

Talus Considered, and Little King Honoured

Ever a sucker for a bargain, I breezed through a fair bit of Talus last month when the California wines themselves breezed back into town with a new look, a new label, and, best of all, a new price—however temporary that was.

Perhaps you availed yourself of the two-buck discount offered on the 2002 Lodi Shiraz and Merlot and the 2003 Chardonnay throughout November, because here in HEAD-land (stands for “hardly ever any deals”) we rarely get cut rates on the booze we buy.

Of course, it's a ploy to get us to try the product, but what's wrong with that? As an introductory gesture it's precisely the right thing to do. Keep your eyes open in the liquor store and you can pocket some savings.

At their \$12.98 regular price, these three varietals are just fine; at \$10.98 they were a steal. If it all passed you by too fast, you can still enjoy the wines, if not the discounts, which are all finished, except for the Pinot Grigio, which landed here at \$11.98 and stays that way.

Let's take a look. Talus 2003 Chardonnay comes off a little peach-sweet at the front of the palate then rolls right into the regulation California-fruit-salad finish: fresh apple, a touch of tropical fruit, honey, and even a little lemon zest; in fact, it's way more citrusy than most similarly priced Australians. If you like yours fresh and bright with a gentle bite, this is your kind of Chardonnay. Fine value still.

Even better value is the Talus 2003 Pinot Grigio, which for some reason never saw a discount; could it have something to do with the fact that the wine copped a best of show at this year's San Francisco Wine Competition? It's a good one—nicely grassy aromas and an initial zap of lime to the front palate; more like a Sauvignon; very pleasant but very tart, which makes it pretty much a food

wine. The winemakers are suggesting spicy Thai dishes; maybe something Sichwan, too: chili-fried green beans with or without shredded beef, charred asparagus and a lime aioli, a Cobb salad (and make sure you use a gentle blue cheese, not that industrial wedgy stuff).

The reds showed well, too. Talus 2002 Lodi Cabernet Sauvignon pours practically blue-purple, delivers a smoked-fish edge to the nose—the back label points in the direction of “blackberry, mint and licorice”—and finishes quite soft and mellow. If your introduction to Cabernets at this price level has had the insides of your cheeks caving in from too much tannin, this one will puff them right out again.

But the best taste—and the best buy in the bunch—is the Talus Lodi Merlot 2003, with a bit of kick at 13.5 percent, a sweet berry nose, and lots of backbone with tannins that are headier but well under control. The flavour offers up a bit of blueberry, some mulling spice, a little sneeze of black pepper; there's lots of weight and ripe, mellow Merlot taste. For my money it was the best of the bunch, with the Pinot Grigio running a close second.

Who knows, maybe they'll do another discount deal in the new year. But as the feds always used to say, don't wait for spring, do it now.

ONE OF B.C.'S most innovative wineries has just released its first sparkling wine. Don't expect anything conventional—ever—from Elephant Island Orchard Wines of Naramata. The first vintage of its *methode Champenoise* sparkling wine is called The Little King and it's made from...apples, with a raspberry dosage but still sitting at a solid 0 on the sweetness scale.

The wine was produced by Elephant Island proprietors Miranda and Del Halladay in honour of their infant son, Rex, who



died as a result of suffocation in his mother's hospital bed just hours after birth. The back label reads: “Celebrating the life of our son, Rex Halladay—our little king. Love, laughter, family and friendship are the soul of this wine...share it with those you love.”

A hundred cases of The Little King were produced, a labour-intensive process that began prior to Rex's birth in July 2002. This quote from Miranda Halladay: “Creating sparkling wine *methode champenoise* is by far the most involved wine making process we have embarked on, requiring many, many touches to the individual bottle. From the therapy the physical involvement provided to the symbolism and occasion that sparkling wines connote, The Little King has grown to represent everything Rex taught us: to live is to laugh and to love.”

Many talented and creative people were involved in the production, including wine-label and packaging genius Bernie Hadley-Beauregard as well as winemaker Ross Mirko and the team at Lang Vineyards in Naramata. You can get a bottle only through the winery,

where it sells for \$21.95. When I called to order my supply for the season, there were approximately 30 cases remaining.

The taste? Sensational, fresh, rich, beautiful, with a hint, just a rumour, of apple for the back of the palate; brilliant colour, pink and vibrant; bone dry and crisp—all around, a lovely wine. I wouldn't know where to put it in the what-wine-is-this-category, but I know where and when to serve it: everywhere, anytime. Especially over the holidays.

Don't let it get warm, though. Put it right back in the fridge—or even the freezer—after pouring the first glass, to keep it really cold. This is an astonishingly good fruit wine—regardless of fruit and regardless of impetus—and one I hope they will consider making again. And maybe a little more of it.

Elephant Island is donating all proceeds from the sale of The Little King to B.C.'s Children's Hospital to support the education of regional and rural hospitals in best codes of practice for peri- and postnatal care. The Tasting Room phone number is (250) 496-5522. ■

Uncorked
JURGEN GOTHE