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California Vines With D.C. Roots

By Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg
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You can't judge a wine by its label.

The most beautifully ornate wine labels and bottles -- such as those of Far Niente, which has produced distinguished estate cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, and Dolce, the exquisite honeyed nectar late-harvest dessert wine -- sometimes reflect the elegance found within.

But there's not always a correlation. The labels of Charles Shaw (a.k.a. "Two-Buck Chuck") wines look rather dignified, and, despite its beautiful blue bottle and label, Blue Nun Qualitätswein is rather forgettable. Still, because the labels on the four Calistoga Estate Vineyards wines from [Napa Valley](#) we sat down to taste recently appeared at first glance to be the work of a hobbyist's laser printer, our expectations were low. Truth be told, very low.

We are rarely so happy to be so wrong.

Each held a delicious surprise, stemming as much from what each wasn't as what it was. The *2003 Calistoga Estate Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon* wasn't big or tannic, just vibrant with dark red berry flavors. The *2005 Calistoga Estate Vineyards Chardonnay* wasn't oaked, and it was light-bodied and refreshing. The *2003 Calistoga Estate Vineyards Merlot* wasn't a pushover, and it wowed us with its black cherry flavors and soft tannins. The *2005 Calistoga Estate Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc* wasn't overly acidic and had a clean, lemony fruitiness. Each one of these unpretentious, easy-drinking charmers was beautifully balanced -- and the reds radiantly so. After discovering each carried a suggested retail price of only \$15, we were even more surprised.

But most surprising of all was that credit for these wines belongs to a D.C. native, 74-year-old Marvin Stirman, who says his passion for wine is as high as it has always been throughout more than five decades in the wine trade as a successful retailer, wholesaler and distributor.

That passion also led him in the early 1960s to co-found the Washington, D.C.-based Les Amis du Vin ("The Friends of Wine"), an organization for wine lovers that Stirman says had more than 30,000 members in 35 chapters at its height. This innovative organization played a part in broadening wine's appeal and enjoyment beyond the exclusive domain of connoisseurs and into that of the general American public.

Innovation is contagious, and indeed Les Amis' popular wine tastings and classes were instrumental in attracting people who went on to play leading roles in the world of wine and food, including wine critic Robert M. Parker Jr. and two of [The Washington Post's](#) own former food editors, William Rice and longtime restaurant critic Phyllis Richman.

Richman described Stirman to us as "unassuming -- you wouldn't necessarily pick him out as a dynamic force in the Washington wine world, but he's very quietly been quite important." In an e-mail, Rice dubbed Stirman "the most innovative wine retailer of the '70s."

Despite everything else he has achieved, at least two of Stirman's major goals had gone unfulfilled. Goal No. 1: After being involved in virtually every other aspect of the wine business, he wanted to make his own wine.

A few years ago, Stirman and 27 partners bought an estate in Napa Valley. While their own vines are growing, they're buying grapes elsewhere and having their wines blended to Stirman's specifications by

third-generation [Sonoma](#) winemaker Harry Parducci Jr. After 50 years in the wine business, Stirman thinks he knows what today's customers want. "Less than 10 percent of buyers are looking for big wines that they can cellar," he says. "Ninety percent of wine buyers are looking for a nice bottle of wine at a reasonable price that they can enjoy tonight."

Stirman has had to "fight" with Parducci, he says, to create them. "While he's always been focused on creating 'great' wines, I wanted wines that are very soft and easy to drink, with little tannin and no oak," Stirman says. "Wine with too much oak is undrinkable. It's like eating toothpicks."

For years, when Stirman was based at Calvert Liquor (today part of [Calvert Woodley](#)) down the street from Pearson's Wine & Liquor, the two shops battled it out for business. We asked Steve Silver, proprietor of Pearson's, what he thinks of Stirman's Calistoga Estate wines. "Marvin has done a great job," Silver acknowledged in an e-mail. "The whites are good, solid bistro wines. The sauvignon blanc is my favorite: bright and crisp, stainless-steel treated, plenty of fruit, and just the right edge. The reds are good, full-fruited wines . . . and you can't beat them for [the price]."

Stirman's Goal No. 2 stems from his pet peeve: wine writers. "No offense," he adds politely, once he realizes what he's said to whom. "I just hate going to wine tastings and hearing critics rave about certain wines -- and then, after they've left, seeing their glasses still full. It proves to me that they didn't really enjoy them."

"I have always told people, 'Don't listen to wine writers, who are only telling you what they like. Taste for yourself!' " Stirman says. "But I failed to convince the public to trust its own taste. Instead, people seek out wines with 90-plus ratings, and won't touch one that's an 89."

There's no better tribute you could pay to a man who's done so much to share his love of wine with so many than to taste his wine and -- regardless of our praise or its modest label (which, by the way, is being redesigned) -- to decide for yourself what you think of it.

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