

# CRITTER WINE

How cute animals help us pick wine



DIRECT PRESS September 2024

Wine Director JONATHAN KEMP Written by JONATHAN KEMP

Art Direction by JEREMY HERNANDEZ Critter Wrangling by KATE MASTERS



CRITTER WINE



**We've** all been admonished to not judge a book by its cover — so why don't we suspend our judgment when it comes to wine labels? Every week, if not more frequently, I hear someone half-jokingly mention how they “shop by the label.” These are not reverse snobs or people dismissive of wine culture, either. They are usually thoughtful, knowledgeable people interested in wine and all of the history that goes along with it. To be fair, they are typically saying this as a roundabout way of thanking me for walking them through our selections, and are simply admitting that in the absence of good help they have to resort to the only thing they can use as a guide: a well-designed label. Sometimes featuring a cartoon animal.

I completely understand. Confronted with unfamiliar names, grapes, and the risk of picking the wrong bottle, what are you supposed to do? However, if a wine's success is tied to its label instead of the actual wine, we will be forever at the mercy of marketing teams. If wine is an agricultural product and the best wines come from the best farmers — as I believe — then we should value farmers who are toiling in the vineyards instead of clicking through font menus in Adobe Illustrator. But the reality is that labels are an important way to stand out in a very competitive marketplace, and even the most conscientious wine drinker will, in fact, be judging a wine by its label.

As a fun way of talking about this, we've put together a collection of “critter wines,” i.e. wines with cute animals on the labels. We could have picked wines with Comic Sans or Papyrus font on the labels and had the same basic discussion, but I think we all have a soft spot for furry creatures and feathered friends. This month we've got a cat, an owl, a badger, a chicken, a cow, some bears, a stork, a hedgehog, a shad, and a deer. “Critter wines” is a term I encountered back in my early days in the wine business as a way to group the scores of inexpensive wines you might see stacked up in any grocery store or liquor store. Yellow Tail and its kangaroo label were arguably the catalyst of this trend, and brands like The Little Penguin or Goats do Roam were similarly inescapable by the early 2000s. They quickly cut through the stuffy visuals of the supermarket wine aisle and seemed to take their design cues from the cereal aisle. Robert Mondavi and Louis Latour are no match for Tony the Tiger and Toucan Sam. Wine is intimidating, and even educated, intelligent people are left gobsmacked by all the minutiae. Unlike a book that you will read independently, a bottle of wine is usually shared, making your decision fraught with potential social embarrassment. Who wouldn't want a friendly woodland creature to help them in a moment of panic?

A few years ago, a collector in Sugar Land, Texas named Karl Gunter reached out to us looking for wine. His curation was not built around Grand Cru Burgundy or Napa Cabs, but on labels with animals. I asked him how he started chasing down critters.

“In early June 2015 my wife asked me to get her a Merlot or Malbec at the supermarket,” he explained. “So, I went to the red section and saw a mass of red wines and was paralyzed. Then I saw a big pig (a Zinfandel) and thought ‘YES, get this one, and if she likes it, I’ll be able to find it again.’ I told everybody I had wine buying figured out — just get animals — and we all laughed ‘til we cried. I liked the art, so I kept the empty bottles for display.” When we spoke, Karl had just entered bottles 5,070 (a donkey) and 5,071 (a fancy fish) into his animal collective, as it were.



*Karl Gunter's 5000 bottle Critter Wine Collection is organized by species*

Animals quickly take the wind out of the gasbag wine snob cliché, and I think we can all relate to Karl's approach and desire to make wine funny instead of a cruel haute-bourgeoisie reckoning. The democratization of wine labels, of course, has also been a goldmine for marketing firms, even going as far as brands like 19 Crimes® linking augmented reality apps to their labels via QR code.

I have no problem with a more welcoming design or one that serves to lighten the mood. I don't object to people shopping by labels out of necessity. But is there any connection between an eye-catching label and the wine in the bottle? I know some people who feel that if there is care and thought put into the label, it suggests the same of the wine inside. I'm sure in some cases that's true, but in plenty of other cases, the person responsible for the label is an overworked winemaker with a family barely breaking even. I can forgive them for not having graphic design talent or a nephew that went to Pratt to help them out. I've heard from importers who have tried to talk to winemakers to get them to update their labels, but sometimes it's their sister or dad who designed it 20 years ago and

they are attached to it for very sweet reasons. Maybe they don't get American irony. Should they be cast aside for using gold leaf and script instead of a line drawing of a pig in a Hawaiian shirt?

I hate the possibility of overlooking a great wine made with heart and soul simply because the label looks like a chapter title page in a high school social studies textbook. Ideally, we would let winemakers make wine and tend vines instead of expecting them to participate in an escalating competition for our eyeballs that has more to do with Instagram than the tenets of biodynamics. I grew up Lutheran and internalized the Protestant attitude towards the Catholic Church's glitz and glamor. When I visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome as a 15 year old, most people were in awe of the adornments and architecture. I, on the other hand, was stewing over how it was a shameful display of decadence paid for by selling indulgences to vulnerable masses (I swear I've loosened up. A bit.) Now I feel that using beauty to manipulate people isn't a reason to condemn beauty, and just because beautiful things draw us in doesn't mean that there isn't truth and goodness to be found, as well. Maybe the surface level beauty is what gets you into religion, music, wine, or whatever — you will eventually find deeper meaning..

Plus, wine is supposed to be fun, right? Bright colors and cute critters may at least suggest that the winemakers don't take themselves too seriously. That in itself may be why we recoil a bit at those labels that look like a funeral director's business card. Nobody needs that on their picnic blanket.

At some point the natural wine movement co-opted the critters. I see this as a pretty great subversion of the Yellow Tail trend, and in many ways a critter on a natural wine label is a more honest rendering of what is in the bottle: wines that go down easy and are not full of agrochemicals. Animals show a sense of irreverence and connection to nature that is genuine. Most of the wines featured this month echo this combination. For instance, there is a stork on the Orsi Grotto Pignoletto (Press 4 White) because they nest on the property. The Iuli Barat (Press 4 Mix/White) is 100% Baratuciat, a white grape whose name means "cat balls" in local Piemontese dialect. Don't blame the messenger: it was named by Italian farmers, not a focus group. Apparently the grapes resemble cat testicles. And, yes, they did go there with the label, but it's more subtle than you think.

*Cheers,*  
Jonathan Kemp



*Fabrizio Iuli*

## **Iuli Barat 2020**

**Piedmont • Italy**

*Press 4 Mix/White*

Fabrizio Iuli has lived in the chalky white clay soils of Monferrato his whole life and is one of the best in the region at showcasing the mineral freshness and finesse that is possible from his native hills, where no synthetic chemical treatments have ever been used. This is despite the ridicule that he and his father were subjected to for not following the ways of modern viticulture. The surrounding forest has given the vines further isolation and protection from agrochemical overspray. These days, Fabrizio's organic vines are getting more respect than ever, and his wines continue to adjust in style as climate changes the game.

The Iuli Barat is a wonderfully rewarding and complex wine expressing vibrant aromas of stone fruits, marzipan, honeycomb confection, rosemary, dried fruit, honeysuckle flowers, and spiced pineapple. On the palate the complexity is echoed with notes of honey, almond, golden ripe apple, honeysuckle and dried fruit, with high acid, medium body, and a hint of spice that in total is reminiscent of aged dry Tokaj with a bolt of electricity. *Jonathan Kemp & Jeremy Hernandez*

## **Weiser Künstler Feinherb 2022**

**Mosel • Germany**

*Press 4 Mix/White*

“We leave them up there to scream, to get over their fears. I instruct them to focus on what’s in front of them, one vine at a time. Then when they finish, they can look down.” So terrifying are the heights of the Ellergrub vineyard near Enkirch that this is the method Alexandra Künstler employs with acrophobic harvest workers perched precariously above the Mosel. However, this same feature—steep terraces with 15-foot walls in some sections—helps maximize sunlight exposure. Konstantin Weiser and Alexandra Künstler also lay claim to a high percentage of old, ungrafted vines in each of their sites, over 110 years old in vineyards like Ellergrub and Gaispfad. Of course, if you want to work these sites organically as Alexandra and her partner Konstantin Weiser do, the labor required is far more taxing than on flatter, gentler land. The Mosel is one of the more difficult places to be an organic winemaker in the world, making these wines all the more special.

Their ‘Feinherb’ bottling is their most approachable and is sourced from a few different sites. Though technically off-dry, you will be hard pressed to detect much sweetness underneath the ripping acidity. Theirs is an uncompromising style that always cuts right to my soul, and where other wines might veer towards expressing power or coming across as severe, the Weiser-Künstler wines are raw in a way that is life-affirming in their nervous, sizzling manner. Lime pith, lemonheads, angel food cake, and a pungent, stony mineral core that smells like you’re standing right beside the Mosel River. This is a mouth-watering, invigorating Riesling that might permanently warp your feelings about Riesling, so be warned. It’s one of the best vintages I’ve had in recent years. Their last names, Weiser and Künstler, respectively mean wisdom (hence the owl on the label) and art (hence the art nouveau design). Their wines also reflect both wisdom and artistry as well as any wines I know. *Jonathan Kemp*

## **Broc Cellars ‘La Boutanche’ Red Blend 1L 2023**

**Northern California • California**

*Press 4 Mix/Red*

Chris Brockway, originally from Omaha, learned winemaking at UC Davis and Cal State Fresno, where he learned how to add all the things to wine that he insists on not adding to his own wines at Broc Cellars in Berkeley. His wife and business partner, Bridget Leary, grew up in Berkeley where her mom had a café and Bridget helped her open a wine bar. When she met Chris, she had no idea anyone was actually making wine in Berkeley. Now she and Chris are making

some of the most exciting wines in California in their Berkeley cellar. They have come to define the “new wave” of California winemaking with wines that pull back on overripe gobs of fruit and alcohol, and instead put freshness and finesse at the forefront.

Their ‘La Boutanche’ collaboration with Selection Massale is 100% Zinfandel that looks back to a style that was more common in the 1970s and 1980s. It’s sourced from Wirth Ranch in Solano County, Arrowhead Mountain in Sonoma Valley, and Buck Hill Vineyard in eastern Sonoma County. Grapes are destemmed and aged for nine months in neutral French oak. It shows off red plum, vanilla, coriander, and cherry cordial with fresh, vivid, brightness. Cranberry and pomegranate notes on the finish are matched with just a touch of crunchy tannins. It’s stupendously delicious with a chill and though it certainly matches the vibe of the badger taking a selfie on the label, it belies the detail, precision and depth that wines of far more solemn presentation would love to possess. Broc, by the way means badger, hence the choice of critter on their label. *Jonathan Kemp*

## **Domaine de la Pépière ‘La Pépie’ Côt VdP 2023**

**Loire • France**

*Press 4 Mix/Red*

Domaine de la Pépière has long been one of our favorite estates of the Muscadet, a region nestled along the banks of the Loire River where it empties into the Atlantic. The domaine was founded by pioneering winemaker Marc Ollivier, who dedicated himself to changing the reputation of Muscadet from one of mass-produced white wines to one that reflects the region’s highly diverse terroirs and micro-climats.

Since Marc’s retirement in 2020, the estate has been run by Rémi Branger and Gwénaëlle Croix, whom Ollivier credits for his conversion to organic, and then to biodynamic, agriculture. While the domaine is mostly planted to the region’s signature white grape, Melon de Bourgogne, Branger and Croix also cultivate three hectares of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Malbec (known locally as Côt).

‘La Pépiè’ is one of those rarer red wines, made from 100% Côt grown in granite soils with a bit of clay. Only free-run juice is used, and the grapes go through a four-day cold fermentation before being macerated for a week on their skins.

The resulting wine has a vibrant, energetic nose with aromas of blackberries, black cherries and black currants, along with an alluring whiff of white pepper. On the palate, silky tannins meld with the wine’s earthier side, bringing struc-

ture and notes of wet horse and damp earth. Medium-rare burgers or steak are a quintessential pairing, but I also think this wine would match beautifully with mushroom risotto and meatier fishes — seared swordfish or bluefin tuna come to mind. *Kate Masters*

## **Common Wealth Crush ‘Let’s Be Friends’ Shenandoah Valley Red 2022**

**Virginia • United States**

*Press 4 Red*

72% Merlot, 13% Sauvignon Blanc, 5% Vidal Blanc, 4% Petit Manseng, 2% Grüner Veltliner, 2% Chambourcin, 1% Pinot Blanc, 1% Pinot Gris

A cooperative dedicated to cultivating the potential of Virginia wine — and its next generation of winemakers — Common Wealth Crush has become known for its inventive cuvées, often featuring hybrid grapes that thrive in Virginia’s humid continental climate despite their frequent dismissal by the wider wine industry.

‘Let’s Be Friends’ is no exception. A blend of more than half a dozen varieties — largely Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, but also the hybrid red grape Chambourcin — its “critter” label features the black bears that are a common sight for hikers in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains (and revered as a creation of the Great Spirit by many indigenous groups).

Even more importantly, the wine inside is lots of fun. Whole clusters of Merlot go through partial carbonic maceration, giving an extra lift to the wine’s aromas of cherry, red currant and macerated rose petals. There’s an earthiness, as well, with notes of black pepper, rare steak, and Shenandoah forests after a night of rain adding to the wine’s complexity. *Kate Masters*



*Tim Jordan of Common Wealth*



## Herve Villemade 'Bovin' 1L 2022

**Loire • France**

*Press 4 Red*

Herve Villemade's path to organic farming and zero-sulfur wines was inspired by discovering Marcel Lapierre and Tue Boeuf's wines; and that he had an allergy to sulfur. To make sulfur-free wines, he needed his grapes to be super healthy, so he converted his family's vineyards to organic methods in 2000. Since then, he's developed a reputation for making some of the most reliably delicious, affordable natural wines in the Loire Valley. They are giving and generous wines, just like the cow that graces his 'Bovin' Gamay. Bovin comes from purchased fruit and it's meant to represent the liter bottles that negociants sold in the '50s and '60s and customers could bring back for refills.

So many things to love here — 100% Gamay fermented with whole clusters and aged in concrete. Aromas of cherry candies and currants mingle with a little fresh organic funk, and on the palate there's more cherry, more dark red fruits, plus a nice spicy complexity that reminds me of caraway and nutmeg. Herve Villemade is such a consistent winemaker, and I'm always drawn to his fresh, slightly funky wines because of how satiating they are. With or without food, it's going to hit the spot. *Jonathan Kemp*

## Orsi Vigneto San Vito Pignoletto Classico Vigna del Grotto 2020

**Emilia-Romagna • Italy**

*Press 4 White*

With deep family roots in Emilia-Romagna, it was only natural that Federico Orsi would heed the call to “plant his own roots” by establishing a winery in Italy after spending most of his youth in Brazil. Most of his family had a background in agriculture and his parents were some of the first to move away from agriculture as a career path. Federico developed an appreciation for wine at a young age from being exposed to his grandfather's collection of great Burgundy wines from the '50s and '60s. The lifelong exposure to great wine, and a family background of farming, seems to have created the perfect conditions for Federico to become a winemaker in his own right.

The Vigna del Grotto is a single vineyard planted on a steep limestone slope using biodynamic practices. The Pignoletto, also known as Grecchetto Gentile, is macerated briefly for one night and spontaneously fermented. Aging takes place in large oak botti for nine months.

When Federico visited our shop in June of 2024, I was especially drawn to the Vigna del Grotto Pignoletto. This is my favorite style of white wine showing characteristics of oxidation, butterscotch, minerality, and spice. I get notes of ripe stone fruit, with a medium body that makes this wine built for food. This is a perfect wine for this transitional pre-autumn weather. *Jeremy Hernandez*

## **Rapillo Bianco**

**Emilia-Romagna • Italy**

*Press 4 White*

Antonella Consilia Volpe is a no-nonsense grower and winemaker in Serrone, Lazio, where she works organically in an isolated, rugged, mountainous area — only 50 miles from Rome but a world apart in cultural terms. The historic residents of the area remained independent from Rome until 300 A.D., which is still reflected in the region's strong-willed, obstinate identity. Antonella has parcels scattered throughout the hillsides and makes rustic, humbly delicious wines from Cesanese and Passerina. She is in her 60s, speaks no English, and most of her wines are made to quench the thirst of local villagers.

Her Bianco is 100% Passerina grown on sandy loam and vinified in stainless steel with native yeasts and no filtration. It's fresh and unpretentious, but still has a nice textural depth and a dialed-in balance of lemongrass with volcanic, mineral salinity. *Jonathan Kemp*

## **Mateus Nicolau de Almeida 'Eremitas Antao do Deserto' Douro Branco 2021**

**Douro • Portugal**

*Press 2*

Mateus Nicolau de Almeida is a fifth-generation winemaker in Portugal's Douro region. Hailing from a family with a deep history in Port production, Mateus has branched out to explore the different subzones of the Douro through the lens of dry red and white wines. He and his partner, Teresa Ameztoy, work everything organically and biodynamically. Their cellar is named Shad's Winery, after the fish that used to swim from the Atlantic up the Douro River before the river was dammed. Their label also sports this fish.

Eremitas is 100% Rabigato, one of the oldest grapes in Europe which is grown mostly in the Douro. It's a reference to the grape bunches resembling a cat's tail, or rabo di gato. Mateus and Teresa's Rabigato is planted on schist near a stream

at 350 meters above sea level. The grapes are foot trodden and aged in concrete for a year. It's waxy, opulent, and complex, with layers of spiced apple and salt. It's a bewitching mixture of depth and richness, not ever crossing the line into something powerful or heavy, just remaining poised and inimitable. Pair with shad if you can find it, but trout, crab, pork, or grilled vegetables will be every bit as tasty. *Jonathan Kemp*



*Mateus Nicolau de Almeida*

## **Chapuis Chapuis Mercurey 2022**

### **Burgundy • France**

#### **Press 2**

Chapuis and Chapuis is a project of the Chapuis brothers, Romain and Jean-Guillaume. They're from Burgundy but Romain, who is the winemaker and viticulturist, worked abroad for years in Australia, New Zealand, and Lebanon before returning to Burgundy to work for Philippe Pacalet. Apparently he was hired by Pacalet mostly because of his size, since Pacalet's cellar work and punchdown regimen entails a lot of physical strength. Turns out Romain has both brains and brawn, however, and he's making Burgundies that are both exciting and relatively affordable, a very rare combination these days. He and his brother began doing négoce but soon started acquiring parcels that they work themselves.

The Mercurey comes from a parcel that they decided to stop working after the 2022 vintage, so this is the last time this cuvée will be available. It is fermented whole cluster with a short maceration and spends 11 months in oak – 30% new barrel. Sulfur additions are tiny. Some of their wines can be natty, but the Mercurey is a beautiful mixture of lively rawness that doesn't overwhelm the elegant

richness. There is raspberry, bing cherry, earthy umami, and a touch of vanilla from the oak — but it similarly doesn't overwhelm the fruit. The extraction is lighter, but it is still satiating and layered. It's a terrific example of the newer wave of Burgundies emerging recently. *Jonathan Kemp*



**SEPTEMBER 2024**

Vanderbilt Ave Wine Merchants  
573 Vanderbilt Ave, Brooklyn, NY