

Wine & Partners

By Robert M. Weintraub

Can cutesy-named wines be serious?

Wine connoisseurs are usually serious about wine. So serious that we often get looks from people who seem to be thinking "get a life!" I must confess that I often get so serious about wine that I miss out on the fun.

Take the current trend of Australian wine makers to give their wines cute-sounding names, such as "Kilroy Was Here," "Duck Duck Goose," "Dark Chocolate Box," and "Cupcake." Normally I would dismiss such wines as not being serious. Am I wrong! It turns out these humorously-named wines are dead serious.

I bumped into a friend at Harris Teeter where there is a corner display of Cupcake wines – chardonnay and merlot – for \$10. She said the chard was so good it got an 88 rating from *Wine Spectator* magazine and a 2nd Street Fernandina bistro is selling it for \$9 a glass. As I respect this woman's opinion on wine I bought a bottle of Cupcake chardonnay and, yes, it's as good as you would like a California chard to be.

Cupcake is a complex wine, characterized by aromas of fruit intertwined with creamy oak, vanilla and a long soft finish. Cupcake Vineyards is in Monterey County right on the Pacific Ocean where cool foggy nights slow the growing process. This increases the grape's sugars which creates a good balance with the chardonnay grape's normal acidity. Cupcake chard is a soft and creamy wine in the American style with a touch of apple, vanilla and spice in the taste. Great as an aperitif and good with shellfish and full-flavored fish dishes.

Cupcake also makes a Sauvignon Blanc that received a 90-point rating from both *Wine Enthusiast* and Patterson's Tasting Panel, but which is not part of the Harris Teeter offering.

With my interest piqued in cute Ausie wine, I stopped into Amelia Liquors to browse their shelves where I found a couple that normally I would scoff at, but both turned out to be serious wines worthy of recommending.

Chocolate Box Dark sounds like a dessert wine, but it is a serious 100% shiraz from a single vineyard owned by the Roiland Estate in Barossa Valley, A small family owned winery established in 1999. *Wine Enthusiast* gave it a 90-point rating making this wine well worth the \$18 price. It has generous aromas of blackberries, anisé and espresso. The palate shows vanillin oak and spice flavors; soft tannins round off this wine which has a long finish. It is ideal with strong-flavored meat dishes, such as a jambalaya with andouille/spinach sausage.

The wine is so named because the vintner wanted to be sure his wife always has chocolate around the house! She loves the real thing but they have small children and they watch the sweets. Roiland Estate also makes a sauvignon blanc called White Chocolate.

The second oddly-named Australian wine I discovered is Pillar Box Red named after the free-standing mail boxes at one time common in Britain and the British Commonwealth (tall, round or octagonal cast iron columns with a mail slot and often painted red). This wine is a blend of 50% shiraz, 42% cabernet sauvignon and 8% merlot aged in a mix of used French and American oak.

Amelia Liquors has priced this gem at \$12 which, considering its 91 points from Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*, makes it a "Best Buy."

Pillar Box Red is from the South Australia Padthaway vineyards known as Henry's Drive, which also produces wines called "Dead Letter Office," "Postmistress," and "Morse Code." (There is no report on why the Longbottom family is so obsessed with the postal system.)

This wine over delivers for the price: it has a red/black color with a scarlet rim; you might say it looks purple. It offers an enticing, fruity nose with aromas of cassis and berries. Full-bodied, ripe and layered with flavor -- berries, cinnamon and a hint of dark chocolate -- the tannins are full yet soft, combined with gentle acidity to produce a lingering finish.

When you sample it, you will notice a lot of oak on the nose, and the tannins may be a bit strong for some. However, on the palate the Pillar Red is spectacular. Pair it with soft cheese, such as brie or blue and taste the tannins melt out of the finish.

So let's have some fun! I'm about to open a bottle of Molly Decker's "Two Left Feet," another shiraz/cab/merlot blend from Down Under. It's party time!

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