

5 Best wines to drink on #NationalWineDay

By Mary Orlin 05/23/2016

Page 1

On May 25, it's time to raise a glass and toast #NationalWineDay. But before you pop that cork -- or twist off the screw cap, check out these five Northern California wine and winemakers you need to know on this annual vinous holiday. Whatever you drink, be sure to post your photos and selfies -- with wine of course -- on Instagram and Twitter.

1. Patriotic wine: Purple Heart Wines

Memorial Day is around the corner, and Charles Krug Winery owner C. Mondavi & Family just launched Purple Heart Wines to support military heroes. They tapped winemaker -- and Vietnam veteran Ray Coursen to create the 2013 Purple Heart Red Wine (\$19.99) Bordeaux blend. So far, Purple Heart Wines has given \$10,000 to the Purple Heart Foundation. www.purpleheartwines.com

2. Illicit label: Cycles Gladiator

This wine, with an airborne, naked woman hanging onto a bicycle on its label, was once banned from Alabama's retail shop shelves. Winemaker Adam LaZarre, who created Cycles Gladiator in 2005, used a vintage French Belle Epoque bicycle shop poster for his label art. It was too risqué for Alabama's wine officials.

A few years into the project, LaZarre departed the company and the wines went, well, south in quality -- and the label changed, minimizing the nude nymph. But Wine Hooligans head hooligan Dennis Carroll bought Cycles Gladiator in 2014 to revitalize it, and lured LaZarre back. The wines have never been better, thanks to a vineyard-to-table focus, with LaZarre involved in every step of the farming and winemaking. And Carroll restored the original label to its original glory too.

By the way, Alabama recently lifted its Cycles Gladiator ban. "The girl on the bicycle is off probation in Alabama," Carroll says.

We're particularly fond of the silky, fruit-forward 2014 Merlot, but we like the crisp chardonnay and dark, rich petite sirah, and the nice \$10.99 price too. www.cyclesgladiator.com



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Page 2

3. America's first sparkling sauvignon blanc: Bodkin Wines

This year we've tasted California sparkling red syrah and sparkling white pinotage. Now we're adding America's first sparkling sauvignon blanc to that list. Bodkin Wines winemaker Christopher Christensen was inspired by New Zealand sparkling sauvignon blanc and created his own in 2012. Demand for the crisp citrusy, toasted hazelnutty NV Cuvee Agincourt Brut (\$23) has been growing ever since. www.bodkinwines.com

4. Winemaker to watch: Keegan Mayo, Assiduous Wines

By day, he's the assistant winemaker at Testarossa Winery in Los Gatos. But at night and on weekends, Keegan Mayo works on his own wine label. His first home winemaking project was a Napa Valley zinfandel, made in 2010. He launched Assiduous with those same zin grapes, and a chardonnay, in 2013. Mayo's making a tiny amount -- 150 cases or so. But we love that the name Assiduous was inspired by a dictionary and thesaurus search to find a word expressing winemaking care, attention and effort. The watercolor label art reflects each vineyard's personality. Pink and gray on the 2014 Coast View Vineyard Chardonnay (\$30) represent granite soil, while blue is for the ocean breezes; the 2014 Tip Top Vineyard Zinfandel (\$40) is terraced, with red-brown iron rich soil as depicted on the label. www.assiduouswines.com

5. Offbeat wines: Colombard and tannat at Y. Rousseau Wines

Winemaker Yannick Rousseau is on a mission to make sure you taste these obscure French white and red wine varieties. Rousseau hails from France's Gascony region, where he made wines from both grapes. There's not much tannat growing in California, but colombard was once the most widely planted white wine grape in the state. It still grows in the central valley, Lodi and, in the Russian River Valley, where Rousseau sources fruit from 45-year-old grapevines for his 2014 Old Vines Colombard (\$20). Rousseau's also making tannat, but we're taken with his 2015 Rosé of Tannat (\$24), made with Solano County grapes. www.yrousseauwines.com

