

# The coronavirus wine diaries, volume 2

By Esther Mobley published by The San Francisco Chronicle

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By now, you may have seen the reports that wine sales have hit Christmas- and Thanksgiving-like levels since much of the U.S. began staying home to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

The most stunning boost came during the week of March 15, according to Nielsen, when off-premise (a.k.a. retail) saw a year-over-year increase of 66% (!) in wine sales value. That was the week that most of the Bay Area's counties instated shelter-in-place orders, which makes it likely that there was a "stocking up" mentality at work. That week, too, was the period in which breathalyzer data from San Francisco company BACtrack showed a 42% increase in blood alcohol concentration among some of its Bay Area users, as I have reported.

Sure enough, the following week, wine sales were still strong — but couldn't match the previous week's crazy stocking-up surge. The latest Nielsen data shows that wine sales during the week of March 22 were up 27% over the same period in 2019. One of the biggest gains? Three-liter boxes of wine grew 80%. If that's not stocking up, I don't know what is.

I haven't been drinking from any three-liter boxes, but I've been doing my part. In last week's newsletter, I shared with you some of the best bottles I'd opened since my coronavirus quarantine began, and I figure I'll keep that going, at least for the time being. Did I personally drink 27% more wine last week than I did during the same period last year? Data points are limited, but anecdotal evidence suggests the answer is yes.

Here are some of my recent highlights.

What I'm drinking

- Big Table Farm "The Wild Bee" Chardonnay Willamette Valley 2018 (\$28, 13.5%): Oregon has been on my mind lately. I'd been working on a story about Oregon wine before the coronavirus changed all our coverage priorities. And I'd planned to go to Oregon this July for a wine festival that's now, like everything, canceled. So it felt appropriate to open this bottle from one of my favorite Oregon producers, Big Table Farm, owned by wife-and-husband team Clare Carver and Brian Marcy. This is their entry-level Chardonnay, and it overperforms for its price. It's creamy and round, with zippy, lime zest-laced acidity cutting through rich flavors of pie crust and popcorn.
- Two Shepherds Vermentino Windmill Vineyards Yolo County 2019 (\$25, 11.1%): I appreciate that the label of this wine specifies that the grape variety is "Vermentino a.k.a. Rolle." Two Shepherds is a Rhone-focused winery, so it makes sense that they'd stress this grape's French roots, even though it's better known by its Italian name. Whatever you want to call it, Vermentino/Rolle thrives in the warm, Mediterranean climates of southern Italy and southern France, which makes it a great choice for many sunny slices of California. This wine is evidence: lemony, waxy and very refreshing, showing grapefruit pith and pine-resin flavors.
- Sans Carbonic Carignan Poor Ranch Vineyards Mendocino County 2018 (\$12/375ml, 13%): I normally reach for canned wine when I need its convenience factor — if I'm going to the park or the beach, for example, and need a drinking vessel that's easy to throw in my backpack and not made out of glass. So it feels a little silly to drink canned wine at home. But the Sans wines are delicious enough that I don't care. Although the label's owners Gina Schober and Jake Stover make some beautiful fuller-bodied red wines in cans — including a very serious Napa Cabernet — I think their carbonic Carignan is particularly well suited to its form. It's ultra-juicy and berry-forward, with lots of vibrant acidity and an explosively fruity flavor profile that recalls Warheads candy, in a good way.

- Cherry House Red Paso Robles 2018 (\$25, 14.9%): This brand-new label comes from Cris and JoAnn Cherry, owners of Villa Creek Cellars in Paso Robles. Their wines for Villa Creek are pricey (and excellent), running up to \$100. Cherry House Red is a new effort to provide a value label, with about half of the fruit coming from their estate vineyard, Maha. A blend of Grenache, Carignan and Mourvedre, the blend is spicy, with flavors of blueberry candy and — yes — cherry pit. It's got some pleasant weight and suave tannins. I was very happy drinking it with a sausage pizza.

### What else I'm drinking

As we acclimate to this brave new world of Zoom conferencing, The Chronicle has started offering special video presentations for small groups of subscribers. Tara Duggan is leading a cooking demo today, Mick LaSalle has shared his movie streaming picks, and our baseball beat reporters Susan Slusser and Henry Schulman have discussed what's happening with baseball season. And, on Tuesday afternoon, I led a cocktail demonstration!

I have to admit, I was a little bit nervous about how my home mixology would translate over Zoom, but it turned out to be a ton of fun — and I was very pleased to see that many of the attendees were able to follow along and make the drinks with me. We made a Negroni Sbagliato, a Whiskey Smash and a riff on a Cosmonaut. We'll definitely be doing this again. If you're a Chronicle subscriber, be sure to check our Membership Center for updates, and feel free to send me some suggestions for things you'd like to see in a drink-focused Zoom class. And if you're not a Chronicle subscriber, we can fix that ;)

Drinking with Esther is a weekly newsletter from The Chronicle's wine critic. Follow along on Twitter: @Esther\_Mobley and Instagram: @esthermob