

## VINOGRAPHY: a wine blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world

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### 2005 Hughes-Wellman Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena, Napa Valley

Good wine is rarely made by accident. So much can go wrong in the winemaking process that to get something that isn't complete dreck is a triumph, and those who are capable of creating fantastic wines are, despite their modesty and common protestations of "just letting nature take her course," truly talented artisans.

While wines, and great wines in particular, are made with incredible forethought and planning, sometimes wine labels can spring up overnight as the result of an opportune conversation or new friendship.

Such is the case with this wine, which may be the first and only vintage under its label, though after tasting it, and knowing the folks behind it, I'd be surprised if this one didn't take on a life of its own.

The story goes like this. Cameron Hughes' friend Sam Spencer, winemaker and proprietor of Spencer Roloson Winery where he makes excellent Syrah (among other things), was given a chance to buy some Cabernet fruit from one of the vineyards where he was already sourcing Syrah. A Cabernet Sauvignon didn't fit into the Spencer Roloson portfolio so he offered to make one for Cameron. But Cameron Hughes wines are all about bargain basement finished wine that can be blended and then sold immediately, not brand new wines made with pricey fruit that require expensive barrels and three years of aging before they get sold.

Coincidentally, Cameron's dad was retiring that year from his job of 33 years, and apparently had an interest in having his own wine. A few phone calls later and a new wine label was born. With the help of his best friend, Sandy Wellman, the elder Hughes pulled together the capital to buy the fruit and hire Roloson as the winemaker for their project.

I'm constantly surprised at how quickly, with the right relationships, a wine label can be forged. Gone are the days when in order to make wine you needed to own some land and make huge investments in equipment and more.

The one thing that hasn't changed, however, is the need to have good winegrowing and winemaking talent behind the scenes, which means that it's no surprise this wine is excellent. Sam Spencer's label debuted a number of years ago with great wines, and they've only been getting better with time. His La Herradura Syrah is now one of my favorites of all time, so it's great to see what he does with Cabernet Sauvignon.

In this case, what he does is get excellent mountain fruit from Nell-MacVeagh Vineyard, which sits on the lower slopes of Howell Mountain just to the east of the town of St. Helena. This vineyard, tended to Spencer's specifications, yields few, but very lush bunches of fruit, which are destemmed and fermented in blocks after four days of cold soaking. After fermentation the wine is transferred to 70% new French oak barrels where it ages for 22 months before bottling. Only 199 cases of the wine were made.

Full disclosure: I received this wine as a press sample.



**Tasting Notes:** Inky garnet in color, this wine has what I might call a "classic" Cabernet nose of bright cherry fruit with aromas of green wood, green bell pepper, and wet dirt. In the mouth it offers smooth, very pretty texture with excellent balance and acidity that allow a complex melange of rich cherry, green wood, and earth flavors to swirl and spike their way along the palate to a nice finish. This wine has a lot going on with it and a nice taut quality thanks to the slightly vegetal qualities that hover well below the threshold of objectionable and add a bit of "old world" character to the mix.

**Food Pairing:** This is a classic red meat wine, and I'd love to drink it with a perfectly cooked prime rib.

**Overall Score:** between 9 and 9.5

**How Much?:** \$50