



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

September 14, 2018

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

I played cards with dogs for the first time when I was eight years old. Been doing it ever since. It's what keeps me going. You've got your troubles, I've got a standing Tuesday night game with a Pitbull named Romulus. It's not something you can openly discuss. I know that. I live a double life. Am I alone? Who's not doing something extra to get by these days? You seen the news? Humanity is swallowing its own tail. I have a cousin who sleeps in a Batman outfit every night; cape, boots, the whole thing. He's not hurting anybody. So, I enjoy tipping a few cold ones with our four-legged brethren. Call the police.

I know: I'm a son, a father, president of the Alexander Valley Winegrowers, I can't go speaking dog to people down at the lumber yard. Their loss. Have you ever been to a party of more than six people without an equal number of dogs that you actually enjoyed? The last time I went fishing without a dog on the boat I jumped in Bodega Bay and swam back to the harbor. And I love salmon. Have you ever heard somebody say something you couldn't live without? I doubt it. Tell me a joke. See if I laugh. Oscar Wilde was a funny human being. And he could drink. Name me one since who compares to a French Bulldog dressed in a plaid waistcoat, drinking Chivas and smoking a fine cigar. That's good company. You put a man on the moon – so what? I once played Hold'em with a Bullmastiff named Hector who claimed to have eaten 17 burritos in a single sitting. That's the kind of feat that impresses me. You can keep the pyrotechnics.

This started back when I was living at my parents' place on Chalk Hill Road. We still had Gewürztraminer planted in the flat back then. What a bunch of morons. I wanted to be Max's dog from The Road Warrior. Who doesn't at that age? I could never sleep at night. I would just lie there in the dark, listening to my brother snoring, waiting for the sun to come up.

One night, the door pushed open and our family dog, Marcus, stood there, looking up at me. He was an old Scottie. Frickin Scotties are adorable, aren't they? His eyes were black, pure black.

"Alright, Jacob," he said. "I'm gonna trust you with some information."

I could tell you I was blown away, yada, yada, I couldn't believe dogs could talk but, honestly, it didn't surprise me all that much. I had my pants on and we were headed out the door in a matter of minutes.

The poker game was across the creek in this guy, Terry's, garage. You had to crawl under the back fence, climb up on the wood pile, and jump through a high window to get inside. I remember I was shocked by how many dogs there were in there – eighteen, maybe, twenty – some of them to play cards, others just to party, a very relaxed, bohemian feel. The music choice – opera – was a bit of a surprise. And you wouldn't believe how much dogs smoke. The air in there was like pea soup.

Here's that story Hector told about the burritos. I'm kind of picking it up in medias res here, because I actually didn't hear the very beginning, due to the opera and the climbing in the window and all:

"Yup," Hector said, "Seventeen."

"No way, homes," this other dog, whose name I later learned was Tino, said. "Nobody can eat seventeen burritos, dog."

Tino was wearing a beret. I'm here to tell you, it actually worked on him.



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“It was just as filthy hot as you please,” Hector went on. Then, turning to me, speaking as if we were old friends, he said, “Matter of fact, pass me another one of those coldy goldies, Jacob.”

I remember thinking, as I reached into the cooler and came out with a Highlife, “this is the greatest moment of my life.” It was all I could do to keep from calling him sir. What a frickin greenhorn I was.

Hector cracked the beer with his paw, then went on with his story: how he spotted the picking crew, followed them into the vineyard in the early morning, waited for them to disappear into the vines and then – bam – he broke the back window of the truck with his head, dragged the burritos out on the ground, and went to work. Then it was all paradise: crispy bits of carnitas, the subtle beauty of refried beans, reflections on salsa – which Hector pronounced sal-za – being like the bubbles in Champagne (it keeps the palate fresh.)

“And then,” he said, “I get to the last one. Numero eighteen. By now my legs are no longer functioning, alright? We aren’t talking those little pencil-prick regular burritos they’re slingin’ down at – what was the name of that place, Tony?”

Tony was an Australian Cattle Dog. He was the only guy I’ve ever known who wore eyeliner without being made fun of.

““Mario’s?” Tony said, “Julio’s? I don’t know. Who knows?”

Too cool for school.

“Anyways,” Hector said. “I crawled over, I peeled the foil back with my teeth, I pulled back my lips and –”

“You barfed,” this Chihuahua, Eddie, said. “You barfed. You barfed, didn’t you?”

“Frickin small dogs,” Hector said. “Am I right? No offense, Marcus. No, Eddie, I did not barf. I passed out. Dead out. And not like a regular pass out, either, but a deep and enduring slumber. This was in the fall, harvest time. And I slept, right there, in the vineyard, for no fewer than five months. I was woken, my brothers, by the April rain.”

We bayed in reverence. It went like this: “Aaaawoo, woo, woo.”

Dogs love a good eating story.

“And you know what?” Hector said. “As soon as I opened my eyes, I was hungry as a monkey dog all over again!”

We laughed our tails off.

My human life has been nothing more than passing time since then. I’ve grown up, I’ve had kids, I’ve started a business. Meh. People are soft and hairless and overly concerned with the smell of their own breath. That’s what I think. I’m waiting for the sun to go down, so I can play cards.

Dogs, on the other hand, are the opposite of people – they’re mostly rad. I meet them ever day – in the back of pickup trucks, in the field, in the parking lot of the tasting room. We don’t speak, of course, we just exchange looks of doggy understanding and go our separate ways. But I know they see me for what I am: A fellow traveler, a blood hound who lays everything on the river.

The poker game isn’t at Terry’s, anymore. It’s in back of the B and B Lounge, run by this Rottweiler named Chester. Hector is long dead, of course. Big dogs, what can you do? And Marcus, he was gone even before that. I’ve



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heard Tino is still around, but I haven't bothered to look him up. The rest of that crew from Terry's garage is gone. It's like my father said: "dogs die."

"Where is all this going?" I often find my human friends asking, if not out-loud, in some minor act of desperation: a forlorn gaze, the consumption of too many beers, spontaneous fits of crying brought on by the evening news.

Dogs, they say, are unaware of their own mortality. I won't be the ones to clue them in.

My advice is this:

Be nice to your husband, your wife, whoever. Wait for them to go to sleep. Then, go out to the living room, get down on all fours, and take a little stroll around the place. You don't have to be naked or anything, jammies are fine, as long you're not restricted. How's that feel? It's not for everybody, I know. You don't even have to tell me if you like it. That's between you and who knows who. But, if you find yourself feeling a little lighter, a little less free of the future and here in the present, don't be afraid to go outside and howl at the moon. I'll bet you'll be surprised at the beauty of your own voice.

If being a dog is not to your taste, it's like old Hector used to say when he was sweeping home the chips: "this may not be your card game."

My cousins got a few Batman suits in the garage he's looking to unload. Whatever gets you through.

Most people reading this letter have received a bottle or two of our 2014 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet. As many of you know, this is our flagship wine, 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, made of fruit from all three of our vineyards. The 2014 vintage isn't even gone yet and I already miss it. In the years since we harvested and crushed the grapes that went into this wine, I have struggled to articulate what it is I love so much about this vintage. I don't think I'll spend too much time doing that again here. Ok, maybe a little:

There is a lot of good red wine in the world, there is very little good Cabernet. As a varietal, Cabernet is tricky – when farmed wrong or picked too early, it's wrought with green flavors like bell pepper and string bean. When left on the vine too long (which it almost always is), it loses its varietal character and tastes cooked and jammy. It might be good, but it might also be Zinfandel or Malbec or Merlot or Cabernet Franc or – you get the idea – tasty, but non-descript.

The trick is to pick Cabernet when it's balanced between these phases, when the nose shows dried herbs and violets and also crushed blackberries and cocoa. I also like a young Cabernet – and I consider 2014 young – to have plenty of acid and plenty of tannin. Both these characteristics make wine harder to drink when they're young, not as smooth, but they also give it a freshness and dynamic energy that big, fruity wines need to maintain my interest. Just as importantly, both acid and tannin are essential for aging, and aging is when great Cabernet truly shines.

If you can, I'd save bottle or two of the 2014 Alexander Valley Estate for five or ten years. Not all of it, just a few bottles. It's what I'll be drinking in retirement, if luck allows for such things. Drink before 2030, let's say.

There's another 2014 Cabernet in this shipment, the 2014 Pyramid Vineyard Cabernet. We've been farming



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Cabernet in Alexander Valley since 1972 but didn't buy this ranch until 1995. Back then, it was a 115-acre dormant cattle ranch in the hills between Chalk Hill Road and Knights Valley, a remote, mountainous area with no vineyard planted in the immediate neighborhood. We now have about twenty-two acres of Cabernet here. I'd describe the wine we make from it as very indicative of what you look for in mountain fruit – deep, dense, purple in color, very tannic, and defined almost entirely by dark flavors, from Santa Rosa plum to a touch of coffee. For all this wine's girth, I think it may actually be more ready for the glass right now than the Alexander Valley Estate. The abundance of fruit helps balance the tannin in a way that makes the whole monstrous thing work, all the better with a steak. I'm guessing this wine will have seen its best days before 2030, too. When in doubt, drink.

Some of you have also received a bottle of both our 2015 Alexander Valley Estate Merlot and our 2016 Home Chardonnay. Both these wines come from vineyards we've been farming since the 1970's.

The 2015 Merlot comes on the heels of such an epic vintage, that my initial approach to drinking and thinking about it was to compare to the 2014. The two vintages are very different – the 2014 Merlot was a dense, brooding muscular wine with palate and texture akin to Cabernet. The 2015, not so much. To be honest, it was my customers who woke me up to the fact that, in spite of being so different than the previous vintage, the 2015 has many virtues of its own: it's lighter, more floral, more delicate than the 2014. We took a light touch with the oak on this wine – it saw almost no time in new barrels – and I think that was the right choice. Too much oak influence would have dampened the fruit. As is, it's very much intact. The aromatics are full of beautiful red fruit and the palate is bright and fresh. Drink now through 2025.

The 2016 Home Chardonnay is, as usual, from the ranch I grew up on down on Chalk Hill Road. The vineyard grows right next to a tributary of the Russian River and is one the coldest sites in Alexander Valley. It also has two very different soil types. The west block is deep, sandy loam, fairly fertile ground, where the vines stay green and lush late into the year and the fruit, at harvest, has a slightly green apple, citrus peel character. On the other side of the avenue, the ground is full of gravel from when the nearby creek used to run through what is now the vineyard. Here, the vines struggle and wizen and drop leaves, and the fruit has a more tropical and honeyed character when we pick it in September.

What I love about making our Chardonnay, and what I think gives it its signature character is that we blend the wine made from those two blocks. I love acid in wine, especially white wine, and I'm able to push the acid envelope by balancing it with the riper, more tropical fruit I get from a different part of the field. I find the 2016 Home Chardonnay, as a vintage, to be a little rounder and more generous than most vintages, but it still has that same bright beam of acid I'm proud to call my signature.

You have my gratitude, as ever, for bearing with me. Be well and thank you for your support.

- Jake