Layered flavors, lingering finish from J pinot noir

ONCE a drink made all the difference. Nicole Hitchcock had been working late at an Italian trattoria in her hometown of Carmel, when the owner uncorked a bottle of Amarone.

He poured a glass for her, and the dry Italian red made quite an impression, a turning point for this winemaker-to-be.

Hitchcock is behind our wine-of-the-week winner — the J 2015 Monterey County, Sonoma County and Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir, 14.6%, $25.

It’s a pretty pinot with jammy fruit and notes of cherry, plum, cola and cracked black pepper. What makes it a standout are its layered flavors and lingering finish.

“At J, our style of pinot noir leans towards a ripe, pronounced profile of fruit, good concentration and texture, with nuanced notes of oak to support all of the intriguing characteristics that pinot noir can bring to the table,” Hitchcock said.

The most challenging part of making a great bottle of pinot noir is “getting it right in the vineyard,” she said.

“There are lots of variables to consider,” Hitchcock said. “Much success is reliant upon Mother Nature, and even if that goes well, timely and consistent vineyard management practices must be applied.

“If all goes well and the grapes are harvested at the perfect ripeness level and delivered to the winery safe and sound, making a great pinot noir becomes very attainable.”

What makes Hitchcock well suited to work with the Rulik grape is that she’s so inquisitive. “I love constant learning and evolution, and this carries over nicely into the craft and business of winemaking,” she said.

“Each new vintage brings a new story to the table and as a winemaker provides me with the opportunity to learn something new as well as to apply what I’ve discovered in the past.”

Hitchcock 38, studied at UC Davis, where she majored in Viticulture and Enology with a minor in Italian language, graduating in 2011.

In 2015, she completed her MBA in Wine Business through Sonoma State University.

In between earning two degrees, she completed winery internships in California and Australia and worked in wineries of all sizes and scopes.

Hitchcock has always set her sights on making her home in Sonoma County and in 2010, she came home to begin a winemaking role with Gallo of Sonoma. She has been at J since 2015.

“I’m married and a mother of two daughters — Hazel and Lucy, ages 6 and 3,” Hitchcock said.

“They often tell me that they want to work in the winery with me when they grow up.”

This Week’s Blind Tasting
Pinot Noir

TOP PICK J Vineyards

J Vineyards 2015 Monterey County, Sonoma County and Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir, 14.6% alcohol, $25.

A complex pinot with layers of raspberry, castas and sage. Bright acid. Crisp finish, just lovely.

TASTY ALTERNATIVES


Trecini, 2013 Vicini Vineyards, Sonoma County Pinot Noir, 13.4%, $55.+++

An earthy pinot with some smoky notes — cherry and strawberry. Balanced, top rate.

MacRostie, 2013 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 14.8%. $93.+++


Marin Estate, 2013 Mas Cavalls Pinot Noir, $42.+++

A tasty pinot with notes of wafly cherry and forest floor. Supple texture — fleshy. A solid pinot.

More reviews are online at presdemocrat.com