CABERNET, IT’S WHAT’S FOR DINNER

THESE STAR-QUALITY WINES WILL COMPLEMENT YOUR FAVORITE CUT OF BEEF

BY ROBERT CALVERT

He was one of the more colorful actors of his generation, a larger-than-life guy with “mythic presence, an image of beatific stoicism, grace under fire” and “wry unflappability in the face of life’s ever-threatening absurdities.” In short, Robert Mitchum was a big star.

Born in Connecticut, he lived briefly in Charleston as a boy. But after his father was killed in an accident, Mitchum’s mother moved her family back North, where she found employment as a linotype operator.

Mitchum was a classic “bad boy.” According to biographer Lee Server, the precocious miscreant was expelled from middle school for doing something nasty in a teacher’s hat. Later, he was kicked out of high school.

Notwithstanding his spotty academic record, Mitchum was highly intelligent, an avid reader and autodidact who spent hours in the public library perusing “novels, histories, anthropological studies, poetry, biographies.” Soon he decided to expand his education through travel.

“One a morning in 1932, 14-year-old Robert Mitchum hopped aboard a freight train heading south.” Adventures ensued.

Mitchum knocked about here and there for several years.
1. Marinated steak with grilled ratatouille.

2. Robert Mondavi Winery seen from To Kalon Vineyard in Oakville.

films noirs.

An enthusiastic abuser of alcohol and cannabis, Mitchum nevertheless worked hard at acting, making more than 110 films and TV series. (Moonshine aficionados revere his performance in Thunder Road, which he co-wrote and produced.) Curiously, Mitchum may be known best today for a series of voice-overs he did in the early 1990s.

Mr. Server writes that the actor’s voice “had come to sound like the voice of the West, of frontier values, masculine values, the sound of when men...
were Men. In a time of quiche and oat bran, Mitchum ... was the natural spokesman for the American Beef Council ... ‘Beef! It’s what’s for dinner!’”

What did Mitchum drink while dining on that beef? A recording he made in 1966 provides a clue—“I’m praying for rain in California,” he crooned, “so the grapes can grow and they can make more wine. . . .” Our prayers mirror Mitchum’s, and when we dine on beef we like to follow the actor’s example: We quaff California wines—especially Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa and Sonoma counties.

We tasted several of these Cabs recently, paired with beef, of course.

Mondavi

Robert Mondavi (1913 – 2008) was a charismatic wine impresario who according to Arturo Ciompi, “preached the California gospel to any who would listen.” Thanks largely to the Napa evangelist’s marketing efforts, “great wine and California wine became synonymous.”

Mondavi’s winery (robertmondaviwinery.com) is located in Oakville next to the To Kalon Vineyard.

Robert Mondavi Winery
Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 ($63) is all but opaque, with a sliver of maroon around the edge. Fragrances of blackberries, raspberries and oak presage glorious flavors that follow—black raspberries, currants, figs, cherries, cinnamon. Fruity and tangy, this elegant potion provides sleek tannin to parry fat in even the heartiest ribeye steak.

Jordan

Colorado natives Sally and Tom Jordan loved the wine and food of France. According to Jordan Winery (jordanwinery.com), “One night while enjoying their first glass of Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour in San Francisco, they had an aha moment: They could realize their very French vision in Northern California.” The Jordans obtained land in the Alexander Valley, constructed a magnificent château, planted former prune orchards to vine, and with guidance from André Tchelistcheff, initiated their winemaking program.

Jordan Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2013
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($55) is a deep ruby color, slightly translucent. Exuding lissome aromas of berries, tea and oak, this graceful, food-friendly wine offers blackberry, currant, raspberry and black cherry flavors—with a smidgen of bitter chocolate.

Spottswoode
Spottswoode Winery (spottswoode.com) is located in St. Helena, an unusually charming town in the northern part of Napa County. A German immigrant planted vines on the property in the 1870s. (One of the subsequent owners was named Spotts.) Mary and John Novak purchased Spottswoode in 1972, initially growing grapes there. The family began making wines in 1982. Mary Novak and her two daughters run Spottswoode today, producing Cabernet Sauvignon and tasty Sauvignon Blanc (as well as small quantities of Syrah and Albariño.) Grapes come from the St. Helena estate and other vineyards around Napa and Sonoma counties.

Spottswoode Lyndenhurst
Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 ($85) is deep purple with a faint ruby glow at the rim. Fragrances of juicy fruit, tea and crushed green leaves usher in rich flavors of blackberries, blueberries, currants, black tea and smooth vanilla. Some writers say they taste graphite and menthol as well.

Brandlin
Owned by Cuvaison since 1998, Brandlin (brandlinvineyard.com) is grown on a property in the southern Mayacamas Range on Napa Valley’s west side. The Brandlin family settled there in the 19th century and planted vineyards beginning in 1926.
Brandlin’s mountaintop provenance imparts a special intensity to the Brandlin Estate Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 ($75). More or less opaque, with a maroon hue, its tangy bouquet is loaded with fragrances of dark fruit and oak. Its robust flavor is similarly dark and intense—elements of blackberries, currants and dried figs with subtle acidity and moderate tannin. You may note elements of espresso and tobacco.

Epilogue
Wildfires struck California wine country in the fall of 2017. Fanned by fierce seasonal winds, the fires killed 38 people, destroyed more than 5,300 homes and leveled three schools. About seven percent of wineries were hit. The Wine Business Institute reports that damage to wineries could have been much worse, but in the affected areas, vineyards often served as firebreaks. According to the Institute, “The most significant impact on the North Coast wine industry was an immediate and temporary slowdown of visitors to the region ... driven by images and reports at the height of the disaster.”

How can we help our friends in wine country recover? We can buy their wines. The 2017 harvest was complete before the fires began; wines from 2017 will be up to usual standards when they are released. Also, those of us with leisure to travel can visit wine country; hostelries and wineries are open for business and are eager to welcome us.

Robert Calvert drinks and writes in Louisville. Questions or comments? Email Robert: RBCalvert@att.net.