



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

September 25, 2023

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

I was sitting on the tractor up at Red Winery, just taking a little break. It was mid-morning but there were still little threads of fog woven through the trees along the river. If my life were a Merchant Ivory film, I would be a man transfixed by beauty. But I'm a farmer. And what is a farmer? What is a man? I've always loved the ocean. If I had it to do over again, I think I'd be a dolphin. If dolphins had hands, what kind of wine do you think they'd drink?

My phone rang and I took it out and answered it. It was Jeremy.

"The name Vance Pennypacker ring a bell?" he said.

"The guy with the hat?" I said. "The guy with the teeth and belt buckle. The helicopter?"

"That's the guy," Jeremy said.

"I always wanted to see if he's as big as he looks on TV. I'd like to sock that guy."

"Two birds, one stone," Jeremy said. "You can meet him and Cecil. He's coming down to my Uncle Red's place in Butchersfield on Saturday to check out Cecil. If all goes well, I'll be a thousandaire by midnight. But no socking."

"Who's Cecil?" I said.

"Cecil the Canine Super Palate," Jeremy said.

"The dog that likes wine?" I said.

"All dogs like wine," Jeremy said. "Cecil is a miracle taster. Go head-to-head with him. Go ahead. Try it. He'll humble your high horse."

"I don't think that use of high horse works," I said.

"You're just scared," Jeremy said.

"How does Pennypacker come into this?" I said.

"He's opening a fifty-thousand-square-foot beef and barbecue emporium down in Waco. You need added value for entertainment on that scale. Historic aircraft. Tigers."

"A wine-drinking dog," I said.

"Canine Super Palate," Jeremy said.

"Do you ever feel disappointed to be human?" I said.

"It's not what it used to be," Jeremy said.

"What?" I said.

"Being a person," Jeremy said. "The era of human exceptionalism is drawing to a close."

"You don't feel conflicted about selling Cecil the Super Palate into bondage?"

"It's not a sex club," Jeremy said, "It's a restaurant."

"It still seems disloyal," I said.

"And you wonder why you're stuck being a farmer," Jeremy said. "Wake up, Banjo Billy."

"Maybe I'll bring Tito," I said. "He's living down in Fresno. I'm sure he'd enjoy drinking wine with a dog. I could pick him up on the way. Would you like that?"



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

"Tito's not a wine guy," Jeremy said. "Why would you bring Tito?"

"Your voice just went up an octave," I said.

"No, it didn't," Jeremy said. "This is just my phone voice. The phone adds an octave. Like the camera, only for voices."

"If voices were people," I said, "I think deep voices would be fat and high voices would be skinny."

"That's not science," Jeremy said.

"So, I'll bring Tito," I said.

"Bring him," Jeremy said. "He doesn't scare me."

"You're an idiot," I said.

"You're an idiot," Jeremy said.

"You're a scared idiot," I said. "You're a scardiot. Woo woo woo."

Then I hung up.

When I arrived to pick up Tito, he was standing on the sidewalk in front of a vacant Chinese restaurant wearing a pair of mismatched cowboy boots, smoking a thin cigar. There was a woman with him, of course. He handed her his cigar when he climbed into the car and I couldn't help but look in the rearview mirror as we pulled away to watch her smoke it and look after us.

"You wanna see my new knife?" Tito said.

"Sure," I said.

Tito took out his knife and I pretended to look at it while driving.

"Nice," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I got it off a dead guy. The blade stays cold in all weather. I think it's haunted."

"I'm sure it is," I said.

I looked out the window while Tito lit a new cigar and talked. He liked to tell stories about being a fearsome outlaw – bank robberies and horse chases and poker games ending badly. Usually I enjoyed them, but I was distracted, contemplating the destiny of man. I mean as a species. It was a beautiful year in the Central Valley. Rain had washed away centuries of human influence and restored the countryside to prehistoric glory. Then we came into Butchersfield.

Isn't it true that all of earth was once paradise? Imagine Butchersfield before the cow, before the oil derrick, before the interstate: a marshland of a million acres, a silver and green lake populated by a rotating cacophony of birds from all over the western hemisphere on their way to and from wherever birds go. Now the gray and forlorn stucco streets dancing with old newspaper. Now the orange sky. Now the fields of chattel, I mean cattle, standing end to end for miles.

Red's place was once a farm but had since fallen into a sort of informal junkyard – a collection of school buses sitting on their axles, chickens roosting in a gutted station wagon, grass growing in the beds of the pickup



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

trucks. As we proceeded through this mess, a pack of dogs came out from between the junk cars to meet us. One dog stood a head taller than the others: a coat of gray leopard, a swaggering gait, the patrician face of a hunting hound.

"I think that must be him," I said. "Cecil the Canine Super Palate."

"He looks like a king," Tito said.

The dogs trotted after us until the driveway dead-ended into a camping trailer with a hole in the side patched with plywood. On the little front stoop and the ground in front were hundreds of empty wine bottles. Cecil walked up on the porch and knocked on the door with his paw. A moment later Jeremy came out shielding his eyes from the sun and looking at us.

"That you, Hawkes?" he said. "Who all you got with you?"

"Just me and Tito," I said.

"Oh," Jeremy said, "Tito. What a nice surprise. So glad you're here. Pull around back."

I reversed and drove around the trailer with the dogs following. Jeremy rolled a tin gate aside and we pulled through. Jeremy held the gate open for Cecil and then rolled it closed, shutting out the other dogs.

"This is Cecil," Jeremy said.

I looked at the dog.

"Does he shake?" I asked.

"Do you?" Jeremy said.

I held out my hand to Cecil and he took it. We looked each other in the eye and shook. Tito came over and did the same.

"Nice grip, dog," he said.

"Pennypacker's people called and said he won't be here til maybe 7. You fellas want to tip a few rosés while we wait?"

"Rosé of what?" I said.

"That shall soon be revealed," Jeremy said, moving his eyebrows around. "You up for little taste-off?"

I looked over at Cecil. I couldn't really read his expression.

"I don't know," I said. "My mouth still tastes like toothpaste. I've got a cold. I ate artichokes for lunch. I was refinishing furniture last night."

While I was talking, Jeremy went to a cooler under a tree in the yard and took out a bottle of wine in a paper bag and poured it around. Cecil and I nosed ours, sipped and looked at each other. Tito drank his and took the bottle from Jeremy and poured it full again.

"Not all wine sucks," he said.

"I'm going to say Bandol," I said. "If not Tempier, then one of their neighbors. Maybe Pradeaux? Definitely a Mourvèdre."

"Waw waw," Jeremy said. "Play again."



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

"He got that it's Grenache," Jeremy said. "Now he's trying to figure out the rest."

We watched as Cecil sniffed the glass and then thoughtfully stuck his tongue in it.

"Woof," Cecil said. "Brr brr woof."

"Correct again!" Jeremy said. "Clos Cibonne it is!"

"That's impressive," Tito said.

"What did I tell you?" Jeremy said.

"I can't believe that's a Grenache," I said. "I'm usually pretty good with Rhônes."

A bottle of rose doesn't go very far between four guys. We polished off that one and Jeremy got another and poured it around. Cecil nailed it again. A Spanish Cinsault. Pretty obscure, but still, my guess was Central Coast Pinot. I was feeling a little morose. I went over to the tree where the wine cooler was. There were two, actually, one red and one white. I looked through the reds until I found a bottle of '82 Château Nénin. It was strange to find it there. I once drank a bottle of 1982 Château Nénin in the basement of a country club outside Cleveland and it has followed me ever since, a bottle that appears in my mind, sleeping and awake. Man has always believed there is an order to things. The meaning in every moment gives meaning to a day and the meaning in each day gives meaning to life. But what is the meaning?

I pulled the cork and poured myself a glass.

Caveman didn't have wine. The mountains and the streams and the forests were his. But knowledge was something he lacked. He couldn't tell the difference between fruit and poison. The stars were blue candles shining in a neighbor's window. Of course, man is still an animal. But, not like he was. Civilization is a journey he began thousands of years ago and will never finish. One has to wonder: is it a journey he would begin again if he knew where it led?

Cecil walked over to where I was sitting and put his head on my knee.

"Hey, buddy," I said. "Where's your glass? You gotta try this stuff."

Cecil looked back at where Jeremy and Tito were seated on a couple of stumps. They were halfway through a bottle of white. Something German, if the shape of the bottle was any indication. Tito had his knife out and was cutting the air with it while Jeremy watched.

"Let me ask you something," I said to Cecil, "what do you drink for fun?"

Cecil made a sort of low moan, somewhere between a bark and cry.

"I hear you," I said. "Just be yourself. That's my advice. There's nothing wrong with Malvasia, if that's what you're into. How about a little water? Little palate cleanser?"

"Woof," Cecil said. "Woof woof."

"Coming right up," I said.

I found a coffee can and rinsed it out and ran it full from the hose bib and set it down in front of Cecil. He gulped it happily and then stood up with his jowls dripping in the star light. Oh: it had gotten dark. A way



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

off in the sky, I saw a pair of blinking lights. Soon, the sound of a helicopter came to us.

"That'll be Pennypacker," I said.

"Rrrr," said Cecil.

"Exactly," I said. "But struggle is folly. Man's destiny is a fait accompli. Even if we knew where we were going, we would be powerless to stop it."

"Woof," Cecil said.

"People are not all bad," I said. "We make music, some of it good. We make paintings, paintings of things we've never seen, stories of places we've never been. And we make wine. What about wine? Did cavemen have wine?"

"Woof," Cecil said.

He had spotted the lights of the helicopter now and was watching it approach.

"Woo, yeah," Jeremy said, "Pennypacker, baby. Get ready for the big time, dog. Woo."

He came running over to us and rubbed Cecil's head. The sound of the helicopter got louder. Tito came over, holding his knife and drinking a glass of wine.

"Big time," he said.

"Woof woof," Cecil said. "Woof."

"Paradise isn't actually lost, if you think about it," I said. "The real paradise is the paradise of the mind. It's the paradise of the mind!"

I hate to use an exclamation point, but I think, in this case, it was warranted.

Most of you have received a bottle or three of our **2019 Stone Vineyard Cabernet** in this shipment. These days, my only fear in describing Stone Vineyard Cabernet is that I'll be too effusive. This is the ranch where I grew up and where my parents still live and I see it as sort of a member of the family.

That said, I think this vineyard really is looking better than it ever has. Starting about seven years ago, we began replanting the hillside Cabernet, piece by piece. The oldest and best of that new vineyard is now producing better grapes than the small amount of remaining old vineyard. I wish there was more of this fruit and in future years there will be, but for now, it's great to be making a small amount of wine that gets better every year.

The 2019 vintage was characterized by heavy spring rain, right after the vines broke dormancy. It was a slow start to a warm summer; we had everything fermenting by the end of the second week of October. Twenty years ago, that would have been a remarkably early end to harvest, it's now commonplace. As a result, Cabernet from the warmer reaches of Alexander Valley can end up both overripe and underdeveloped – the sugar arrives before the tannins and phenols develop. Strange as it is to say, I think Cabernet at cool sites like Stone have benefitted from the warmer weather. We get more ripeness, more fruit, more generosity from Stone than we typically did ten years ago, and the telltale tannic backbone is still very much intact.



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

The 2019 Stone is a bright, energetic edition of this wine. I get less blackberry here than in many past vintages and more black cherry and currant. There's always a touch of bramble, a touch of sage and thyme in this wine, and I get that very clearly in the 2019. The acid is bright and bracing; it may be that mouthwatering acid that gives the 2019 a meaty, salty, savory dimension. Yum.

Man, I really enjoy drinking this wine right now but I know it's not ready. It reminds me a little of the 2005, a wine that took ten years to really open up. Drink 2025-2035.

Our **2019 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet** is also included in this shipment. This is a one hundred percent Cabernet Sauvignon, made with fruit from each of our three estate vineyards; Red Winery, Pyramid, and Stone. Like the 2019 Stone, the 2019 Alexander Valley Estate has pronounced acidity. But this is a softer, more drinkable wine than any of the three single vineyard bottlings from the same vintage. I get black cherry and plum and blackberry on the palate. And I am proud of how restrained the oak influence is on the 2019. It was aged almost entirely in neutral oak and the fruit and varietal character are vivid. Drink now through 2030.

I sat down and drank a bottle of our **2022 Home Chardonnay** just last week. The 2022 tastes even more like Burgundy than usual. That doesn't bother me. This was never meant to taste like a typical California Chardonnay. It is from the same vineyard we have been farming for more than fifty years and the focus is on the grapes, not the process – it doesn't undergo secondary fermentation and is aged in old, neutral barrels to leave the native aroma and flavor intact. The 2022 is at once racy and rich – I get Meyer Lemon, orange blossom, lychee, honey, leavening bread. Meursault, eat your heart out.

I'd like to think that our **2020 Estate Merlot** is a reminder of why this much-overlooked varietal has a place in the pantheon of great wines. Our 2020 Merlot comes from the same few acres of vines we have been farming in the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains since 1972. Too much American Merlot is made as poor man's Cabernet. Not this time. What a lovely, floral expression of the varietal. Violets and blueberries and allspice. Not exactly soft, but an easy and pleasing texture. Very drinkable now, but will improve with another few years of aging. Try not to guzzle.

Before I sign off, I want to mention that the 2023 vintage looks like it could be historically good for Cabernet Sauvignon in Alexander Valley. Keep your fingers crossed.

Thank you for your support.

- Jake