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Mike Dunne's Wine of the Week: 2007 El Dorado New-World Port

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Madrona Vineyards 2007 El Dorado New-World Port (\$28)

With Valentine's Day drawing near, brace yourself for the usual round of wine tastings, TV segments and advice columns trying to make a case on behalf of cabernet sauvignon, petite sirah, zinfandel and merlot as the best wine to accompany a gift box of chocolate.

Save your time and your money by opting for the only style of wine with the fruit, spine, spice, acid, sugar and alcohol to accommodate a rich assortment of chocolates, hand-dipped or otherwise.

And that would be Port, or a Port knockoff, which is to say a Port in every measure but place of origin and name - grape varieties, blending techniques, color of the glass bottle and so on.

I've tried all sorts of wines with chocolate, and for seamless matching none comes close to Port with the possible exception of a late-harvest zinfandel, Madeira or Angelica. Dry table wines? Only in the tired mind of a winery's marketing agent.

California wineries who joined the Port game late - less than four years ago, when U.S. and European Community trade officials agreed that "port" no longer could be used to designate the style of wine unless it was made in Portugal - must come up with a fanciful name for their wines that emulate historic Portuguese Port.

Vintners who had been making a port-style wine before the compact could continue to call it "Port."

One of them is Madrona Vineyards at Camino in El Dorado County, which has been making port for two decades, since 1981. For most of the first decade, however, the port was made for St. Amant Winery of Lodi, where the late Tim Spencer was an early pioneer in the contemporary production of California port.

Inspired and instructed by Spencer, Madrona's Dick Bush family planted seven Portuguese grape varieties on its Apple Hill estate in 1997. Three years later, the Bushes began to make port under their own label.

Though the ban on using "Port" for port-style wines made in California was several years off,

the Buses from the outset used the proprietary name "New-World Port" as a way to alert consumers that while the wine was port-style it was from somewhere other than the Old World.

"With a nod to the Portuguese, and also noting that this wine is from the new world - California - we felt 'New-World Port' was a good compromise that our consciences could live with," explains Paul Bush, son of Madrona's founders and now in charge of winemaking.

His latest take on the wine is the Madrona Vineyards 2007 El Dorado New-World Port, made with all seven Portuguese grape varieties tended on the estate. The wine is softer than I remember earlier vintages, but the complexity, directness and freshness of the fruit is there in all its usual abundance. As Port is expected to be, the color is deep and brilliant, the aroma as fragrant as blackberry cobbler, the flavor layered with holiday pie spices, assorted berries, mixed nuts and, yes, a suggestion of chocolate. It's warm in its hug, with a finish that fades slowly and gently, like the contrail of a jet across a bright Sierra sky. Everything is in exquisite balance, the wine's stiff alcohol not at all fiery.

By the numbers: 18.1 percent alcohol, 7.2 percent residual sugar, 331 cases, \$28 per 500-milliliter bottle.

Context: The Buses recommend the wine with Stilton and other blue-veined cheeses and walnuts, but if chocolate is in the house they won't quibble with that.

Availability: In the Sacramento area, the wine is available at several branches of Cost Plus World Market, the Nugget Market at El Dorado Hills, Carrington's in Grass Valley, the Davis Food Co-op and Taylors Market. It also can be ordered online through the winery's website, www.madronavineyard.com.

More information: The tasting room at Madrona Vineyards, 2560 High Hill Road, Camino, is open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except major holidays.

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Long-time wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne continues his relationship with The Bee as a contributing columnist to the Food & Wine section and www.sacwineregion.com. His wine selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. Check out his blog at <http://www.ayearinwine.com>, and reach him at mikedunne@winegigs.com.