



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

February 17, 2017

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

Friends –

Dogs are wonderful. That we can all agree on, but figuring out how to build a life on them is another matter. What's more, I'm not much of a small dog person. I'm not out to disparage the Pekingese, the Shih Tzu, the Yorkie, but I've never met one I'd be thrilled to spend the day fishing with. My friend Terry did have a Jack Russell Terrier that could play basketball and sing "God Bless America" in high C, but even he was sort of shifty and elitist. He never really felt like part of the crowd. Then, when Terry was working on a landscaping job over in Napa, the dog, whose name was Carlton, jumped ship on him and moved in with the owners. Terry called his name for a while, but when he looked through the window and saw Carlton sitting on a pillow and watching *Falcon Crest*, he knew it was over.

"I rest my case," I said, when he told me about it later. Carlton's character had always been a point of contention with us. I felt vindicated.

After that, Terry got himself a Catahoula Cur. That dog is still with us, unfortunately. George – one of my favorite names – is wasted on that dog. In terms of charm, size is about the only thing he has going for him. He's a jumper. He tore the paint off the driver's side door of my truck and scratched my chest so badly I had to drink beer naked that night to keep the blood off my clothes. I drive an old dump truck and wear my welding jacket when I go over to Terry's now. He's a good friend, but there are limits. That George is a talker, too – on and on – he's the world's leading authority.

"I just tune it out," Terry said. "I don't even hear what he's saying anymore. Plus, there's something about the way his mouth moves when he's talking sports that cracks me up."

Well, love is blind, I guess.

So, you can see I'm not claiming there's a linear relationship between a dog's stature and the content of his character; I'm just implying an imperfect connection. For example, I had this Rhodesian Ridgeback named Fred when I was a kid. He was without question the smartest member of our household, and – and this is really the crux of it – he was modest.

I'm guessing most of you haven't spent a lot of time in farm country. That doesn't mean you're totally ignorant of these things; every man's knowledge is incomplete. That's the attitude I take – we all have room to learn. But, and this is just my opinion now, the impression I get is that city life consists mostly of pushing against other people, both literally (on the subway, on the sidewalk, in the elevator) and figuratively (on the phone, over the desk, in the elevator) and staring at liquid crystal displays. What I ask is, when is there time to think? Well, that's something we out here in the country do plenty of, man and beast alike.

I guess that's why I think all the great philosophers are farmers. I know Plato writes a good line, but I grew up watching these guys spin it out, right there on the tailgate, with nothing but a Budweiser and a pair of dirty coveralls – no pencil required. They all had dogs, too, of course. They were Americans; they believed in checks and balances. Phil Wasson was widely acknowledged as the smartest man around, besides my father. They loved sharing a beer, but their interactions were always a bit contentious, too. You know how conversations between two people of deep intellectual rigor can get. Sometimes the original point of the conversation is lost and things turn into what is known as a pissing contest.

Phil's dog was a female Bloodhound named Lotus. People thought that was funny and high-flown until they met her. Then they piped down. She and our dog, Fred, were very much in love. They'd sit there for hours – me, too – watching their fathers drink Bud and discuss the philosophical implications of various irrigation techniques. (Phil was a flood man, my dad was an early-adopter of the deficit approach.) Then, every so often, when things got particularly loud and off-topic, Fred would put back his head and say something so clear and simple, and in such a sonorous tone, that both men stopped speaking entirely, sat back, and remained in silence for some minutes,



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reminded, once again, that the great gift of their lives is to be here, together, with dogs, and that differences of opinion regarding irrigation, though apparently critical, are but passing concerns in the evolution of the cosmos. By then, of course, Fred the Rhodesian had already settled down to bask in the glow of Lotus's adoring stare. The wisest among us are quite often the softest spoken. I learned that from Fred. (Buddy, you're missed.)

Of course, most of you have probably met or at least seen pictures of my current dog, Capone. I know; we make it look easy. He lies around in the driveway all day, maybe rolls on his side when a car comes in, maybe slaps his tail against the ground a few times like a beaver. He doesn't even have to ask for salami. He just walks up to people and they give it to him. His face inspires generosity. The world is like a field of wildflowers and he's like – I don't know – Darryl Hannah or something – somebody very at home in a field of wildflowers.

And me? What do I do? Do I walk around in the vineyard all day, playing in the mud? Sometimes. Do I occasionally stop to smear a little mud on my forehead, just to see how it feels? I might do that. Do I "sample" Cabernet from the barrel in the morning, sometimes returning over and over again, to "sample" the Pyramid Block 9, until Pancho says, "Whoa, Boss. Leave some for the bottle."? I won't say that hasn't happened. Do I nap in the afternoon? That's a healthy habit. Do I say, "I'm busy," when one of my employees knocks on the window of my truck because I've been sitting in the parking lot for forty-five minutes, memorizing the lyrics to the Dire Straits song, "Tunnel of Love"? Perhaps – that's a very good song.

But there are other things to consider: sacrifices. Maybe, for example, it was my life's dream to work in financial services. Maybe I like hanging out in those buildings where there aren't even any exterior walls, the whole thing is basically a glass box where you sit all day, looking across the canyon at the other guy in his glass box. Maybe, what I would like to do is, when I make a particularly good financial move or whatever, I would jump up from my desk and tear off my shirt and make the international sign for "IN YOUR FACE!" for all the other guys in their glasses boxes to see. Bam. Maybe I don't like trucks. Maybe I like sushi. I do actually like sushi; I can confirm that. Maybe I don't even drink. Well, ok, that's not plausible. But maybe I don't even like *wine*. Maybe I like *wine coolers*? Ok, no. But, maybe I like vodka. Maybe vodka – Grey Goose – on the rocks, twist of lemon, gives me the killer instinct I need to keep my financial services edge honed like the frickin' scythe of the reaper of Wall Street. "Cower ye chaff who lie in my path." Yeah.

The thing is, I love dogs. That's why I'm here. That's the choice I've made. It's not easy. It's not for everybody. It has its hard days, but it's worth it. If you don't believe me, you should come meet Capone.

Everybody receiving this shipment is getting some of our 2013 Cabernet, in one form or another.

This is the first release of our **2013 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet**. It's one-hundred-percent varietal and is a blend of fruit from all three of our estate vineyards – about 40% from Red Winery, 30% Stone, and 30% Pyramid. Those percentages are rough. The 2013 is composed of about eighteen different lots, sorted and blended over the course of nearly two years in barrel. Some of those lots are combined early in the wine's life, some decisions I avoid until the last possible moment – right before we bottle. My aim is to make a wine that expresses both place, vintage, and varietal in some quintessential way.

It's hard, a little painful even, to identify some ubiquitous quality, some smell or flavor that identifies Alexander Valley Cabernet. This is a big and varied place – about twenty-five miles from north to south, encompassing everything from the ranch I grew up on, tucked in the hills north of Russian River Valley, to the mountains above Cloverdale, just this side of Mendocino County. Unfortunately, the inevitable comparison, when talking about Alexander Valley, is Napa. Like Napa, or any other coastal valley in California, for that matter, Alexander Valley is coolest at the south end and gets progressively warmer as you go north. Cloverdale is ten degrees hotter, on a given day, than our Stone Vineyard, down on Chalk Hill. Needless to say, this variation in temperature, not to mention a corresponding variation in topography, makes for varied wine.



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All that said, if there is one characteristic I feel comfortable in assigning to Alexander Valley Cabernet as a whole, it's balance – the dark fruit that is universal in good Cabernet from all over the world, combined with a sagey, briary character that's unique to this valley. In negative terms, that second dimension – the briar that balances the berry – might be described as greenness and greenness is regarded with something approaching terror by most Cabernet producers – an irredeemable defect. But to me, when a wine is too ripe, too dense, too extracted, it takes on a ponderous, leaden quality that exhausts me. I need freshness, even in a big, heavy variety like Cabernet. To me, in fact, that's what defines a truly great Cabernet – a wine that is powerful and intense while retaining a freshness that gives an experience of the raw fruit – the vines, even, from which the wine originates. I hope those qualities also represent Alexander Valley at its best.

As many of you likely know, 2013 is a very, very highly regarded vintage for California Cabernet. Robert Parker said something like, "2013 will reset the bar for California Cabernet." Something like that. It's bad enough to mention the guy's name; I'll be damned if I'm going to quote him correctly. Anyway, it was a very good year. It is also a fairly ripe, lush year. No other vintage comes to mind that drinks so well in its youth and has the potential to age. Certainly these wines – both the Stone Vineyard and the Alexander Valley Estate – will improve in some respects with a decade in the cellar, but they are so vital and delicious now that there's something to be said for enjoying them as they are. My best counsel is to do a bit of both – drink a bottle or two now (or as soon as you feel inspired to do so) and lay a few bottles down to enjoy years from now. 2013 is indeed a great vintage that should be pleasurable both out of the box and for twenty years to come.

This is the second and final shipment of our **2013 Stone Cabernet**. I feel like I've already said a lot, maybe too much, about Cabernet in this letter, so I won't go into detail about the Stone here, but I will mention a few things. 2013 was, as I said, a very ripe year. So, in choosing the lot of Cabernet to be bottled as the Stone Single Vineyard, we didn't choose the ripest lot from that vineyard, rather the one we thought showed the power and intensity provided by 2013's warmth, while retaining the fresh, almost perfumed scent of crushed herbs and underbrush that gives this wine dimension and excitement. The response to the 2013 Stone has been overwhelming. I love it, and I will be sorry to see it go. We'll send out a postcard when we're down to the last cases. If you pop one of these bottles and decide you'd like more, please let us know right away or prepare to be disappointed. Drink now or hold through 2030, just make sure to drink it in this life and you can't miss.

Those of you in the Flight Club are also receiving a bottle or two of our **2013 Merlot** and our **2015 Chardonnay**. While those are obviously very different, I think of both of these wines as being defined by their wonderful aromatics. I wrote recently about how much I cherish good aromatics in wine, and besides treating them delicately, I'd be lying if I said I understood much about how to produce them. Like everything else important in wine, I chalk great aromatics up to vineyard site, not craftiness in the cellar.

With that in mind, it is hard to imagine a better site to grow Chardonnay than the ranch I grew up on. It's sixty-three acres in total, about forty in vineyard and about five of that in Chardonnay. The Chardonnay is in the lowest, coldest part of the field, growing in gravel and loam right next to a tributary of the Russian River. The climate and soil produce a combination of the tropical character typical of warm Alexander Valley Chardonnay – mangoes, guavas, pineapples, and the colder, greener Russian River expression: key limes, Meyer lemon, Granny Smith apples. Our Chardonnay is made the same way every year: fermented in stainless steel, then aged on the lees in neutral barrels for six months to a year. The vineyard speaks for itself in this wine.

Our 2013 Merlot is a wine I'm already missing before it's gone. Too much of the time, Merlot in California is produced as a pale shadow of Cabernet - like Cabernet in every way possible, only with less tannin, less color, and less bite. By comparison, I encourage our Merlot to be different from our Cabernet. It comes from a two-acre block on our Red Winery Road Vineyard, a site that produces ripe, fully mature Merlot at low brix, resulting in a delicate, aromatically expressive wine impossible to confuse with Cabernet. The 2013 is especially bright on the nose right



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now. It smells like raspberries and rose petals and allspice. Although it spent eighteen months in French barriques, there's very little oak evident at this point. It's all fresh, bright fruit. Drink now through 2026.

This is a great time of year to come see us. First of all, you'll have our full attention, because the place is empty. More compelling, perhaps, is the fact that our futures offering is now open. As a wine club member, you can buy six bottles of our 2015 Single Vineyard Cabernet at half price, paying for it now and receiving it in February 2018. We have barrels of these wines in both the Sonoma and Alexander Valley tasting rooms and would be happy to taste you through them whenever you're ready. The offering will be open through sometime in the spring, depending on supply. Please call us for an appointment.

If the futures offering isn't enough motivation there's always the dog. He's what keeps me going.

Thank you for your support.

– Jake