or her heart racing and beating irregularly. The post alcohol ingestion heart arrhythmia syndrome carries the moniker "holiday heart syndrome".

Turning now to the recently published elegant study, "**A Randomized, Double-Blind, Placebo Controlled Trial of Intravenous Alcohol to Assess Changes in Atrial Electrophysiology**", by Gregory Marcus, M.D, Jonathan Dukes, M.D., and Eric Vittinghoff, M.D. et al, published online in Journal of American College of Cardiology Clinical Electrophysiology. Jan 27, 2021.

This study looks at the question of whether smaller doses of alcohol can induce changes in the electrical properties of the heart that can lead to an increasing chance of developing atrial fibrillation. It utilized patients undergoing a procedure, called ablation, for treatment of atrial fibrillation. Ablation is a procedure during which cardiologists specializing in electrophysiology can insert catheters into the heart to map the electrical properties of the upper chamber and can ablate the tissue at the junction of the pulmonary veins where they empty into the left atrium. It is recognized that most atrial fibrillation occurs when early beats arise from this area and then induce fibrillation in the left atrial tissue.

One hundred patients undergoing ablation were studied. Fifty received a continuous infusion of intravenous ethanol to achieve a steady state blood level (as measured by breath analysis) of 0.08%--the amount at which it is illegal to drive. The other fifty received intravenous placebo. The effective refractory period of the cardiac cells was determined, and an attempt to induce atrial fibrillation with intravenous isoproterenol (a potent adrenaline like stimulant) or rapid atrial pacing was performed (as is standard during ablation procedures).

Cardiac conduction tissue enters a rest period (refractory period) after each heartbeat. During this time another beat cannot be conducted. The shorter the atrial refractory period, the quicker another heart beat can be conducted, and the more likely an early beat could precipitate fibrillation. The group that received the ethanol infusion had a statistically significant shortening of the refractory period in the area where the pulmonary veins join the left atrium. Other cardiac cells did not have such a shortening.

This raises the possibility that a blood alcohol level easily achieved with a few glasses of wine at a tasting or dinner party could have an electrophysiologic effect on the heart making atrial fibrillation, in susceptible individuals, more likely to occur. The likelihood of being able to precipitate atrial fibrillation during the study did not increase, however. The authors felt this may be due to the fact the effect of alcohol is delayed, or more likely, that the ability to precipitate fibrillation by the study techniques was so great in this population that even the control group had fibrillation easily stimulated.

So what are the clinical implications? Does this mean that even moderate occasional use of alcohol should be added to the risk factors associated with occurrence of atrial fibrillation? I suppose it does, and counselling to this effect should be included in discussions with patients, along with attention to blood pressure, diabetes control, recognition and treatment of sleep apnea, weight issues, etc.

The propensity for atrial fibrillation is multifactorial and, in most patients, probably genetically influenced. Thus, not every patient with a history of atrial fib might be as susceptible as some to a few glasses of wine. But others might, and they should be aware of this. This applies to patients with occasional episodes of atrial fibrillation (so called paroxysmal atrial fib) or to patients with recent onset of persistent atrial fibrillation whose doctor is still working on controlling the issue. Many patients have chronic, or irreversible atrial fibrillation, and are quite well controlled with a paucity of symptoms on medication, and the need to exclude alcohol may not be as important for them. But as always, the advice of a personal physician with knowledge of an individual should be followed over that of a newsletter editor!