Giacomo Conterno. Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Domaine Jean-Louis Chave. Other than high price tags, Old World roots, and legions of fans, what do these wineries have in common? All three are estate wineries.

Recently a wine writer wrote a book on California Wine with a chapter provocatively titled, “The Myth of the Estate”. The chapter made, and still makes, me bristle. In it, the author suggests that in California it is not necessary for a winery to own the vineyard (i.e. to be an estate bottling) or to have even farmed the vineyard in order to make California’s greatest wines. He proffered, you can buy fruit, perhaps farm your section of the vineyard to some degree for even a short period of time, and, voilà, you have captured the essence of the vineyard and are making the best examples of those varieties in California. While I agree it is possible to make a delicious wine this way (ahem, we make a superb Savoy Pinot noir, btw), the negociant model often provides wines that are a fair representation of a wine from that region, or a specific vineyard, but rarely captures the essence of the vineyard like a wine made by the people who planted and farm it. For some reason negociant wines seldom make the heart soar. Why is that? The grapes frequently come from a heralded vineyard and the winemakers have all the technical ability of their estate counterparts? There must be something about living on the vineyard throughout the year, daily walking the vineyard at all stages of growth, and making wine from the same vineyard across many varying vintages, that enables the estate winemaker to best capture the ineffable, yet distinct, voice of the vineyard. I think it has something to do with the estate winemaker’s slow accretion of knowledge about the unique quality of grapes grown at their site.

Without this intimate knowledge the winemaker may unwittingly obliterate the identity of the vineyard by employing winemaking techniques or otherwise make decisions to add qualities to the wine that are not unique to their site: excessive oak use, excessive ripeness or unripeness, excessive stem use, etc. It is easy to layer in flavors that consumers recognize and like but those flavors are available to any winemaker making wine from any region. It takes restraint to hold off on the heavy make-up and only highlight features so the inner beauty of the site shines. Now, not every consumer may like the face the winemaker brings forth, but the subset of people who do have a much deeper relationship with the wine as there is something exceptional that they appreciate and connect with. That connection can start a long conversation that may last a lifetime between the drinker and the wine. That is the myth of the estate I believe in and the one that informs my wine buying and making.

At the base of this argument lies the granddaddy of wine mythology, the concept of terroir. The modern, western mindset oftentimes balks at the idea of terroir since the link between the wine and place is not measurable and scientifically verifiable. The idea (see not even a thing but an idea!) is complex, comprising physical attributes that can be measured (temperature, precipitation, aspect, geology, etc.) and those that cannot (the human who made the decision on how to farm and all of the subtle influences on her sensibilities when making decisions). Despite an inability to scientifically explain why a wine tastes the way it does based on its terroir, however, we all know terroir exists from our empirical experience. From drinking. But, like this “Estate business,” terroir is relegated to the class of Mythology wine marketers obviously trot out to justify their pricing, right?

Even if you persist in calling “Estate quality” and “terroir” myths, are myths inherently untrue? Myths exist and are vital because they often explain cultural phenomenon and “truths” that are otherwise beyond description. A list of characteristics about what it means to live a good life is not as powerful as a mythical tale that shows you the value of living a good life. Despite my attempt above, I cannot tell you concretely why estate wines are better. But in the myth I am writing, I think it is because the land, the wine, and the people are one. Can you taste Aubert de Villaine in La Tâche? Literally, thankfully, not. But you can somehow taste his steady hand on the rudder, year in, year out. There is a clear vision that can persist through conflicts of interest, tides of fashion, or restless egos. The commitment to expressing the estate’s terroir trumps all other considerations and, in doing so,
The 2014 wines are remarkable. They have the depth and concentration of the 2012s with the brightness and aromatic appeal of the 2013s. I sat with the only wine critic we allow to taste our wines the other day and he raved about the 2014 vintage and how we appear to have hit our stride with what he had tasted (only Sonoma Coast wines, I held back the 2014 estate wines until next year).

Why was it such a good year at our vineyard? Crop levels may have been high in some parts of wine country but at our estate we were down a wee bit from our normal and the vines appeared quite healthy and able to support the 1.5-2 tons/acre. We had a warm spring which aided in fruit set and the summer and fall were quite cool allowing long hang time while maintaining acidity levels and moderate sugars. As a result, this was a vintage where we did not have to sweat whether flavors were lagging sugars or if acid would never drop. All three criteria—sugar, acid, flavor—came together in an optimal spot allowing for greater oomph in the mid-palate without sacrificing any elegance or freshness. It is rare when this happens, maybe a few times per decade, or even a lifetime.

2014 Peay Vineyards Estate Viognier, Sonoma Coast  200 CASES
The 2014 Viognier is on the stylistic edge of domestic, or even international, Viognier. If you are a fan of the bright, mineral, citrus and green qualities of our Viognier, here they are in spades. Flavors include a mix of: lemon thyme, lemon drop, kaffir lime, lemongrass, and Thai basil. On the palate the wine is direct, taut and bright. The acidity is mouth-watering without any fat or cloyingness and the finish is chalky and minerally. This wine is crying out for a Thai curry or soup. Or perhaps the crab, oysters and shrimp feast we try to have on Fridays during the winter at our house (that is, when we had a local crab season. Sniff.) Drink end of 2016 to 2018.

2014 Peay Vineyards Sonoma Coast Chardonnay  550 CASES
I love this wine. If you like our Estate Chardonnay, you would be remiss not to try the 2014 Sonoma Coast bottling. It does not have the mid-palate depth of the Estate but has incredible energy and mineral tones. The nose has a flinty aroma with a whiff of smoke and wet stone. The mouth is well-proportioned and has a creamy texture with some pear and crème brûlée notes. The acidity is very bright and the aroma of slate lingers on the long finish. You can enjoy it on release to appreciate its vibrancy or age it for 3+ years (until 2019) for secondary flavors of wax and nuttiness to develop.

2014 Peay Vineyards Sonoma Coast Pinot noir  900 CASES
The Sonoma Coast Pinot noir is made almost entirely from grapes grown on our Estate vineyard. It has all of the clones we grow and, as such, is a good snapshot of the vintage and the essential nature of Pinot noir from our vineyard.

2014 Peay Vineyards Savoy Pinot noir, Anderson Valley  400 CASES
The famed Savoy Vineyard in Anderson Valley represents our first (and only!) foray into making vineyard designate wine from someone else’s fruit. We are motivated by showing what is unique about our estate vineyard but we have long admired this vineyard and the opportunity to interpret Savoy through a Peay lens proved irresistible. We have been fortunate that the owners of Savoy are diligent farmers and are now re-planting old blocks and offering us older blocks and clones we have desired.

The famed Savoy Vineyard in Anderson Valley represents our first (and only!) foray into making vineyard designate wine from someone else’s fruit. We are motivated by showing what is unique about our estate vineyard but we have long admired this vineyard and the opportunity to interpret Savoy through a Peay lens proved irresistible. We have been fortunate that the owners of Savoy are diligent farmers and are now re-planting old blocks and offering us older blocks and clones we have desired.

The nose on the 2014 Savoy is quite dramatic with distinct berry and conifer notes accenting the core of cherry fruit. On the palate, the body is medium weight due to moderate alcohol with medium to high acidity, noticeable particularly in the fore palate. At this youthful stage, Asian five spice smells frame the bright cherry core of fruit that makes the Savoy so appealing. This is a masculine wine but not fat, rich or brutish. There is suavity, class and grace. You can drink it in a few months once oak aromas integrate or hold it for 5+ years (to 2021) to allow secondary aromas to come to the fore.
Starting with the 2013 vintage, Pomarium evolved into a more refined cuvée. The Pomarium still remains the most dark-fruited and earthy of our estate bottlings but there is a seriousness, a reserved quality to the wine that makes me think more deeply while drinking it. Dark cherry and plum sit at the core of the nose with bright pomegranate, anise seed, and red apple skin framing the cherry aroma. Deep in the nose (sniff deeply) you will find iron, musk and forest floor qualities that make this decidedly a masculine Pinot noir. The mouth is well-proportioned with a harmonious equilibrium at even this young age. The soft tannins on the finish do not cut short the persistent finish and the lively acidity bodes well for cellaring. The 2014 Pomarium really captures the personality of our windy coastal vineyard resting on a hill top among the fog and conifers. Enjoy now as it is very appealing or hold as long as you desire (10+ years to 2016 and beyond). I suspect the 2014 Pomarium has a long life ahead of it.

The 2013 vintage signaled the return of our Syrah blocks to healthy production. The timing was perfect as the vines are middle aged and making wines of such great character as evidenced by the 2013 Les Titans.

This may be our best Les Titans to date; better than the deep and rich 2006 or the bold and aromatic 2009 (my previous favorites.) There is a notable depth of Peay Estate Syrah character in the 2013 with less flash and flesh than the ’06 or ’09. The nose and mouth showcase red fruits, iron, blood, and rosemary. The mid-palate is neither firm nor fat but focused and harmonious. The persistence on the finish is very long. I could drink this all day long with or without food. You can enjoy it now (the aromas are well-integrated despite the youth and I want you to try it and become as excited as I am) or you can age it for as long as you desire (10+ years to 2016 and beyond).
I know that I am going to sound like an old person when I say that young people these days (“Youts deez days!” as I shake my fist) think they can figure out how to do anything by simply watching a YouTube video. Don’t get me wrong. I have found some pretty good tutorials on YouTube where I learned how to do something more easily by watching someone do it rather than reading instructions on how to do it: How to stop autoplay of those annoying video ads on my computer; how to fold an origami Yoda; or how to apply Halloween makeup, except that unhelpfully they never seem to use a squirming 4 year old as a model. There are some fundamental things, however, that can’t really be summed up by viewing a video a couple of times. Some things are better mastered when experienced hands-on from the get-go, like: cooking, playing a musical instrument, or, say, brain surgery. Our millennial-age baby sitter once spent hours watching videos on how to make cookies but never actually attempted to bake a batch of them. I think taking a stab at it in the kitchen would have produced at least some edifying if not edible results.

In truth, I don’t spend much time watching how-to videos online but the one thing I do try to find are music videos. No, I am not talking about videos of the Katy Perry or Wiz Khalifa sort. I am looking for videos of musicians playing music that I am trying to learn how to play on the cello. Cello is an instrument that I used to play off and on when I was a kid but quit after a few years. I always knew I would one day pick it up again when I had the time and means to commit to learning it because I did enjoy it. So after a 25 year hiatus, I decided to take lessons alongside my son. I delight in the process as I find it both challenging and relaxing at the same time (although I have to say that there is nothing relaxing about forcing my kid to practice).

My proficiency level at playing the cello is happily beyond “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” but is lamentably most definitely not high enough to play anything interesting or well-known in the classic cello repertoire like the Bach Suites or anything by Elgar. So, I have found YouTube quite handy for hunting around for possible recital pieces by first viewing the sheet music online and then watching a video of somebody playing that very piece of music. This way I can see someone playing as well as hear how it sounds to judge whether it is appropriate for me. Isn’t the internet fantastic? And yet there is nothing quite as demoralizing as watching some 6 year-old prodigy playing the very same piece I am sawing away at with skill, ease and much better sound than I ever could hope to produce. It was on one such tumble down the rabbit hole of YouTubing that I happened on a video of Six Studies in English Folksong by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It was a chamber music piece Vaughan Williams had written in 1926 for the cello with piano accompaniment. I “watched” or rather listened (lots of classical music YouTube videos are nothing more than a photo still while the music plays) to the simple and haunting melodies that capture the purity of each of his studies. The brevity of the simple songs express their own beauty.

I didn’t know much about the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams so I did a little research to find out more about him. Vaughan Williams was a prominent and prolific English composer who composed a catalog of many genres of classical music including symphonies, operas, film scores, and choral music but he is most well-known for his work for strings Fantasia on Greensleeves. Not only did he study music and composition, but his love and fascination for the rural music of his native country, England, also led him to collect and preserve folksongs. He trekked throughout the English countryside recording and transcribing music that had traditionally been passed on orally. This passionate study of English folk music largely informed his approach to his composition in that he wove elements of his native music into his writings using a musical language derived from the folk song. Vaughan Williams also lectured and wrote prose writings on the subject of music itself. It was in my reading of his essay “Should Music Be National?” that I stumbled upon a most astonishing and poignant passage in the conclusion of his essay:

“I am told that when grapevines were first cultivated in California the vineyard masters used to try the experiment of importing plants from France or Italy and setting them in their own soil. The result was that the grapes acquired a peculiar individual flavor, so strong was the influence of the soil in which they were planted. I think I need hardly draw the moral of this, namely, that if the roots of your art are firmly planted in your own soil and that soil has anything individual to give you, you may still gain the whole world and not lose your own soul.”

Here was a composer drawing an analogy between grapes and where they are grown to music making. He was explaining the notion of terroir to illustrate his idea that even though music can transcend its borders or its...
frontiers, one’s music should express itself in a way that speaks of its origin. That, in its very essence, music, if true to its nature, should embody all that brings it into being or makes up what it is: its surroundings, its environment, its community, its history, in other words, its terroir.

I read in this that we may grow grapes originally from Burgundy and that we may strive to make a “Burgundy-style” wine but, in the end, the wine should be true to its origin and express the individual terroir in which it is grown. If I make a wine that is sincere to its terroir I gain the whole world and not lose my own soul. Wow.

I often liken the balance of the components and flavors in a wine to the way a symphony blends the various sounds of all the different instruments into a polyphonic balance that is expressive, harmonious, and evocative to the senses and emotions. But now having learned more about Vaughan Williams and his music, I also like to think about the melodies in his *Six Studies in English Folksong* and how the purity of the folk song is the strain that provides the framework of the music. The expression of terroir in a wine should be true to its origin and bring forth the very essence of its site. In order to have a universal meaning or message, one’s work should first have what Vaughan Williams calls a “specialized meaning” or “local” meaning, a significance that speaks of a sense of place.

Looking at the sheet music for *Six Studies in English Folksong* for cello I realize that although the music has been described as popular with cellists because it requires “only modest technical demands on the performer”, it is still too difficult for me to play with my less-than-modest musical abilities. So, I am content just to put on some earphones while sipping a glass of wine to listen to this beautiful piece of music while contemplating either the pastoral English countryside or the lovely far West Sonoma Coast where our grapes are grown. And everyone knows that drinking wine is much better than watching someone on YouTube doing it.

**THE MYTH OF THE ESTATE?**—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ensures no one else can make a wine that tastes like DRC’s La Tâche. Coaxing out the estate profile in the wine was considered long before that spring’s bud break or even the previous ten budbreaks. Theoretically, someone can purchase the same grapes from the vineyard (it is a Monopole, I know) and make a vineyard designate wine but when making the wine they will not know what the person who planted the vines was thinking when he planted. He does not know what the farmer was thinking when he made each decision throughout the year or throughout the past twenty years. He simply does not possess the same aesthetics, sensibility, and experience as the estate vigneron.

We have beaten the drum of estate winemaking since we started in 1996. It was the first commandment Nick laid down when he proposed we make wine together. It was a monumental decision as it forced us to become farmers first—yes, boys from the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, decidedly not farm country. It meant we had to plant a raw piece of land and farm it for 4 years before harvesting our first fruit and then to wait another two years until we had wine to sell. To cap it off, we had to sell most of our fruit the first 4 years since we did not feel we could reveal the voice of our site and make world-class level wines from young fruit. As the newly minted MBA, it did not take me long to calculate the financial impact of this decision. But, unless you are one of the few people who inherit a vineyard, this is what you must do if you wish to be an estate vineyard. Hopefully, the piece of land you planted has something interesting to say.

But you don’t really need me to tell you the author got it wrong when he called the importance of an Estate a mythology in California. Almost every winemaker/owner who finds financial success making wines with purchased fruit eventually ends up buying land to plant her own vineyard. And that is a fact, not a myth.
Every year our family convenes at the vineyard for the long Thanksgiving weekend to cook, eat and drink. Late fall is my favorite time of year as the cold, damp air and slightly decayed leaf smells make me yearn for braised foods cooked low and slow. I look forward to a weekend of foraging mushrooms and smelling freshly baked bread in the kitchen. Of course, we will eat turkey on Thanksgiving and the other 3 nights will be a rotation of lamb, beef, and fish/seafood. These proteins sit at the core of the suppers and drive most of the wine decisions. There are little touches, however, that adorn the evening’s centerpiece and, though decidedly guilty of “gilding the lily,” add such ritualistic perfection I feel I must share our ultimate, over-the-top, indulgence before heading into Mike Tusk’s sublime risotto.

**Quince’s: Wild Nettle Risotto With Porcini Mushrooms, White Asparagus & Sea Scallops**

Every year as the cold, damp air and slightly decayed leaf smells make me yearn for braised foods cooked low and slow. I look forward to a weekend of foraging mushrooms and smelling freshly baked bread in the kitchen. Of course, we will eat turkey on Thanksgiving and the other 3 nights will be a rotation of lamb, beef, and fish/seafood. These proteins sit at the core of the suppers and drive most of the wine decisions. There are little touches, however, that adorn the evening’s centerpiece and, though decidedly guilty of “gilding the lily,” add such ritualistic perfection I feel I must share our ultimate, over-the-top, indulgence before heading into Mike Tusk’s sublime risotto.

**Caviar, Crème Fraîche, Potato Chip**

As easy as it sounds. Buy as good a caviar as you wish to afford. Drop a small teaspoon of crème fraîche on a potato chip—I prefer Kettle for their crunchy and saltiness—and spoon caviar on top of the crème fraîche. Use a second small spoon to remove the crème fraîche and the caviar from the serving spoon. Move quickly so the chips do not get soggy. You cannot make enough of them as they will disappear before your eyes; even our kids sneak as many as they can while walking past the kitchen prep table. Potato, cream and caviar is not breaking new ground (latkes are also great with caviar and crème fraîche) but this is the perfect one bite trip to the moon. I like Black River Caviar sustainably farmed in Uruguay www.blackrivercaviar.com. Enjoy!

**Quince**

Chef/Owner Mike Tusk of Quince is a quiet, smart, force in the kitchen. I first got to know Mike when we teamed up for a cooking demonstration and wine dinner at the new Cavallo Point in Marin County 7 or 8 years ago. He modestly walked a group through how to make and roll gnocchi blithely unaware that the result of his efforts would look nothing like what we would get at home when we tried. Mike’s food speaks for itself. It is based in Italy with strong California input yet reveals influences from all over the world. His accolades come from every corner as well: Two Michelin stars, 4 stars from our local food critic, respect from everyone in the food world. I once bought a Middleton vegetable knife from “a guy” (turns out it was Quintin Middleton, the actual maker) at a midnight BBQ simply because Mike said this was legit steel at a crazy good price. Oh yeah, Mike also is knowledgeable about art and loves to collect things of beauty. I teamed up with Mike again to auction off two dinners at last year’s Meals on Wheels Auction in San Francisco. The very generous winners purchased a 5-course meal prepared by Mike paired with Peay wines from our library. The first dinner was held this past fall to celebrate the winner’s sister’s 50th birthday. It was a wonderful evening. Mike was in the kitchen managing the preparation while his sous chef manned the stove. He was modest and in command but not over-bearing and his dishes (I stole a few bites while standing in the kitchen) were well-balanced and delicious. I was a little disappointed, however, that Mike had not served his risotto. He is famous for his risotto and I order it every time I dine at Quince. So, instead, I asked for his recipe. Try the version below when the nettles come up in the next few months. If you cannot find fresh porcini use chanterelles or other wild mushrooms.

**Serves 4 - 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 quart wild nettles, stems removed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 T unsalted butter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 cups porcini mushrooms, slice thinly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 lb white asparagus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ½ cups minced leek, white only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 3/4 cup Aquarello Carnaroli rice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 3/4 cup white wine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 quarts vegetable or chicken stock</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 T unsalted butter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3 cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 lb sea scallops, sliced into thin rounds and made into rosettes on parchment paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Method:**

- Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Heat stock and when at a rolling boil add in the nettles, cook until tender, remove with a slotted spoon. Shock in ice water and wring out any moisture with a kitchen towel. Pound the nettle in a mortar and pestle with a little olive oil or puree in a blender, using a little stock until it is smooth. Season with a little salt and keep covered at room temperature. Keep the stock at a simmer.
- Heat a stainless steel or copper saucepan and add 4 Tablespoons of butter and sauté the porcini mushrooms until tender, season gently and reserve. Add the white asparagus and cook until tender and set aside with the porcini. In the same pan which is now perfumed with the porcini and white asparagus add the remaining 4 Tablespoons of butter and melt. Add the leeks and cook until tender, add a bit of water if necessary to prevent the leeks from browning. When the leeks are softened add the rice. Coat the rice with the butter and toast the rice over medium heat for about 4 minutes.
- Add the white wine and continue stirring until the wine is evaporated. Set a timer for fifteen minutes to correctly time the stock additions. Gently heat the porcini mushroom-white asparagus ragout and keep warm.
- Add the stock a ladle at a time, stirring continuously until each addition of stock has evaporated. When the timer goes off the rice should be tender but still al dente. Add the nettle puree and heat until the nettle is fully incorporated into the risotto, no more than two minutes. Pull the risotto off the heat and let rest for 45 seconds. Flash the scallops rosettes in the oven to barely warm, about a minute. Keep warm while you finish the risotto.
- Finish the rice by adding the butter and cheese, stir vigorously with a wooden spoon. Ladle the rice onto warm dinner plates, place the scallop rosette on top and then finish by spooning the porcini mushroom-white asparagus mixture in the center. Garnish with fried nettles, if desired. Serve immediately.