



ALICE  
FEIRING

BY THE  
GLASS

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## Stalwart Surprises *Classics come naturally to the guys of Sonoma's Lioco Winery*

Tasting a sommelier-made wine right in front of the sommelier can be tricky. Clearly, they know a great deal about wine, but that doesn't always extend to *making* it. What do I say if I don't like it?

I needn't have worried. One sip of Kevin O'Connor's 2006 Lioco Michaud Vineyard Chardonnay told me I was sipping a bright spot in the future of California wine. And it was delicious, with a blast of California fruit, unaided

by the blowsiness of oak. Made in stainless steel, the wine was a cha-cha of lime, golden fennel and lingering hazelnut, with a touch of allspice.

Intrigued, I then tasted a couple of the Lioco single-vineyard Pinot Noirs. These were wonderful because of what they were *not*—candied, floozy or chunky. But the best of Lioco was yet to come: the 2006 Indica, a field blend from gorgeous gnarly older vines of

what should be a signature grape of California—Carignan. Slightly brambly, slightly cherry, with a dusky aroma, it was warming but with an edge.

Yes! This is the taste I remember—great wine with the kind of deliciousness California can produce. Okay, I thought, What's the story?

It starts with O'Connor, a New Yorker of Irish-Italian descent whose parents served up crisp white wines (guilt free)

to their underage son. He never drank Coke, didn't know from McDonald's, pursued an acting career that was at first subsidized by restaurant and wine service in the early '90s and turned into an intense human being who talks in punctuated monologues.

Riding a wave of acting jobs, he quit sommeliering in 1996, moved west and sat on his butt for two years, listening to a chillingly silent phone. So back to the floor he went, toting his corkscrew, eventually landing at Spago.

Sipping champagne, I tried to size up the 47-year-old, suited up for service and with a posture so elegant he could balance a wine glass on his head. It didn't take much to get him into a monologue on *vino*. And he spoke a language I well understood: wine that isn't messed with. This guy does not lack for opinion—one of my kind, I noted.

In 2000, O'Connor made a Santa Barbara Sauvignon Blanc. Five years later, when he moved on to Chardonnays and Pinots, he realized he needed northern fruit. He teamed with Matt Lickliger, a wine-distributing buddy from Berkeley, who immediately fused their last names into Lioco and set a production target of 10,000 cases.

With O'Connor still at his Spago day job, they needed a winemaker. But not just any winemaker, one who worked without the usual quiver of industry trickery—no yeasts, enzymes or manipulation. They wanted someone with the nerve to trust the vineyards and let the fruit do the work, allowing for nature and vintage differences.

Following a lead to Sonoma, they found Kevin Kelley, who toiled in a spot about as unromantic as it gets—a Santa Rosa industrial park. Kelley believed in organic or biodynamic fruits. A UC Davis graduate, he said, "They teach science. I was there to make wine. It's a different mindset."

To audition for the part, Kelley sent off a bottle of his '03 Salinia Pinot Noir Keefer Ranch, and O'Connor recalled that as soon as he put his nose in the glass, he knew it was a go. "Kevin's wine was alive," he said. "Yes, he was our guy."

There is plenty to be gleaned from nose in glass. You can perceive the winemaker, grasp the soil, smell the attitude. I knew a lot from tasting the Lioco Chardonnays and Pinots. But the Indica elicited an emotional response.

At once dusty and suggestive, it changed by the minute—here some cherry, there some licorice. And it was fun. Kelley's wine, especially this one, was bursting with energy and soul. Yet O'Connor told me, "It's a brutal sell."

I was incredulous.

"People want grapes with more breeding," he said. "Didn't they ever hear of Roussillon, the lush, spicy wines from the southwest of France? Or the powerful, currently sexy wines from the mountainous region of Spain, the Priorat? They're all made from the Carignan grape, man!"

Gorgeous old Carignan vineyards exist all over California, but they are systematically getting replaced by more easily marketable varieties such as Pinot, Syrah and Cabernet, which rarely show this kind of personality.

O'Connor and I shook our heads. Oh, what a world. How can people deny such beauty? Where's the justice? With a dash of Petite Syrah and no new oak, the wine, to my taste, becomes uniquely Californian. It could be on the state flag.

The unoaked Chardonnays and mannered Pinots are bringing accolades to Lioco, but I think these winemakers should be getting Purple Hearts for commitment to their underdog.

Inevitably, the winemaking part of O'Connor's life will lead him off the Spago floor and on to...where? "Wolf jokes that everyone who works for him eventually leaves him to make wine."

As for what's really next, he is a bit coy. "We're as big as we want to be," he said, flexing his well-angled jaw. "Wine is a relationship. The best thing is to let it unfold, whether in the winemaking or in the business. We'll see what happens."

**ALICE FEIRING** penned the book *The Battle for Wine and Love: Or How I Saved the World from Parkerization*. An outspoken blogger, she runs rampant at [www.alicefeiring.com](http://www.alicefeiring.com).

## BARFLY



—SHISO

### TRAMPLED SHISO MARTINI

With a flavor that finds the place where mint, basil and fennel seed meet, the Japanese shiso leaf has an exotically captivating herbal quality that is surprisingly profound and refreshing. Combine it with vodka, and you get the perfect late-summer martini.

#### Splash of dry vermouth

3 oz. Tito's Handmade Vodka

3 large shiso leaves

Chill martini glass with ice cubes and coat with a splash of vermouth. In a shaker with ice, combine vodka and shiso leaves that have been bruised in hand, reserving one leaf for later.

Shake vigorously for 10 seconds.

Empty vermouth and ice from martini glass, and pour in Trampled Shiso Martini. Garnish with shiso leaf.

Note: Tito's Handmade Vodka available at Greenblatt's Deli, 8017 Sunset Blvd., 323-656-0606.

Shiso can be found Sundays at Environmental Arts, Hollywood Farmers' Market, 1600 Ivar Ave., 323-463-3171.