



ERIC LEVIN

# Vintage Rounds

Raritan Valley's wine program heightens the membership's grape expectations **BY ERIC LEVIN**

**P** rivate clubs often send newsletters to their members, but few begin with a quote from the likes of W.C. Fields or George Bernard Shaw, or conclude, as Bob Golden's do, with a hearty, "Cheers!"

That's because the subject of Golden's "As the Spirits Strike Me"—his missives to fellow members of Raritan Valley Country Club in Bridgewater, New Jersey—is not golf, but wine. If you partake of either, it helps to have a sense of humor, and Golden does. Which is why he began one "Spirits" letter with a quote from the comedian ("I cook with wine; sometimes I even add it to the food") and another from the playwright ("A mind of the caliber of mine cannot derive its nutrients from cows").

Apart from the levity, members value Golden's letters for their content: invitations to themed wine dinners, some with presentations by noted wine-

makers, and updates on the club's carefully curated wine list. Both are selected and managed by the eleven-member committee Golden heads.

The committee was formed in 2007 by member Gerard "Jerry" Pascale, who had served on a similar panel at Fairbanks Ranch Country Club in Rancho Santa Fe, California. Even in that wine-intensive state, Pascale says, such a committee was unusual. In the Met Area, Raritan Valley's program truly stands out.

The member-owned club, managed by Troon Privé, gives the committee Golden has run since 2012 the authority to select all wines for the club. The group meets monthly to taste wines "to decide if they're worth adding to the list or replacing something already on the list," says Golden, 77, a retired lawyer. "It's easy to buy expensive wines.

The hard work is finding good but inexpensive wines for the bar and the restaurant, because that's what most members are going to drink."

Golden and others on the committee, all of whom consider themselves wine lovers rather than experts, attend numerous industry tastings, often involving hundreds of winemakers from around the world. "Tasting wine and drinking wine are two different things," Golden says. "If I drank the wine, I'd never make it through a tasting." Spitting is like putting: anyone can do it, but it requires accuracy and finesse.

To get on the list, a wine has to survive one or more rounds of blind tastings against other wines of the same grape, region, or style. When a wine already on the list sells out, before ordering more the committee will taste the new vintage to see if it measures up; if not, it's back to blind tastings.

The by-the-glass list is worthy of a first-rate wine bar. Taking a seat at one of the bars or dining rooms in the handsome modern clubhouse, a member peruses a list of 17 whites and 14 reds, the majority from California. Golfers will recognize one name right away, Greg Norman. A glass of his Australian shiraz is \$7.50. Most of the names will not be familiar at first, but the membership has taken them to heart. The best-selling wine by the glass is an \$18 cabernet from Honig, a small, highly-rated, family-owned winery in the Napa Valley.

The 74-label bottle list, about 60 percent of it red, is attractively priced. More than half the bottles are \$40 or less.

A small portion of what the committee buys is set aside to age for five years in the club's temperature- and humidity-controlled storage room, which holds 1,000 bottles. These limited-production wines typically earn ratings in the 90s from the likes of *Wine Spectator* and Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*.

When the wines are ready, members can buy them by the bottle for on-site consumption at prices more comparable to retail than to typical restaurant markups. Some of these "reserve wines," as the club calls them, would be hard to find at restaurants at any price: One of the prize offerings right now, at \$192, is a 2008 Peter Michael cabernet blend, the Les Pavot, Knight's Valley, which earned 98 points from *Wine Spectator*.

"I wasn't much of a wine drinker when I first came here," admits John Moore, who joined in 2000 and now serves as club president. "But it's been a wonderful way to get to know wine. The committee brings it to the membership in an unin-



timidating way."

Many hearts and minds are won at the themed wine dinners, held about four times a year. Some are organized by country or region, but the primo events feature noted winemakers, such as Jasmine Hirsch of Hirsch Vineyards on the Sonoma County coast, and Michael Honig of Honig. Members attending the dinners can buy the wines at a discount. As many as 60 cases of wine have been sold at the dinners, making

it well worth the winemaker's time. The club's first wine dinners, around 2013, attracted roughly 30 members—but in the last few years, as word has spread, the committee has had to cut off attendance at 100. "You have to sign up quickly," says Moore.

Credit Raritan Valley's executive chef, Filomena Lombardi, as much as the vino. "We will sample the wines two months in advance of the dinner," she says, "and then I discuss with Bob and the committee what dishes will pair well with each wine."

Golden could not be prouder. "You'll look far and long before you find another member-owned club with a wine program anything like ours," he says. "If you're a wine lover, you need to look at us before you decide where to join. And it's fun."

Yes, it is, not least for the quotes that open Golden's newsletters. They even contain sound advice, such as, "If you drink, don't drive. Don't even putt." The attribution? Dean Martin. ■

Opposite: Committee founder Jerry Pascale and its leader Bob Golden in the club's wine storage room. Above left: Part of the decorations at the dinner featuring winemaker Michael Honig. Below: A display at RVCC's Loire Valley-themed dinner in 2016.

