



April 2017

Dear Wine Club Member:

We are excited to present you with our latest releases, the first wines from the exceptional 2014 vintage:

2014 Montemaggiore Paolo's Vineyard Syrah
2014 Montemaggiore Syrafina

Every vintage evokes a standout memory in our minds. For example, we'll always remember 2002 because it was our very first vintage. 2005 was the year we converted to biodynamic farming. 2007 was our first absolutely picture perfect vintage, whereas 2011 was cold and wet and challenging. But 2014 was the year we discovered how to turn money into rain!

As you may recall, in 2014 California was in the midst of a multi-year drought. Our seasonal rains typically start in November, but by the end of January 2014 we had seen less than 1.5" of rain (20" is normal during those three months, although this year we received more than 30"). Our irrigation ponds, which typically fill up by mid-December, were at record low levels. If our ponds don't fill up, there won't be enough water to irrigate our vineyards during the dry summer months. We contemplated our options—letting some vines go without water (which would have multi-year affects), re-pruning our vineyards (a reduced crop would require less water) or re-activating an old well (unpredictable and costly)—all of which were fairly drastic.

We decided the best option was to hedge our bets with crop insurance, a first for us although many of our neighbors get it every year. Interestingly, farmers can't receive crop insurance payouts due to a drought, but they can when "cultural practices" lead to a much lesser crop. In our case, if we bought crop insurance in February before the deadline, then we could re-prune our vineyards if no no rain came by early March. Luck was with us because exactly one week after we bought crop insurance, rain started falling from the heavens! Six inches came within three weeks, and our ponds filled up. We convinced ourselves that if we hadn't bought insurance, the rains wouldn't have come. So everyone in northern California can thank us because our financial investment brought on the rain in 2014! And yes, we are <mostly> joking.

As for the wines, the dry year had some minor affects. In most aspects, the 2014s are reminiscent of the spectacular 2013s in terms of their ripe fruit profile, balance, and intensity. But the tannins are a bit more blocky, which is a positive way to say that they are not quite as silky, at least this early in their lives. Not that these wines are any sort of a disappointment because 2014 was an excellent vintage!

The Vineyards. Both the syrah and viognier grapes for these wines come from our estate vineyards on a mountainside 750ft above Dry Creek Valley in northern Sonoma County. Long-time supporters know that we recently sold these vineyards but we still consider the 2014 wines to be from "our" vineyards since the grapes were grown by us that summer, fermented in our estate winery that fall, and finally bottled on-site in spring of 2016.

Our estate vineyards are on a steep grade whose rocky soils produce intensely flavored grapes at naturally low yields. These mountainside grapevines produce small individual berries, which create wines with firm structure, incredible varietal intensity, and excellent aging potential. All our estate vineyards are farmed according to biodynamic principles and using organic materials. With its focus on biodiversity and soil fertility, we believe biodynamics brings additional strength, vitality and a unique sense of place to Montemaggiore wines.

The Growing Season. The 2014 vintage was dry, early, and compact. The winter of 2013/14 was extremely dry, which laid the groundwork for a very early bud-break in the spring, about 2-3 weeks early. Late season rains led to explosive growth in the vineyards, requiring a lot of suckering. Pollination occurred under sunny skies, but the crop level was relatively small because the vines received little rejuvenating rain after the 2013 harvest (which typically best prepares them for winter dormancy).

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Summer temperatures in 2014 were moderate, but mid-August brought a cool-down in which stretched out ripening. Verasion (when the hard green grapes turn purple and soft) was quick and uniform, which is an early indicator for a compact harvest.

We started harvesting on September 18th, about a week early. We then proceeded to harvest all of our Syrah within a single week! Lise and her intern Hannah will never forget that Sunday, September 21, which started at 5:30am with the harvesting of Syrah and Viognier, and was followed by destemming and sorting the reds, pressing some white (Viognier), and finally pressing Syrah for rosé. They only took quick breaks to nibble on Cliff bars and change juice-stained shirts. The day finished just before midnight when all the equipment was clean and sparkling.

The Crush. We harvested four different areas of our vineyards over six days, resulting in three different lots of syrah and one of syrah + viognier (a co-fermentation, where the two varietals are fermented together). As usual, we hand-harvested the clusters starting at 5:30am with LED lights from our tractor, and brought them into the winery while still cold. About 20% whole clusters were put into the bottom of an open-top stainless steel tank, stems and all. By noon, the remaining 80% had been destemmed and carefully sorted, the resulting whole berries are layered on top.

The grapes underwent a cold maceration to bring out flavor and color precursors, after which they were inoculated with yeast. For the duration of the 12-19 days of fermentation, manual punchdowns were performed three times a day (a half hour each) on every tank in order to introduce oxygen in the fermentation and keep the flavorful skins in contact with the juice. Peak fermentation temperatures ranged from 82°-85°F, and all fermentations proceeded evenly to dryness.

Aging the Wine. Each lot of syrah (and syrah + viognier) was individually pressed off the skins using a stainless steel basket press, whose gentleness limits the wine's astringency. The wines were then aged on their fine lees in 100% French oak barrels for eighteen months. For those not steeped in wine-lingo, **lees** are the dead yeast cells and other particles remaining in a wine after fermentation. As the yeast cells break down, they release polysaccharides and mannoproteins (amongst other compounds), thus enhancing the structure, mouthfeel, and flavor complexity of the wine.

For both the Syrah and Syrafina, about one quarter of the wine was aged in new oak barrels, imparting structure, tannins, and oak flavors into the wine. The balance of the wine was aged in neutral barrels (older barrels that have no flavor but definitely impart a good texture). In September of 2015, different Syrah lots were blended according to taste. 200 cases of Paolo's Vineyard Syrah and 250 cases of Syrafina were bottled in April of 2016, and then allowed to rest before being released in April of 2017 to our wine club.

Tasting Notes. With the 2014 Paolo's Vineyard Syrah, aromas of dark blackberries and cassis mingle with nutmeg and white pepper. With the 2014 Syrafina, those aromas are similar but complemented by floral high tones of violets and more black pepper. Flavors on the palate of both wines reflect their aroma, being framed by chunky tannins and gentle acidity.

The 2014 Syrah and Syrafina are ready to drink now, but their tannin and acid structure also lend them significant ageability. Both could be cellared for up to 5-10 years if you prefer more mellow, integrated flavors in your wines.

Food Pairings. Our favorite ingredients to pair with both these wines include bacon, mushrooms, hazelnuts, pepper, and lamb. Thus the wines pair well with wild mushroom soup, braised short ribs, pork tenderloin, bacon rösti, marinated tri-tip, lamb shanks, pasta bolognese, sheep's milk cheeses, lamb burgers—and the list goes on! For recipes and more food pairing strategies, navigate on our website to Wines > Recipes.

Enjoy your 2014 Paolo's Vineyard Syrah and 2014 Syrafina along with any other wines you've chosen for your Spring Wine Club Selection. In October comes our next Wine Club Release, consisting of the 2014 Nobile. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your continued support. *Salute*, as we say in Italian!