

# A Veritable Treat

“What is truth?” asked Pontius Pilate. He should have asked Jess Jackson. Then he would have known that (a) truth is a multi-vineyard wine from Sonoma created in 1998 with 15 100-point Robert Parker / *Wine Advocate* scores to its credit; and (b) it’s best in a foreign language. Not Russian, obviously, because that would be *Pravda*. Try French.



*Vérité*, then. And with a French winemaker (Pierre Seillan) behind it, and French grapes in the vineyards, there are French connections to talk about.

Seillan was lured to Sonoma from his job at Quancard in Bordeaux to create the wine from scratch and was given the pick of the Jackson vineyards; some grapes were bought in initially but now group head sommelier Dimitri Mesnard MS reckons that all are home-grown, and come from four main AVAs: Alexander Valley, Chalk Hill, Bennett Valley, and Knights Valley. And to see what all the 100-point accolades are about, we sat down to dinner at London’s 110 de Taillevant (French, you see) to taste the 2014s.

Various private collectors were there. One was a financier in the process of selling somebody else’s cellar, which included large quantities of Petrus; another had, in the past, swapped half a dozen bottles of Salon for a car service. Some service; some car. Another had tasted Screaming Eagle for the first time recently, and been utterly astonished to discover that he loved it.

These wines, however, are not in the Screaming Eagle mold. Jackson’s original “vision and concept” was for a Merlot as good as Petrus, but while showing his Merlot blend to Jackson, Seillan also produced a Cabernet Sauvignon blend, and now there are three wines: La Muse, which is Merlot with, in 2014, 10% Cabernet Franc and 3% Malbec; La Joie, 77% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc and 3% Petit Verdot in 2014; and Le Désir, 61% Cabernet Franc, 31% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 4% Malbec in 2014. A crucial point is that Seillan eschews acidification, and so the wines have intrinsically better balance as well as a sense of coolness. Alcohol levels are around 14.5%, and about 1,000 to 1,500 cases of each are made each year and sold through the Bordeaux Place, so any wine merchant with connections there should be able to source the wines.

Alcohol levels were a subject of conversation at the table but the truth is that these wines are balanced and, crucially, not overextracted. It’s overextraction plus alcohol plus too much oak that creates monsters, and these are highly drinkable. Glasses were empty at the end of dinner, which is a sure sign.

The wines also went extremely well with the food. (All the wines had been double-decanted at 3.00pm that day.) La Muse was served with Venison tartare, smoked beetroot, and spiced plums; a dish with fruity sharpness to balance the richness and chewiness of the venison, and the wine just slotted into place, completely happy with the strong flavors. It's a wine of rich black-cherry fruit with plenty of spice; the initial impression is of oak, but this doesn't last. The acidity carries the wine through to a long finish.

Spiced English plums came into play, too, with the main course, Goosnargh Duck, which also came with muscat pumpkin, crisp kale, and granola, the last hard enough to provoke jokes about Harley Street dentists being just around the corner. None, I hasten to add, needed to be found. La Joie, deep, concentrated, and tight, black-fruited, chocolate-nuanced, and polished, more vibrant than La Muse, cut through the duck nicely, though the pumpkin was perhaps a little sweet for it; again, the acidity of the plums met the freshness of the wine.

Le Désir 2014 was served alongside the 2008 of the same wine, the older version showing graphite on the nose, a savory palate and again, that polished, suave texture and supple, fresh palate. It's still young: Mesnard suggests an ideal drinking window of eight to 12 years or ten to 12 years depending on the vintage. The 2014 has the same DNA, darker and denser, with bright plum fruit and some well-judged grip. Comté and Haut-Barry cheeses were good matches; the perfectly ripe Brie de Meaux was delicious but, as always, unsuited to red wine.

The (French) oak isn't obtrusive in these wines. Seillan, says Mesnard, has "a deep affiliation with the forests" when he is choosing oak; he chooses particular trees in the forest for particular wines. The sense of restraint is certainly French. They're not terroir wines, however, unless you consider that the term has any meaning when applied to such a broad area. Mesnard uses the comparison of Krug and Dom Pérignon, and perhaps we should understand the importance of terroir in the same way: crucial for the various components, but blended away thereafter. Polish and perfection are the keys to Verité, not the individual truth of any particular spot on the earth's surface. And perfection is, after all, no small aim.