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ON THE WEB

He Sniffs, She Swills

The Samurai matches sips with a big tippler.

By S.S. FAIR

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The Samurai Sipper, humble wine spectator, enthusiast and advocate, recently pitted her puny viticultural pedigree against a man who creates wine cellars for the wealthy and the obscenely wealthy. Jeff Smith, 45, married to an A.B.C. woman (Anything But Chardonnay), lives and drinks in Beverly Hills 90210. He owns the company Carte du Vin and describes his job as that of a forensic oenologist, someone who roots around cellars separating the plonk from the la-di-da, spackling gaps in clients' collections, making maps and dealing with bottlenecks that have nothing to do with traffic on Rodeo Drive.



Takao Ikejiri for The New York Times

Smith is the author of "The Best Cellar" (Volt Press), a book that demystifies much of the pomp and pedantry in the wine trade. "I like to think I've written one of the three funniest books on wine," he says. Mission accomplished. He figures thousands of bottles have passed his palate since he began gargling with the stuff. Smith is the son of the passionate wine collector Joe Smith, a onetime D.J. in Beantown and former president of Warner Brothers Records. Jeff's first words were probably "Romanee-Conti." But the Samurai Sipper, whose first words were "Drambuie, neat, in a pony," held her own in a charm-wrestling match, wherein Jeff Smith selected six wines to drink 10 minutes after purchase, and six to stash for that rainy night in 2015.

Now, the Samurai Sipper is neither wine snob nor slob, but Smith doesn't much bother with under-\$20 wines. "They all taste the same," he says. Chatting him up about trendy, brash fruit bombs sold in bulk to the peons is like discussing Cheese Nips with Brillat-Savarin. But he perfectly sums up the difference between Old World terroir versus modern modes of cranking out young liquid disco not built to last the winter: "European wines are about finesse; Australian and American wines are about power." His picks come from both camps, but they're infuriatingly, esoterically in-crowd. "Wines are not like CD's, where a store probably has Billboard's Top 100," he explains. "If you have a hit in the 2000 vintage of anything, only so many grapes have been pressed." (I found some of Smith's picks at the always reliable P.J. Wine in Manhattan and through my sommelier by the sea, Michael Crafa, at Pop's Wine and Spirits, in Island Park, N.Y.)

To Drink Now (in Riedel Glasses, Natch)

1. 2003 Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc, \$27. "Grassy, tastes like summer," Smith says. The Samurai says: "A great guzzle but as overhyped as BLT Fish. Why not a 2002 Westerly Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc, at \$21?"
2. Nicolas Feuillatte nv Rosé Champagne, \$31. Smith says, "The most important bottle in the house; it means there's good news." The Sipper says with a sigh, "Amen."
3. Kay Brothers Amery Vineyards 2001 Hillside Shiraz, \$48. Smith says, "If you like concentrated fruity wines in the modern style" — high in alcohol, more of a cocktail than something to go with food — "this one's it." The Samurai says, "Dense, smoky and yes, for roasted almonds, not roast duck."
4. 2002 Belles Soeurs Shea Vineyard Pinot Noir, \$55. Smith says: "Belles soeurs means 'sisters-in-law,' " and adds that it's "hard to get on the East Coast." The Samurai says, "Harder to get than 'Finnegans Wake.'" But food friendly, with anything but Hot Pockets.
5. 2001 Artadi Pagos Viejos Rioja, \$92. The Samurai Smarty-Pants polls her backroom wine wags, who uniformly grumble, not about this stellar choice but about drinking it now. Still, I decant and drink it solo. Tremendous! For absolutely any Wednesday.
6. 2002 Colgin IX Estate Syrah, \$270. Smith sorely risked a punch in the nose for picking this cult wine that can't be had for love or money. Peter Yi, the owner of P.J. Wine, offers a reality check: 1999 Enrico Fossi Sassoforte, \$61.

To Store in the Cellar

1. 2003 Le Vieux Donjon Châteauneuf-du- Pape, \$45. "Just picked this out of a hat," Smith says. The Samurai sniffs, swills and is thrilled. If I couldn't wait for the band Ten Years After to become Ten Years Later, why wait for this?
2. 2001 Château Guiraud Sauternes, \$38 (half bottle). "Château d'Yquem is the Michael Jordan of Sauternes," he says. "But this one still plays in the N.B.A. The '01's were blessed." Really? Give me that old 1997 Château Coutet from Barsac, and I'll slam dunk, too.
3. 2000 Arnaldo Caprai Sagrantino di Montefalco 25 Anni, \$88. "A blending grape like cabernet franc. This one's really unusual." Good thing I've got some Vinum Cellars Petite Sirah 2003 in the meantime.
4. 2002 Lewis Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, \$114. "Good to go in five years." So I cheated. This one's a stunner now.
5. 2000 Château Margaux (Bordeaux), \$675. Smith says this is a bargain: "One of the heavyweight champions of the world." Does Muhammad Ali have a vineyard?
6. 2002 Domaine Leroy Richebourg (Burgundy), \$774. "Will be pure poetry." O.K., swell. Where's the Betty Ford Center's phone number? My mouth is purple. Why are your elephants climbing on my computer?