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SHOW-SEASON STRATEGIES

*Anna Buffini and
Davinia La Douce FRH*

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VINE-TUNING: Dressage trainer Alex Greer and Greer Ventures LLC's 2013 Hanoverian, First Wonder Ymas (Fürstenball x Londonderry) amidst the grapevines at Shadybrook Estate Winery in Napa, California

DE BETTER DECANter, DE BETTER DE RIDE

Dressage horses, they say, are developed like fine wines. Likewise, some wines and spirits are infused with a love of all things equine.

BY L.A. SOKOLOWSKI

In the 4th century BCE, the Greek poet and statesman Eubulus advised fellow *symposia* revelers that, after three *kraters* of wine, wise guests go home. A fifth, he warned, leads to yelling; a sixth to “prancing about”; and after seven *kraters*, “black eyes, insanity, and hurling furniture.”

Modern dressage symposiums are staid affairs in comparison, but convivial appreciation for a good libation has withstood the test of time. Meet some wines and whiskeys—and a selection of artful labels, stoppers, and decanters—created by, for, or about lovers of horses, dressage, and the equestrian lifestyle.

WINE, VINES, AND EQUINES

Hacking out in a vineyard? It's all in a day's work for Alex Greer, resident dressage trainer at Alko Equestrian Center, located on the Shadybrook Estate Winery at Rapp Ranch in Napa, California.

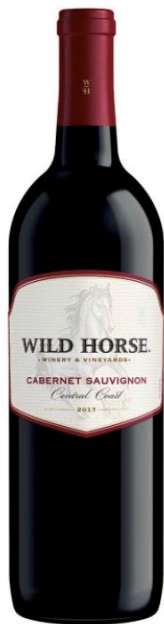
After graduating from Cornell University in 2012, Greer trained in Wellington, Florida, under the tutelage of interna-

tionally renowned coaches and fine-tuned her “horses first, always” focus on boutique training, sales, and imports.

“It is truly incredible to call such a beautiful facility home,” Greer says. “My clients and I love riding the estate's groomed vineyard trails and hills. The horses are so happy. Our indoor arena has a vineyard view, and it's a lovely backdrop to our dressage training.”

“Horses and wine are a perfect blend,” Greer continues. “The wines from Rapp Ranch/Shadybrook Estate are bold and full of flavor, much like our dressage horses! It's really special to drink wine made from the grapes you ride past every day. Their cabernet sauvignon is a barn favorite.”

The estate's winemaker, Rudy Zuidema, suggests that the 2017 vintage will age gracefully or, with proper decanting, can be enjoyed now: “The Shadybrook Estate Cabernet Sauvignon showcases aromatics of lilac, blackberries, and mocha powder. The palette starts out rich and juicy, with notes of boysenberry preserves, hazelnut, and chocolate, transitioning into long, balanced tannins of exquisite texture.”



LAURA'S CHOICE:
Dressage Olympian Laura Graves enjoys Wild Horse Cabernet Sauvignon from Wild Horse Winery in San Miguel, California

If you're a horse lover, then you're bound to be drawn to wines with equine-themed names. Laura Graves is no exception.

"Most wine appeals to me," says the Florida-based 2016 US Olympic dressage team bronze medalist, "but I have been a fan of Wild Horse Cabernet Sauvignon." And what's not to love? Wild Horse Winery, San Miguel, California, describes its 2018 cab as having "aromas of blue fruit, candied currants, bramble fruits, forest floor, and oak spice" and a rich mouthfeel of "red velvet cake."

It's also hard not to like a bottle if your horse is on it. When Graves' friend the Scottish dressage rider Katie Paulin shared a "personalized" bottle of 90-proof whiskey produced by a friend, its label sporting a picture of Graves' legendary mount, Verdades, Graves loved it.

"It was her horse's name (Belisario)," Graves enthused, "but a photo of 'Diddy.' It was epic!"

Horses and artwork make fine company at Bloomer Creek Vineyard in New York's Finger Lakes, and a "favorite stop" on the *Conde Nast Traveler* Destination Guide. The label of its White Horse Cabernet Franc/Merlot red blend sports the colorful art of friend and wine collector C. James "Jimmy" Wright, a Kentucky native whose work hangs in the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, as well as in museums in Chicago and Los Angeles.

Vines and equines grow well together in Oregon, at Pheasantbrook Vineyards and Bayer Family Estate, the equestrian dream facility of the late reined-cow-horse champion Toni Isola-Bayer. Today the winery is known for its award-winning Brook Horse Zinfandels and Rosés.

"My wife," says Jim Bayer, "got her first horse from [entertainer and Arabian-horse enthusiast] Wayne Newton in Las Vegas. She was an incredible equestrian, with US and Canadian national championships." After Bayer's enterprise transitioned from equestrian facility



BLOOMER CREEK VINEYARD

White Horse 2018
FINGER LAKES DRY RED WINE
Alcohol 12.2% by Volume

FINE ART: Renowned artist C. James "Jimmy" Wright's work graces the label of Bloomer Creek Vineyard's White Horse red wine

to vineyard, he maintained the horse-centric theme: "If you look on our wine label, it's got a horse coming out of water and lilies. That's the legend of the brook horse." The Scandinavian folk tale of the *bäckahäst* ("brook horse") intertwines horses, love, and water, and reflects Bayer's passion for the wine, equines, and vines that flourish along the Rogue River.

On any given wine-shop shelf it's hard to miss Cynthia Sampson's brightly-colored horses galloping across the labels of Washington state's 14 Hands Winery, whose selections include a Unicorn Rosé and a Hot to Trot White. Or, for a choice of sparkling wine, layered with fresh apples and toasted oak, a Dark Horse Brut out of Modesto, California, is always ready to show off. ➔



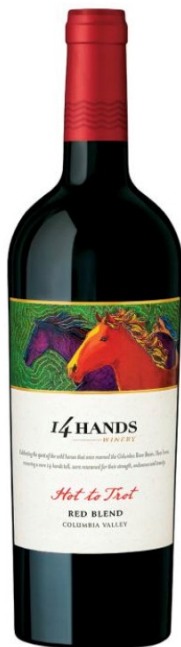
HORSE OF LEGEND: A Scandinavian folk-tale equine lends its name and image to the Brook Horse wines of Oregon's Bayer Family Estate, a former equestrian facility



THEY'RE OFF: Collectors vie to acquire the entire set of Blanton's bourbon stoppers. The eight stoppers depict a Thoroughbred winning a race, and each bears a letter (near the horse's right hind foot) spelling out the Blanton's name

WHISKEY: OFF TO THE RACES

GoogleTrends has tracked bourbon whiskey's rising popularity since 2004, and the number of craft distilleries has risen 250% in the last decade. According to the Kentucky Distillers' Association, nearly 95% of all bourbon is produced in Kentucky, where the influence of the Bluegrass State on inspiring creative and collectible horse-themed bottles



PONY POWER: Non-horse folk may not know that the 14 Hands Winery name refers to an equine's height! The Prosser, Washington, winery's labels all feature equine art, including the colorful pastel-and-acrylic "Wild Horses" by Colorado artist Cynthia Sampson. 14 Hands is named for the wild horses that once roamed eastern Washington state.

and stoppers is undeniable.

Blanton's Original Single Barrel Bourbon Whiskey representative Aaron Lawrence explains how the heritage of horses parallels that of bourbon.

"At the turn of the 18th century, the most efficient way to ship whiskey from Kentucky was on flatbed boats down the Mississippi to New Orleans," Lawrence says. "After unloading, they needed a fast way back to keep turning around shipments, so, while down South, they would take some of the money from selling bourbon and ride home on the fastest Thoroughbreds they could buy."

Thanks to some savvy horse-dealing, Kentucky built a racehorse industry while expanding bourbon sales.

Blanton's founder, Elmer T. Lee, "knew Kentucky had two international assets: horses and bourbon. This is our way of paying homage to that heritage," says Lawrence, referring to the collector's set of eight stoppers depicting a horse and jockey in the strides and poses of a race from starting gate to finish line. Each stopper is marked with a single letter, and the complete set spells *Blanton's*. On the final stopper, marked with an S, "the jockey's arm is raised in victory." According to Lawrence, the provenance of the artist who created the stoppers remains a mystery, although "the legend is that it was inspired by a Triple Crown champion."

In 1999, the distillery noted that its bottle's eight-paneled design lent itself to the eight letters in the Blanton's name and thought: Why not eight stoppers, each with their own horse-and-jockey figure corresponding to a letter? The venture was a success, with

the stoppers soon becoming collectors' items.

"Today the thrill of the hunt is as cool as the bourbon," Lawrence says. "It's one thing to see a single stopper, but all of them together are really something." In addition to proudly displaying their complete sets, collectors also use the stoppers for horse-racing board games played with cards and dice, he adds.

Blanton's artist may remain unknown, but there is no such question about the image on Horse Soldier Bourbon Whiskey, distilled in St. Petersburg, Florida. The bottles are formed in molds made from steel recovered from the World Trade Center after 9/11 and donated to the distillery by the New York City Port Authority.

The bourbon is named for the Special Operations team inserted into northern Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The only way over the mountainous terrain was on horseback, and it marked the first time that US troops had used horses in combat since 1942.

"One of the soldiers grew up on a ranch and worked as rodeo cowboy," says Horse Soldier Bourbon representative Bryan Avery. "He called them [the mounts in Afghanistan] crossbred with a werewolf. They were angry horses."

Those who did their duty while outriding their angry crossbreds were honored by the America's Response Monument, which overlooks Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. That statue, *De Oppresso Liber, America's Response*, graces the Horse Soldier Bourbon label.

The life-and-a-half-sized bronze was sculpted by Douwe Blumberg, who was a professional horse trainer



DRINK TO REMEMBER: Named in honor of the horseback-riding US Special Ops team in Afghanistan post-9/11, Horse Soldier Bourbon Whiskey features an image of the America's Response Monument (inset) on its label, and its bottle molds are made from steel recovered from the World Trade Center towers

for 18 years before he turned to art full-time in 2001.

"My mother rode dressage in Holland before the war [World War II]," says the Los Angeles-born Blumberg of his Dutch-born parents. "My parents were amateur artists. I began sculpting for fun while I trained horses. But after the art business outgrew the horse business, I closed the barn and changed careers."

Blumberg relocated from California to Kentucky, where he built a studio north of Lexington.

"Horses allowed me to find a niche that I was very good at, with a financially solid clientele, which allowed me to get my foot in the door of the art world. Most of my early works were equine-related," he says.

THE FINE ART OF THE DECANTER

If a mold can make the bottle, then a decanter can make the wine.

Decanting refers to the slow pouring of a wine from its bottle into a

different container (decanter) without disturbing whatever sediment has formed at the bottom, and oxygenating the compounds within to elevate the drinker's perception of its flavor, texture, and aroma. The most inviting decanters are glass vessels with elongated, easy-to-pour necks in standard shapes and sizes. More creative shapes, such as swans or horses, have also earned appeal.

For nearly three centuries, family-owned Riedel Crystal has been respected among wine connoisseurs, hospitality professionals, and drink specialists. Founded in 1756, the Austrian company was the first in history to recognize how the shape of a vessel affects the taste and aroma of the beverage within.

Shape matters, say these renowned glassblowers (whose work is in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art) in delivering the four sensations—bouquet, texture, flavor, and finish—inherent to a wine's "message."

"On the palate, decanted wine expresses higher levels of fruit in red wines, and tends to integrate and smooth out tannins," says Maximilian Josef Riedel, the eleventh generation to be appointed CEO and president, and principal designer of the company's decanters. An award-winning craftsman best known for his revolutionary stemless "O" glassware series, before his current role Riedel earned 2011 Grand Prix Table & Gift awards for design, innovation, and technicality; and a *Wine Enthusiast* Wine Star Special Award for Generations of Innovation.

At nearly two feet tall, the hand-made, hand-finished crystal Riedel Horse Decanter honors good wine with the treatment it deserves, its elegant lines reminiscent of Austria's *haute école* equestrian legacy. A sec-



ELEGANT LINES: Just like a dressage horse, Riedel Crystal's Horse Decanter is graceful and arresting

ond decanter, the Horn—reminiscent of a hunting horn—pays homage to the family's own Austrian and Bohemian heritage, with a coiled design that "double-decants," via technology developed by Riedel to accelerate wine aeration by creating a natural vacuum within the vessel.

A SATISFYING PAIRING

The similarities between riding and winemaking may not be apparent at first blush, but dressage trainer and wine connoisseur Greer says that both pursuits require passion and dedication to produce a result that is pure harmony.

"You can look back on a great ride the way you look back at a great bottle," Greer says. "It stays with you and makes you want to come back for more."



L.A. Sokolowski is an award-winning, multi-platform journalist and image consultant based in New York. She has covered equestrian sport, welfare, lifestyle, and culture at the highest international levels since 1992.