



April 2018

Dear Wine Club Member:

We are excited to present you with our latest release, the first from a low-yielding 2015 vintage:

## 2015 Montemaggiore Syrafina

Typically in the spring we release our Syrah and Syrafina simultaneously, so you might be wondering, where is the 2015 Paolo's Vineyard Syrah? Never fear, it will appear in the fall club shipment for two reasons, both relating to the fact that the amount of grapes we harvested that year was down over 35%! We'll discuss why yields were down for nearly all vineyards in Napa and Sonoma, but first let's address its impact on the Montemaggiore wines.

Low yielding vintages like 2015 typically lead to more concentration, depth, and intensity in the wines—generally a good thing! When a grapevine focuses its energy on a smaller crop, individual grapes will have more concentrated flavors. But that same concentration of flavors (good) can also mean more tannin, which can make wine more astringent (bad). Our mountainside syrah already has significant tannins, and Lise felt that the 2015 Paolo's Vineyard Syrah (100% syrah) needed additional time in the bottle for the tannins to smooth out. The Montemaggiore Syrafina, on the other hand, with its small amount of viognier (4%) has much silkier tannins, thus this wine can be enjoyed sooner. Lise feels that the 2015 Syrafina is ready to drink now, while the Syrah could use a bit more time.

The other reason we're releasing the Paolo's Vineyard Syrah in the fall is that our cabernet vines bore so few grapes in 2015 that we decided against producing a Nobile (Cabernet-Syrah blend). Our small 1.16 acres of cabernet vines produced less than 1 ton of grapes, meaning that we would not be able to make even 100 cases of Nobile. We also weren't super-excited about the quality of the grapes so the extra effort to make a small batch of Nobile didn't make sense. Thus we only produced two 2015 wines: Syrah and Syrafina, one for each of our two club releases.

Winegrowers must always balance quantity versus quality in the vineyards. Interestingly, this inverse relationship (higher quantity leads to lower quality and lower quantity leads to higher quality) is not absolute. Yields can be so low that the quality does not improve, as was the case of our 2015 cabernet. Between fixed natural effects (e.g., soil, weather, slope) and discretionary cultural practices (e.g., pruning, irrigation, thinning), Vincent's goal is to keep the vineyard in balance. It's the Goldilocks Principle: yields shouldn't be too high yet they also shouldn't be too low!

**The Growing Season.** The 2015 vintage was dry, early, and difficult. This fourth year of drought prompted a very early bud-break, even earlier than the prior year which itself was 2-3 weeks early. In May, the weather during flowering was highly unstable with an impactful cold front followed by a heat spike. The temperature fluctuations led to poor pollination and uneven fruit set—the main culprit of the 35% yield reduction for our vines. Most vineyards in Napa and Sonoma were down 30-50% and some essentially did not produce any fruit, so we were relatively lucky!

Summer temperatures in 2015 were warm, but ripening proceeded on schedule after the cool May. Verasion (when the hard green grapes turn purple and soft) was quick and uniform, which is an early indicator for a compact harvest. During verasion we dropped more under-ripe clusters than usual, an extra sacrifice of quantity in the name of increased quality. The growing season ended in early September with several 100F+ days which affected many vineyards in the area, but didn't have too much effect on Montemaggiore grapes.

**The Vineyards.** Both the syrah and viognier grapes for this wine come from our estate vineyards on a mountainside 750ft above Dry Creek Valley in northern Sonoma County. Long-time supporters know we recently sold these vineyards but we still consider the 2015 wines to be from "our" vineyards since the grapes were grown by us that summer, fermented in our estate winery that fall, and barrel aged in our cellar for a year and a half. (When we sold the property, the barrels were moved to a shared winery then bottled in the spring of 2017 by the same mobile bottling line we've used for over 10 years). You can look forward to the addition of new Rhône blends from exceptional vineyards throughout Sonoma starting with our 2017 vintage.

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Our estate vineyards are on a steep grade whose rocky soils produce intensely flavored grapes at naturally low yields. These mountainside grapevines produce small 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 Crush.** We harvested 4.2 tons of syrah and viognier for the Syrafina on September 27, generally on time but maybe a little early. 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. By noon, all the grapes were destemmed and carefully sorted with the syrah and viognier being co-fermented (both varietals were put in the same fermentation tank).

The grapes underwent a cold maceration to bring out flavor and color precursors, after which they were inoculated with “Syrah” yeast. For the duration of the 16 days of fermentation, manual punchdowns were performed three times a day (a half hour each) on the tank in order to introduce oxygen in the fermentation and keep the flavorful skins in contact with the juice. Peak fermentation temperature reached 82°F, and the fermentation proceeded evenly to dryness.

**Aging the Wine.** The syrah + viognier was pressed off the skins using a stainless steel basket press, whose gentleness limits the wine’s astringency. The wine was then aged on its fine lees in 100% French oak barrels for eighteen months. As you may recall from our last Club newsletter, **lees** are remnants of fermentation that enhance the structure, mouthfeel, and flavor complexity of the wine as it ages in barrels.

About one quarter of the Syrafina was aged in new French oak barrels, which impart 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). 150 cases were bottled in March of 2017 and then allowed to rest for one year before being released in April of 2017 to our wine club.

**Tasting Notes.** The aroma of the 2015 Syrafina opens with deep blackberry, plum and spices, highlighted by floral notes. On the palate, layers of dark fruit, smoke, peppery meat, and crushed rock emerge from this full-bodied wine framed by round, silky tannins.

The 2015 Syrafina is ready to drink now, but its tannin and acid structure also lends the wine significant ageability. If you prefer more mellow, integrated flavors in your wines, you should feel comfortable cellaring this wine for 5-10 years. We recently opened a 2009 Syrafina (9 years after vintage) which was spectacular and still had a lot of life left in it!

**Food Pairings.** We enjoy pairing Syrafina with grilled salmon, roast duck, grilled eggplant, pork tenderloin, and sheep’s milk cheeses. But it’s a very versatile wine, so you should explore your own pairings. We recently hosted a winemaker dinner at the TuTuTun Lodge in Oregon where Chef Gil served syrah-viognier blend alongside a delicious Frisee and Arugula Salad with Roasted Shallot-Thyme Vinaigrette. Bitter greens and vinaigrettes are often difficult to pair with wines, but this was delicious. For recipes and more food pairing strategies, navigate on our website to Wines > Recipes.

Enjoy your 2015 Syrafina along with any other wines you’ve chosen for your Spring Wine Club Selection. You can look forward to our next Wine Club Release in October which highlights the 2015 Paolo’s Vineyard Syrah.

We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your continued support. *Salute*, as we say in Italian!