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COOKING & EATING



NELSON DEMILLE

The best-selling author doesn't drink rosé—but he'll consider a Chardonnay, if it's manly enough

BY LETTIE TEAGUE



NELSON DEMILLE'S world-weary, crime-solving heroes don't drink wine. The gumshoes of his best-selling thrillers tend to opt instead for scotch—or beer.

His detective John Corey, for example, had the following to say upon visiting a vineyard in "Plum Island": "Never has so much bull been concocted about something as small as a grape. I mean a plum is bigger. Right? People make plum wine. Right? What's with this grape crap?"

And yet Mr. DeMille is a bit of an oenophile. He drinks a glass or two of Cabernet almost every night and splurges on the occasional Brunello, a wine he particularly loves.

How to explain the dichotomy be-

'I don't have a cellar,' Mr. DeMille said. 'My liquor store is my cellar.'

tween the writer and his characters? "There's something not masculine about being a wine lover. It's OK to be a wine drinker, but not a wine lover," he said. "If John Corey was a wine connoisseur I think readers might be suspicious about him. I think—to some people—wine drinking is still considered a little bit feminine."

"Is there a wine on this list that's sufficiently manly?" I asked, examining the by-the-glass offerings of CoolFish Grille & Wine Bar in the Long Island town of Syosset, N.Y., where we'd agreed to meet. Coolfish is one of Mr. DeMille's favorite dining spots, and it's quite close to his home. The latter factor was especially important, as Mr. DeMille was on a tight deadline writing his next book, "The Panther," due to his publisher at the end of November.

Mr. DeMille's writing schedule is rigorous: seven days a week, begin-

ning at 10 a.m. and ending around 6 or 7 p.m., with a quick break for lunch. He writes all of his books in longhand on yellow legal pads. I was impressed by his discipline—no procrastinating with email or surfing the Internet—but Mr. DeMille ruefully said of his progress: "If I'd turned in the book six months ago, I wouldn't be working like this."

Mindful of the time, we turned our attention to the wine. Mr. DeMille had chosen a glass of the 2008 Di Majo Norante Terre Degli Osci, Sangiovese, an earthy red from a top producer in the Molise region of southern Italy. Mr. DeMille grew up in a working-class Italian family in the Long Island town of Elmont; his uncle made wine at home that he often "mixed with cream soda and other things," Mr. DeMille said.

That's a combination that would turn anyone into a scotch drinker, I noted, and offered Mr. DeMille a taste of my 2010 Mas Carlot, a lovely dry rosé from Costières de Nîmes. He refused. Mr. DeMille doesn't drink rosé (of course). What about white wine? Almost never, he replied, though his wife, Sandy, likes a good Chardonnay. I ordered a glass of the 2009 Chalone Chardonnay from Monterey for Mr. DeMille to try. "It's a pretty rich Chardonnay with a fair amount of oak—you might even call it a masculine white," I said.

The theme of manliness runs throughout Mr. DeMille's work. His heroes—John Corey, John Sutter and Paul Brenner—take on Mafia dons, terrorists and unpredictable women all over the world, though Mr. DeMille is partial to his home turf, Long Island. Several of his books, including "Gate House" and "Gold Coast," are set on Long Island's North Shore.

A DeMille hero generally talks in a straightforward, even clipped fashion, with frequent sarcastic asides. His detectives are inevitably capable and wise, but they can also be hapless, particularly when dealing with women. Perhaps that's why more than half of Mr. DeMille's fan mail comes from women, by the author's estimate. After tasting the Chalone Chardonnay, Mr. DeMille seemed to reconsider the possible manly qualities of white wine. "If I closed my eyes I could almost think this



A Long Island favorite:

Although his "Plum Island" was set amid the vineyards of the North Fork of Long Island, Mr. DeMille is fond of Wölffer Estate on the South Fork.

Special-occasion wine:

2006 Castello Banfi Poggio Alle Mura Brunello

Winery pilgrimage:

Drawn to the name, Mr. DeMille has visited Château de Mille, a Côte du Luberon estate in southeast France, and brought some wines back with him.

is a red wine," he said approvingly.

Mr. DeMille's regular red is the Columbia Crest Grand Estates Cabernet Sauvignon from Washington state, which costs about \$12 a bottle. It's the wine that Mr. DeMille drinks most evenings after his writing day is over, and it's often the wine that he serves his friends. He and Sandy have dabbled with other, more expensive options (Chateau Montelena Chardonnay from

Napa for her and Vieux Télégraphe Châteauneuf-du-Pape from the Rhône for him—he's a Châteauneuf-du-Pape fan), but the author eschews ostentation and the expense of daily \$40 bottles. "I think it's wasteful," he said.

For a special occasion, however, "it would have to be a Brunello," Mr. DeMille said decisively. He particularly likes Castello Banfi Brunello; John Mariani, Banfi's chairman and

founder, is a friend of his and lives nearby on Long Island.

Would he choose a special bottle from the DeMille cellar? "I don't have a cellar. My liquor store is my cellar," Mr. DeMille replied—sounding just like a character out of one of his books.

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OENOFILE: SOME OF MR. DEMILLE'S FAVORITES—PLUS ONE OR TWO HE SHOULD TRY



2008 Columbia Crest Grand Estates Cabernet Sauvignon, \$12

This wine from Washington state is Mr. DeMille's "daily drink"—a reward after a long day of writing. It's a straightforward, medium-bodied red marked by notes of dark fruit, with soft tannins.



2009 Chateau Montelena Napa Valley Chardonnay, \$35

This crisp, almost steely white—from an estate best known for its Cabernet—is a refreshing exception to the cliché of "buttery" California Chardonnay. It's the favorite Chardonnay of Mr. DeMille's wife, Sandy.



2007 Vieux Télégraphe Châteauneuf-du-Pape La Crau, \$77

The 2007 vintage is rich and dense, bursting with fruit yet delineated with a mineral, savory note. Vieux Télégraphe was Mr. DeMille's house red until he deemed it "too extravagant." Now it's reserved for special occasions.



2010 Mas Carlot Rosé, \$12

This lovely, bright and lively Syrah-Grenache blend from France's Costières de Nîmes may not be "manly," according to Mr. DeMille, but it's a rosé that will leave any man—or woman—well-refreshed. It's also a very good deal.



2008 Di Majo Norante Sangiovese Terre Degli Osci, \$18

This bright, lively red with aromas of red fruit and spice is one of the flagship wines of this producer from the Molise region of southern Italy. It's made from Sangiovese, a favorite varietal of Mr. DeMille's.