FERRARI IS THE PREEMINENT PRODUCER OF METODO CLASSICO
SHARPENING NOSES AND PALATES WITH TEN INTERNATIONAL SELECTIONS AT THE
Game Of Wines EVENT IN WASHINGTON, D.C.
As millions of ardent fans already know, “More wine!” is a command routinely uttered by Lord Tyrion Lannister in the hit HBO series Game of Thrones. But despite his brilliantly scheming mind and penchant for gulping goblets with nary a breath, Tyrion would be no match for the army of talented industry professionals who recently gathered in the courts of SommCon Washington, D.C. for the Game of Wines event, sponsored by The SOMM Journal and The Tasting Panel.

Their mission? To blind-taste ten wines in 15 minutes and jostle with the challenging nuances of aroma, flavor, texture, and aftertaste. Victory—and, of course, spoils in the form of cash prizes—would be claimed by the three contestants who most correctly identified the wines, the grape varieties from which they were produced, and their places of origin.

The ten wines were an eclectic mix of bottlings from locations near and far: some familiar, some more unexpected. “I know we presented some ringers,” said event moderator and SOMM Journal Publisher/Editorial Director Meridith May. “But a few of you hit the mark, and we have a winner!”

Taking the Game of Wines title “by a nose” was Ariana Tsuchiya, who works as a sommelier at Alan Wong’s in Honolulu, Hawaii. Tsuchiya credited her win to spending time with Masters of Wine at SommCon to learn more about tasting methodologies. “SommCon and Game of Wines were such great experiences because they merge wine enjoyment with education,” she told The SOMM Journal. “It allowed me to think about each wine in a vacuum, finding the nuances in each variety. Friendly competitions like this provide an opportunity to venture out of our comfort zones, challenge ourselves, and discover something new.”

The participating winery representatives expressed similar sentiments. “SommCon was a great opportunity to share our stories and wines with professionals and enthusiasts,” said Jerry Humphrey, who presented for California’s J. Lohr Vineyards and Wines. “Wine should be about gathering together, sharing experiences, and having fun. Game of Wines succeeded in all of these areas.”

Megan Cline of Cline Family Cellars concurred, adding that she especially enjoyed the inclusion of releases outside of the mainstream. “There is so much beauty in wines from obscure places or wines made in varietally variable styles,” she said. “They make you pause, think, and analyze more deeply. My favorites were the wines I could never guess blind!”

With that, here is a rundown of the challengers. Let the Games begin!
Tucked into the steep volcanic slopes of the southern Zemplén Mountains, the historic Hungarian village of Mád is located in the heart of the country’s Tokaj wine region. Here, 18th-generation winemaker István Szepsy Jr. fashions world-class dry and sweet Aszú wines from 11 vineyards, which comprise 25 hectares mostly planted to Furmint, the region’s signature grape.

One of those vineyards, Szent Tamás, is a south-facing Grand Cru slope just east of Mád that was classified as a premier growing area in the early 1700s. According to Enikő Magyar, who serves as Project Director for Hungarian wine promoter Wines of Excellence, the vineyard is so prestigious that the winery there was named after it. “From this terroir, this dry Furmint expresses real complexity, minerality, depth, and elegance,” Magyar says of the vineyard’s red clay, zeolite, rhyolite, and quartzite soils.

Produced from 25-year-old vines that underwent “extreme green harvesting” during the growing season to lower yields (3.5 tons/hectare for this single-vineyard Furmint) and concentrate flavors before a mid-September harvest, the oak barrel-aged Szent Tamás 2013 Furmint is the high-end expression of dry Furmint. It’s luscious and rich, indeed, with a bright, spicy, and botrytis-laced nose brimming with notes of ripe apricots, honeysuckle, and powdered stone.

In the wake of a satiny texture, both savory and sweet flavors coat the palate with deep, generous layers of dried mango and peach, honey, and vivacious spice- and mineral-tinged zip. Magyar recommended pairing the wine with oysters and spicy foods, as well as poultry-based and vegetarian dishes—or, for adventurous diners, roasted veal liver.

Imported by Vinum Tokaj International, LLC, and distributed by Southern Glazer’s Wine and Spirits.
While several contestants correctly identified Riesling as the grape variety for the second wine in the blind flight, no one dared to imagine it could hail from Romania. “I knew it would be very challenging to identify Romania—and especially Transylvania—as the region of origin,” said Ioana Benga, who serves as Export Manager for Jidvei. Instead, Benga focused on the grape variety to “offer a wine that represents our terroir without being obvious—one that would perhaps intrigue the participants and compel them to discover more about Jidvei.”

One of the oldest and most important wine regions in Romania, the Tarnave-Jidvei DOC straddles the Transylvania plateau. It’s surrounded by the sprawling Carpathian mountain range, with the Jidvei commune—the winery’s namesake—at its core. Approximately 2,500 hectares are under cultivation in the DOC, largely to aromatic white varieties like Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Muscat Ottonel, Gewürztraminer, and the native Fetească Regală and Fetească Albă. Vine-growing in the area dates back to the Iron Age and was reportedly first mentioned by Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.

Situated at 200–500 meters above sea level, the DOC’s altitude provides cool-climate growing conditions moderated by the nearby Târnava Mare and Târnava Mică rivers. As a result, its white wines are typically fruity and light- to medium-bodied with excellent freshness and food-pairing prowess. With 3.5 grams per liter of residual sugar, the 2016 Jidvei Riesling drinks slightly off-dry and boasts lovely floral, lychee, and tropical fruit notes. The juicy, viscous, and minerall-influenced mouthfeel, meanwhile, yields refreshing flavors of green apple, melon, lemon crisp, and hazelnut.

Best suited to serve as an apéritif, this Transylvanian tippler is delightful when paired with hard cheeses such as Pecorino and Grana Padano. It also makes a great companion for Hawaiian poke bowls and fruit salads.

Imported by Albus Imports, LLC.
WINE #3: 
BRAVIUM 2015 PINOT NOIR, ANDERSON VALLEY, CALIFORNIA ($32)
Presented by Derek Rohlffs, Winemaker for Bravium

Translated from Latin, Bravium means a prize or reward. Fittingly, the third wine, with its classic and easily identifiable Pinot Noir character, was certainly a gift for our blind tasters after several challenging rounds.

Bravium carefully selects its Pinot Noir grapes from three vineyards in Mendocino County’s Anderson Valley: Donnelly Creek, Ridge, and Wiley. Donnelly Creek, a lovely 80-acre site in a warmer pocket of the appellation, produces riper fruit, which adds plushness to the blend. Ridge Vineyard, a family-owned site at Valley Foothills planted to 30-year-old Jackson clone Pinot Noir, delivers grapes of exceptional flavor and structure.

Meanwhile, in the famed and westernmost “Deep End” corner of the valley, the historic Wiley Vineyard is a true cool-climate site that rests on benchlands just 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean. According to Bravium Winemaker Derek Rohlffs, the property is renowned for its bucolic setting and pristine fruit, a benchmark of the appellation.

The 2015 growing season at the winery was marked by early bud break, berry shatter, and smaller-than-usual grape size, which resulted in lower yields and excellent flavor concentration. Harvest kicked off early in late August, with picking unfolding at night to preserve freshness and acidity.

The characteristics of the resulting wine epitomize the terms “elegant,” “exotic,” and “vivacious.” An alluring bouquet of aromas—strawberry rhubarb, rose petal, raspberry, wild berry, crushed rock, and wood smoke—blossom from the glass. On the palate, plush, clean, and juicy sensations give way to pleasing notes of strawberry, orange peel, and floral blooms—blossoming flowers. The wine is supported by a bed of silky tannins and a chalky, mineral-driven core. As he concluded his reveal, Rohlffs described the vintage as “classic Anderson Valley finesse...a beautifully balanced Pinot Noir that, while enjoyable in its youth, possesses impressive aging potential.”

WINE #4: 
BERONIA 2009 GRAN RESERVA, RIOJA ALTA, SPAIN ($30)
Presented by Christopher Laveglia, Area Sales Manager for González Byass USA

Founded in 1973 and named after the Celtic Berones tribe, which occupied the Rioja region of Spain in the third century, the Beronia winery lies in the Rioja Alta subregion. Surrounded by 25 hectares of estate vineyards planted mostly to Tempranillo, including pre-phylloxera parcels of vines more than a century old, it thrives largely due to the region’s Atlantic climate and gypsum/alluvial clay soils.

An additional 870 vineyard hectares are under contract and managed by Beronia’s technical team. All grapes for the González Byass USA brand are hand-harvested parcel by parcel under the watchful eye of Winemaker Matías Calleja: The 2009 vintage, classified by the Rioja Regulatory Council as “Very Good,” saw harvest begin at the end of September and conclude the second week of October.

Produced from a selection of the highest-quality grapes from the oldest vines (98% Tempranillo; 2% Graciano), the Beronia Gran Reserva presented at Game of Wines ages in new French oak barrels. The maturation regiment requires the wine to spend 28 months in new wood followed by 36 months of bottle-aging before release. Upon unveiling the Beronia bottle from its blind-tasting bag, González Byass USA Area Sales Manager Christopher Laveglia described the 2009 Gran Reserva as “powerful yet graceful and elegant.”

Indeed, the wine delivers intense flavors of dried fruit, tobacco, and sweet spices. Full-bodied with grippy yet pliable tannins, the palate buzzed with a freshness that served to lift dark notes of black cherry, smoke, vanilla bean, and dark-chocolate-covered plums. “With its different aromatics and tannin texture, I thought a Rioja aged in new French oak would be a nice curveball for the competition,” Laveglia said.
WINE #5: CLINE 2015 BIG BREAK VINEYARD GRENACHE, CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA ($60)
Presented by Megan Cline, Winemaker/Social Media Manager/Second-Generation Vintner at Cline Family Cellars

After Fred Cline founded Cline Family Cellars in Oakley, California, in 1982, he fermented his first vintages from select old-vine Mourvèdre, Zinfandel, and Carignane plantings, several of which date back to the 1880s. While the winery is most often associated with its Ancient Vine Zinfandel label, it’s Fred Cline’s role as founding member of the Rhône Rangers—a group of winemakers dedicated to popularizing Rhône varieties in the U.S.—that more closely defines the winery’s philosophy.

In the late 1980s, Cline purchased a 350-acre horse farm in Carneros and moved the winery to Sonoma County, where he planted Syrah, Viognier, Marsanne, and Roussanne. Today the winery remains family-owned and -operated, with Cline now managing vineyards in Carneros, Sonoma Coast (Petaluma Gap), and Contra Costa County (Oakley) with his wife Nancy and daughter Megan, who represented the brand at Game of Wines.

In the sandy, well-drained soils of Contra Costa’s Big Break Vineyard, Cline’s century-old, ungrafted, dry-farmed, and head-pruned Grenache vines benefit from a long and arid growing season. During the 2015 harvest, the Grenache bunches reached a fully-ripe 25 Brix after undergoing extra hang time. The wine was then fermented in stainless steel with a large proportion of whole berries, followed by ten days of pump-overs and maturation for 12 months in medium-dark toasted American oak barrels (38% new).

During her presentation, Megan described the 2015 Grenache as expressive and complex with abundant eucalyptus notes. Courtesy of the grove bordering Big Break, they lend an alluring minty perfume that wafts from the glass, intertwining with lush cherry and chocolate. On the palate, spectacular pomegranate and licorice flavors flourish on a frame of velvety tannins and bright acidity before finishing with a richly satisfying mouthfeel. “I wanted to show something a little fun and unique that might be challenging for the blind-tasters,” Megan said.

WINE #6: JORDAN 2003 CABERNET SAUVIGNON, ALEXANDER VALLEY, CALIFORNIA ($100)
Presented by Lisa Mattson, Director of Marketing and Communication for Jordan Vineyard & Winery

Inspired by the great estates of Bordeaux, maverick wine pioneers Tom and Sally Jordan established Jordan Vineyard & Winery in 1972 as an homage to the timeless connection between food, wine, and hospitality.

Located in Sonoma’s Alexander Valley, Jordan endures as one of the top Cabernet Sauvignon brands in California today. Under the guidance of second-generation vintner John Jordan and Rob Davis, the winemaker who’s crafted every Jordan vintage since the inaugural 1976, Jordan Vineyard & Winery continues to elevate standards for the American wine industry.

At Game of Wines, Jordan Director of Marketing and Communication Lisa Mattson unveiled a Cabernet Sauvignon from the underrated 2003 vintage. “I love pouring underdog vintages,” Mattson explained. “A cool, wet spring followed by a summer with extreme heat spikes created many challenges, but the results are wonderful. Fifteen years later, this wine remains fresh, multi-layered, and richly textured.”

The 2003 was also one of the last vintages made by Tom Jordan before he retired. “Tom adored the wines of Château Lafite [Rothschild], so his winemaking principle mirrored the style of Bordeaux,” Mattson said. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (81%), Merlot (15%), Petite Verdot (2%), and Cabernet Franc (2%), the 2003 Jordan Alexander Valley macerated on the skins for 11 days before undergoing fermentation in stainless-steel tanks. Aging occurred in French and American oak barrels for 12 months, then in large, upright oak tanks for an additional three.

The wine’s slightly garnet rim envelopes notes of vibrant blueberry, black currant, cedar, and an alluring hint of bell pepper. Refined and elegant on the palate, it persists with opulent flavors of ripe blackberry and plum, dark cocoa, wet earth, and a kiss of vanilla. With this classic California Cabernet Sauvignon, Tom Jordan apparently achieved his goal of honoring to the great wines of France: The majority of the Game of Wines participants identified the wine as a Bordeaux!
WINE #7:
EARLY MOUNTAIN 2016 SHENANDOAH VALLEY CABERNET FRANC, VIRGINIA ($34)
Presented by Aileen Sevier, Director of Marketing for Early Mountain Vineyards

Virginia wine country has entered a new era. While wine grapes were first planted there in 1607, their cultivation over the years has been largely fraught with hardship due to the state’s challenging growing conditions. Whereas in 1995 only 40 wineries dared to cultivate in the hot and humid landscape, today more than 280 wineries have defied historical precedent in an effort to alter the vinous landscape.

One of these agents of change, Early Mountain, is nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Charlottesville. The area sits on land rich with history: The first landowner of the property was Revolutionary War veteran Lieutenant Joseph Early, the winery’s namesake. Early served under General George Washington at Valley Forge and later hosted Washington’s celebrated visit to the farm.

Fast-forward to 2005, when Jess and Sharon Sweely planted vineyards in the Shenandoah Valley. Their work paved the way for Steve and Jean Case to purchase the property in 2010 and establish Early Mountain winery two years later. Today the vineyards are planted to classic Bordeaux-type varieties such as Cabernet Franc and Merlot, as well as experimental varieties like Malvasia Bianca, Sauvignon Blanc, and Tannat.

By presenting the Early Mountain 2016 Shenandoah Valley Cabernet Franc, Aileen Sevier; the winery’s Director of Marketing, aimed to show “Cabernet Franc is a variety that best represents the Virginia wine story, as it perfectly channels terroir and expresses regionality.” According to Sevier, Cabernet Franc grown in the Shenandoah Valley is more structurally aligned with Burgundy versus Bordeaux: “We look for a silky rather than an edgy tannic structure, and we favor the natural aromatic potential of the grape variety over notes of oak,” Sevier said.

A blend of fruit from two vineyards, the wine leads with an essence of juicy red fruit and cherry framed by forest floor and herbal notes. Silky, viscose, and rich without feeling heavy, the finish exudes savory umami notes of mushroom and damp soil. Only 212 cases were made.

WINE #8:
SILVERADO VINEYARDS 2014 MT. GEORGE VINEYARD CABERNET FRANC, NAPA VALLEY ($45)
Presented by Jon Emmerich, Winemaker for Silverado Vineyards

Named after an abandoned mining town, Napa Valley’s Silverado Vineyards was founded by Diane and Ron Miller in 1981. When reflecting upon their journey as winegrowers, the Millers often evoke a quote from writer Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote that planting vines is like mining for precious metals: The winegrower must prospect to coax something of value out of the soil.

Today the Millers farm 400 acres across six vineyard sites: Stags Leap Vineyard, Miller Ranch, Mt. George Vineyard, Soda Creek Ranch, Firetree Vineyard, and Vineburg Vineyard. Its wines are produced exclusively with estate-grown fruit, including the Silverado 2014 Cabernet Franc, which hails from Mt. George Vineyard in the Coombsville AVA. The site lies in the foothills of Mt. George, an extinct volcano that once blanketed the area with volcanic ash and subsequent alluvial flows of rich loam layered with cobblestones. This terrain induces drainage, while the deeper ash-based sub-soils retain water for the vine roots to retrieve as needed.

Mt. George is planted mostly to Bordeaux varieties on west-facing slopes, on which cool morning air flowing from the San Francisco Bay helps Cabernet Franc achieve a full ripeness without sacrificing freshness. “I believe properly managed grapes should be able to retain their own acidity,” Winemaker Jon Emmerich told the Game of Wines contestants.

While the 2014 was harvested at a whopping 26.3 Brix, the wine was not overly powerful or “hot.” Instead, it showed a lovely vivaciousness with notes of spicy red fruit, vanilla, and pepper. Bright acidity skated over slick tannins, resulting in a zesty but full mouthfeel in which cranberry, boysenberry, roasted herbs, and dark earth heralded a harmonious finish.
WINE #9:  
J. LOHR 2015 VINEYARD SERIES HILLTOP CABERNET SAUVIGNON ($35)  
Presented by Jerry Humphreys, Sales Manager for J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines

The Paso Robles region has become synonymous with excellent California Cabernet Sauvignon, but that wasn’t always the case. Four decades ago, the California Central Coast had yet to be discovered as a world-class wine region. Jerry Lohr, who founded J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines in 1974, was among a handful of early innovators who took a gamble and invested in Paso Robles. He inherently understood the region’s potential for producing high-quality grapes and stellar wines.

Blessed with a long growing season with days of intense sunshine balanced by cool, wind-chilled nights, Paso Robles continues to deliver on the investment: It’s proven to be an ideal home for Cabernet Sauvignon, as demonstrated by the incredible popularity of J. Lohr’s flagship red. J. Lohr, the fourth-largest vineyard holder in the Central Coast, remains a family-owned winery with Jerry still at the helm, assisted by his two children. All wines are produced only from estate-grown fruit, as the Lohr family never buys or sells grapes.

For the Vineyard Series Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon, grapes were sourced from a handful of select Paso Robles vineyard sites. While the 2015 vintage was marked by early budbreak, a cold snap in May disrupted bloom, resulting in shatter and a yield 50 percent lower than average. However, the surviving fruit swelled with explosive flavors and mature, velvety tannins, producing a highly satisfying wine, with a lavish palate bursting with effusive aromas of blackberry, cassis, toasted hazelnut, and cocoa preceding a juicy, persistent finish.

J. Lohr Sales Manager Jerry Humphreys assured the gathered sommeliers that while the 2015 is marked by J. Lohr’s signature “dense but soft” texture, it boasts a structural integrity that would allow it to comfortably age for another seven to ten years. Winemaker Steve Peck recommends pairing it with rosemary-seasoned ribeye served with garlic-roasted potatoes, parsnips, and fennel.

WINE #10:  
PATRICIUS 2006 TOKAJI 6 PUTTENYOS ASZÚ ($65)  
Presented by Enikő Magyar, Project Director for Vinum Tokaj International’s Wines of Excellence Program

The final wine unveiled at the competition was perhaps the easiest to identify for its distinctive botrytis-infused richness, electric acidity, and swirl of golden, nectar-like lusciousness. This is no accident, as the aforementioned Tokaj region of Hungary possesses a terroir characterized by gently undulating south-facing slopes, mineral-rich volcanic soils, and a perfect balance between humidity and warmth to induce Botrytis cinerea, also known as noble rot.

When left untreated, this fungus ultimately shrivels indigenous Furmint and Hárslevelű grapes (the traditional white varieties grown in the region) and concentrates their sugars and flavors, allowing for the production of the region’s revered dessert wine, Tokaji Aszú.

A shining jewel in the crown of the Tokaj’s rich history is the awarded Patricius winery. With 85 hectares of vines situated within vineyards established by royal decree in 1737, Patricius produces wines that represent the region’s prestige while also garnering accolades like gold medals from the Decanter World Wine Awards and the International Wine Challenge for the 2006 Patricius Tokaji 6 Puttonyos Aszú.

Like all Aszú wines, the Patricius Tokaji 6 Puttonyos was produced from desiccated, hand-harvested grapes painstakingly picked one berry at a time. The mummified berries were then mashed into a thick, dark brown paste and added to a base wine. The amount of botrytized paste, referred to as puttonyos, determines the sweetness level of the final wine, with six being the highest allowable ranking.

After undergoing fermentation, the wine aged in Hungarian oak casks for three years and in bottle for an additional seven. The result? A thick and unctuous yet amazingly fresh elixir that pops with luscious flavors of buttered-and-grilled pineapple, dried yellow peach and mango, and candied orange peel. To cap off an indelible experience, the palate is accentuated by high floral notes with a hint of earthy botrytis and a savory vein of powdered volcanic rock.

Imported by Classic Wines, Inc., and promoted by Vinum Tokaj International, LLC.