

WYNN

FALL 2014



Amuse Bouche's 2008 vintage, whose label by the late Pop artist Steve Kaufman honors winemaker Heidi Barrett.



A WINE FOR ALL SENSES

With Amuse Bouche, Napa winemaker John Schwartz finds that beauty is in the eye—and on the lips—of the beholder. BY AMY ZAVATTO

Beauty is fleeting. Maybe that's why some of the more artistically talented among us feel compelled to make it their life's work to capture it—whether on canvas or in a bottle. Winemaker John Schwartz and his partner, Heidi Barrett, have found a way to capture them both at once.

Since they launched the Napa-based label Amuse Bouche in 2002—an homage to the soft yet structured allure of the Merlot-centric right bank

of Bordeaux—Schwartz and Barrett knew that they wanted the wine to resonate for both the eye and the palate. Each Amuse Bouche label has featured original work from some of the world's most famous modern artists, including Guy Buffet (2002 and 2003) and Marc Clauzade (2013), as well as world-renowned talents of another kind who dabble in paint and canvas, like Tony Curtis (2010) and, the surprise for 2014, Bob Dylan.

"Both Heidi and I love art—she's an artist herself," he says of the former Screaming Eagle winemaker. "When we started, we were inspired by Mouton Rothschild's artist label series, but Amuse is different." For one, art commissioned for the Amuse labels is produced as a lithograph on a 300-year-old press in Paris. Each is signed and numbered, allowing those with a spot on the producers' exclusive mailing list to receive one of the valuable pieces of art. "We do it to focus on truly iconic artists—and we pay a lot. Some originals sell at \$500,000 or more." The originals are kept at the winery, and their fame and the wine's fame are often intertwined. "Sometimes someone might say, 'I love the '04 vintage—but then someone else will refer to the same bottle and say, 'I love the LeRoy Nieman vintage,'" laughs Schwartz. But with two superstar winemakers at the helm, the wines are indeed famous in their own right. "Heidi and I wanted to

Amuse Bouche gets a little Cabernet Franc blended in, adding backbone and structure to the Merlot.

dispel the notion that Napa, which has been known for its Cabs, could not also make world-class Merlot like Petrus," he says of the storied right-bank Pomerol producer in Bordeaux. "We set out to craft an amazingly delicious right-bank style using Merlot and Cabernet Franc." The blend is consistently Merlot-heavy, comprising 93 to 97 percent of the wine. "For a long time and even today, many [American] wineries make Merlot as a lesser varietal and as a blending tool, underestimating the complexity it has. Amuse Bouche gets a little Cabernet Franc blended in, adding backbone and structure to the Merlot, which is so voluptuous and soft. It's a great food friend!"

Perhaps some of the beauty is in the bottles' rarity. To find them, you can fly to Dubai, Tokyo, and Beijing—or visit any of the fine dining establishments at Wynn and Encore, which currently have the 2008 and 2010 vintages in stock, thanks to the resort's relationship with the winemakers. "We don't do a lot of direct consumer and select distribution," offers Schwartz. "Wynn is one of the few accounts that gets good allocating."

Schwartz knows that producing a bottle with a layered connection to beauty has a language of its own. "I've been all over the world, and it's fun to see your project everywhere you go. Ten years ago, I was in Tokyo having dinner and the waiter came to me and said, 'There's someone here drinking your wine and she wants to meet you.' It was Cameron Diaz!"

Far-reaching fame aside, Schwartz remains grounded in his deep-digging California winemaking roots: "I'm proud of it. It's who we are. Heidi's trademark is making wines that are balanced; we make wines that age and that stand the test of time," he says. "We make wine we love—not wine for critics." What they make, perhaps, is wine for the true art lover. ■