

This year's Friends Wine Auction is just around the corner. It is on Saturday, May 1st and all the money goes to reduce the risk of cancer. If you've never been, go. It's fun, it's casual, it's educational, and a great wine value.

This year we are recognizing the Central Coast of California wines (basically between San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara). The area has a fantastic and rich tradition. Grapes have been grown in this area since 1797. Today, there are over 200 vineyards, over 100 wineries, and over 3,000 acres of vines. Three valleys open to the ocean. The only place in America where the valleys open from East to West. Best known for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, it's the home of several Rhone verticals as well. In recent years prices of these wines have risen, but it is still the best place in America to find good value wines.

What makes the Central Coast special? Well, the mountain range which runs North and South and turns toward the sea in the Central Coast. This creates a channel for cool sea breezes and fog, which creates great growing conditions for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

The slopes on the hillside create great sun exposures for the grapes and the long growing season can create great wine. This is one of the largest growing seasons in the world which intensifies flavors and add complexity.

The four wineries we're honoring this year are all leaders in this area. All make great wine and each one has unique wines and specialties.

Qupe's Bob Lindquist is one of the original Rhone Rangers. His bold, inventive viticulture has shaped American Syrah. His winery was founded in 1982. When you talk about American Syrah, the conversation starts and stops with Qupe's Hillside Select. This is a big, huge, sweet Syrah that has all the pepper and wild game elements that makes Syrah great. This is not a sweet Australian Shiraz. It is a well-made balanced, agreeable Syrah. He makes Chardonnay too! His Chardonnay is made in a rich and dramatic style.

Our second honoree is Cold Heaven, a relatively new winery. Specializing in Viognier, the wine is poured by the glass in some of the greatest restaurants in the world. Morgan Clendenen has gotten off to a fast start with worldwide recognition (if you didn't know, Viognier has its roots in the Condrieu region of the Rhone). Floral notes, grapefruit, and a mineral finish characterize it. Delish with shellfish and seafood. If you don't know American Viognier, here's the place to start. By the way, she was recently voted one of the more interesting persons in Santa Barbara.

Also attending is Foley Vineyards, another relative newcomer to the Central Coast. Alan Phillips is making great Pinot Noir. At a recent tasting in Nashville, Alan's Pinot Noir was paired with seared tuna. The Foley was head and shoulders above the other Pinot Noirs. Good harmony, good sweet fruit, a nice long structured finish, and plenty of complexity. My idea of a good American Pinot Noir.

Finally, Justin Vineyards, founded in 1981 by Justin and Deborah Baldwin, will be honored as well. Their first vintage was 1987. Although they make Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, and even Port on occasion, they are best known for "Isosceles" (a Cabernet blend). When I drink this wine I always think of black cherries and leather. This wine consistently gets rave reviews from numerous critics.

I hope you'll try some Central Coast wines soon. None are among the top 50 wines served in restaurants in the United States, but they are quality wines at reasonable prices. Also, I hope you'll attend the Friends Auction on Saturday, May 1st. I've been to every major wine auction in the United States and there is none more fun than this one. Call me at 615-352-2679 or Jan Anderson at 615-329-1760 to get a ticket.

Someone recently asked me the definition of a good wine and I said, "It's simple, it should begin and end with a smile."