

Dave Roberts, Rich Aurilia Go Pro

Ex-baseball players dip a toe into making wine

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When I heard that Rich Aurilia and Dave Roberts had started to produce wine in their own winery, I must admit I was unimpressed. As big a fan as I am of the San Francisco Giants, where the players met, I am as skeptical as the next guy of people who are good at something else thinking they can be as successful with wine.

The wine world is full of ex-athletes and other celebrities who have attached their names to winemaking enterprises. It's hard to identify which ones are worth paying attention to because the wines are really good, and which ones are only of interest because of the famous name.

Where does their Red Stitch wine fit? I figured my colleague James Laube would have reviewed their first offering, 150 cases of a 2007 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, but he said he hadn't seen it yet. I got an e-mail from Dave Roberts asking if I would like to meet with him and his partners. I gave Jim the first shot, since California is his beat, but he sent me in from the bullpen (as it were).

Earlier this week, over dinner at Boulevard, they bought a bottle off the list for us to drink with dinner. (It goes for \$75 at retail.) The wine showed a sense of refinement and elegance without losing the opulence and power that Napa Valley can deliver. Jim tasted it blind later, and agreed. His note: "Smooth, rich, generous and well-proportioned, with a touch of savory herb woven into ripe plum and dark berry flavors, full-bodied, firm and structured, ending with a spicy floral scent."

OK, Red Stitch is worth paying attention to. So what's the story behind it?

Aurilia and Roberts became friends in 2007, shortly after Roberts joined the Giants. Aurilia, the Giants' shortstop for nine years, including the 2002 National League championship team, had returned to San Francisco after playing elsewhere. Roberts played for five major league teams but is most famous for his ninth-inning stolen base in Game 4 of the 2004 American League Championship Series that sparked the Boston Red Sox' improbable comeback against the New York Yankees.

He also played for the Giants' arch-rival, the Los Angeles Dodgers, when Aurilia was starring in SF. "I did not like Richie much," Roberts admitted. "He was so intense. He never smiled, never seemed friendly with opposing players."

But wine brought them together, at a tasting of Malbecs from around the world at the home of John Micek, who had a hedge fund company in San Francisco and now works for Goldman-Sachs. They hit it off. Before long the six of them were organizing more wine tastings and planning a trip to Italy together. "The three of us, the six of us, are best friends as couples," said Aurilia.

And they are into wine in a big way. Micek has the most eclectic cellar, encompassing wines from France, Italy, California, Washington and Australia. Aurilia loves to find the next collectible wine from anywhere in the world and stash it away in his home in Scottsdale, Ariz., the town where the Giants do spring training. “I love to cook, and I’m always opening up something new to drink with it, just to see what it’s like,” he said.

Roberts has bigger issues on his mind today than wine. Now retired as a player, he is fighting cancer, undergoing radiation treatments for lymphoma. He said the doctors caught it early and things look good enough that he can also focus on his job as a special assistant to the San Diego Padres.

At his home in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, near San Diego, Roberts keeps a cellar focused on 2001 Brunello di Montalcino, Kosta-Browne Pinot Noirs and Cabernets from small, relatively unknown producers he and his wife, Tricia, have met in Napa Valley. “For us it’s as much about the places we were when he first tasted the wines as it is about the wines themselves,” said Tricia. “We drink the wine and remember the first time we tasted it with the winemaker or the winery owner on their patio or in their kitchen.”

Roberts got inspired to try this project after Barry Bonds introduced him to Rolando Herrera and his Mi Sueño wines at spring training. Roberts got Herrera to agree to make the wines and source them from his Frog Tree Manor vineyard in the Coombsville area just outside the town of Napa.

He called Aurilia to tell him. “I said, ‘OK, I’m in,’” Aurilia recalled. “I didn’t realize he wasn’t looking for investors, just sharing the news.” Dave and Tricia thought it was a pretty good idea, though, and brought in the Miceks to complete the party. Together they meet several times a year with Herrera to taste the various lots, define the style, and agree on a final blend.

“Rolando is very receptive,” Micek said. “We don’t bottle anything until we all agree on the final cuvée.”

Obviously, 700 cases will not provide a living to three families, and it’s not intended to. Aurilia and Roberts made millions of dollars as baseball players, and Micek has a good job. But clearly this is more than a vanity project, even if the name is a not-too-obvious reference to the threads on a baseball.

“Look, being known as baseball players has opened some doors for us,” said Aurilia, who retired from the Giants after last season and does some broadcasting for the team. “We get to visit wineries that aren’t open to the public. Sommeliers and wine shops are usually glad to see us. But we don’t want to be the baseball guys who make wine. We all want Red Stitch to be good wine, our wine.”