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Love Cameron Hughes' wines? Just don't go looking for his winery

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Cameron Hughes owns neither vineyard nor winery, yet his eponymous brand is one of the more recognizable and respected in the wine trade.

Hughes is a virtual vintner, or what in France traditionally has been called a negociant, a merchant who buys grapes or juice without actually owning a vineyard. The negociant then ferments, blends and bottles the final wine under his or her own free-floating label.

"Most of our wines come from the bulk market, where we look for high-quality, high-impact wines that are not only technically correct but reflective of their origin," says Hughes, explaining that he is not fanatical about terroir. "We look for wines of character and excitement."

He contracts for everything from bottling to warehousing, and he hires winemakers who work on commission. By doing without his own vineyards and brick- and-mortar winery, he figures he saves consumers 40 percent to 70 percent of what they would pay for the same wine if it were marketed under customary labels.

Several big-name retail chains appreciate Hughes' pricing strategy and his taste in wine, and they eagerly stock releases bearing the boringly direct label of Cameron Hughes Wine. The retailers include Safeway/Vons, Albertsons, Cost Plus, Sam's Club, SaveMart and Costco.

At the Dallas Morning News International Wine Competition in February, I tasted two Cameron Hughes wines with local pedigrees, the Cameron Hughes Lot 88 2006 Amador County Ancient Vines Zinfandel and the Flying Winemaker 2007 Lodi Ancient Vine Zinfandel. (Whereas "Cameron Hughes" wines may be available only by single lot, the new "Flying Winemaker" label is for wines that will be continually available from vintage to vintage.)

At Dallas, both zinfandels won gold medals, and both spoke with authority of the historic zinfandel areas where they originated. But I preferred the expressive aromatics, fresh and juicy fruitiness, and zesty finish of the Amador zin to the ripe sweetness of the Lodi.

The Amador is a smoothly polished, artfully elegant take on the sort of brash zinfandel the county has been producing for decades. It's dry and husky, with deep blackberry, cherry and plum fruit complemented by the sweetness of well-integrated oak. I liked its spicy highlights and

appreciated that its tannins were comfortably restrained.

Hughes is unusual for a negociant in that he is as eager to discover and promote underappreciated zinfandel as he is the popular cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay. His interest in zinfandel is motivated by his own long love for the varietal and by the fortunate coincidence of discovering that members of Costco in Northern California share his fondness for the wine.

Because of confidentiality agreements with wineries that generally sell their wines for substantially more than Hughes asks, he can't reveal the specific sources of his wines. He does say that the Amador zinfandel is a blend of lots from two "very famous, very old vineyards" that are being replanted slowly as the older vines die. The vines have been head pruned since inception, and some "are well over 120 years of age," he adds.

Cameron Hughes Lot 88 2006 Amador County Ancient Vines Zinfandel (\$13)

By the numbers: 14.7 percent alcohol, 1,600 cases

Context: This is an unusually sleek and accessible Amador County zinfandel, more fitting for a thin-crust pizza than leg of lamb, but it's still forthright enough to go with lasagna and even the first ribs of the new grilling season.

More information: sacwineregion.com or the Cameron Hughes Web site, www.chwine.com, through which his wines also are sold.

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Longtime wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne continues his relationship with The Bee as a contributing columnist to the Food & Wine section and sacwineregion.com. His wine selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. Reach him at mikedunne@winegigs.com.