

THE SACRAMENTO BEE [sacbee.com](http://www.sacbee.com)

Mike Dunne's Wine of the Week: 2009 California Red Blend

Special to The Bee

Published Wednesday, Jul. 20, 2011

I usually don't shop for wine at Walgreens. But I'd heard of one being sold exclusively through the drug-store chain and wanted to try it. Problem is, not every Walgreens stocks the wine. I stopped at three branches before finally finding it at the Walgreens along Arden Way at Eastern Avenue.

It's the Colby Red 2009 California Red Blend, a fresh and supple mix of cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel, syrah, merlot and petite sirah, harvested mostly from vineyards scattered about the state's north-coast wine appellations.

At \$10 to \$12, Colby Red is in a highly competitive and highly popular marketing niche right now. But it stands apart from much of the rest of the field not only for its sunny red-fruit flavors, seam of herbalness and dash of peppery spice.

There's a story behind the wine that would persuade even the president of the local chapter of the temperance society to buy a bottle.

The "Colby" of Colby Red is Colby Rex Groom, a 13-year-old who lives with his father and mother, Daryl and Lisa Groom, in Healdsburg. Colby was born with a hole in his heart. Early on, it didn't seem to much hamper his development, and practically seemed to heal itself.

When he was 8, however, doctors discovered that he had a defective valve, and he underwent his first open-heart surgery. That operation didn't work out as well as everyone involved had hoped, and eight months later he went through another open-heart surgery, this time to have a mechanical heart valve installed.

Once recuperated, he began to join fund-raising efforts on behalf of heart research in hopes that eventually other youngsters wouldn't have to face what he'd endured. At one such event he raised \$1,000 by charging participants to see him raise his shirt and expose his chest scar.

About a year ago, he suggested to his father that the two of them make a couple of barrels of wine that could be sold at a fund-raising auction. Colby calculated that they maybe could raise \$500. The proceeds were to be earmarked for the American Heart Association, St. Jude's Childrens Hospital (where his valve had been developed) and other organizations and programs helping youngsters with heart ailments.

Colby is one smart guy. His partner in this winemaking venture has been one of the industry's more honored vintners over the past quarter century, both in California and in

his native Australia. For six years before he came to California in 1990, Daryl Groom was in charge of making the red wines at Penfolds, including Grange, Australia's most highly acclaimed wine.

In California, he's been winemaker for Peak Wines International and Beam Wine Estates, overseeing various brands, perhaps most notably Geyser Peak. Publications such as Quarterly Review of Wines, San Francisco Chronicle and Los Angeles Times named him "winemaker of the year" at various stages in his career. Today, he's a partner in Marschall Groom Cellars in the Barossa Valley of South Australia, as well as the owner of his own brand in California, Daryl's Great Discovery (DXG Wines), through which he makes small-production wines from appellations about the state.

Given his stature and his friendships within the wine trade, word of his and Colby's barrel project spread quickly. Before long, others in the industry were offering to come aboard to turn Colby's vision into something much more financially significant for heart research. Most notably, Stephen Brauer, managing director of Treasury Wine Estates, an international winemaking corporation whose 54 brands include Penfolds, stepped up to provide the Grooms with the resources and space for making wine.

"They allowed me access to a huge selection of wines from their barrel lots to blend the first vintage of Colby Red. They were much more expensive wines than you would normally find in a \$10 to \$12 bottle of wine," says Daryl Groom. "Treasury supports all the costs of making and bottling the wine. They are also my distribution partners to get the wine to market."

By January, the two barrels originally envisioned by Colby had grown into 25,000 cases. And by now, sales of the wine have spun off \$115,000 that has been donated to various institutions and programs in heart research. The Grooms are hoping to hit \$250,000 by the end of the year. The contributions so far include \$15,000 to the American Heart Association in Santa Rosa, \$15,000 to the American Heart Association in Chicago, and \$10,000 to the American Heart Association in San Jose. The Grooms make a point of dispensing funds in the communities where the wines sell well.

Colby Red isn't a one-shot wine. The 2010 version is to be blended and bottled in the near future. "We will do the same from the 2011 vintage later this year," says Daryl Groom. At first, he didn't expect to make a Colby White, but strong sales of Colby Red and the many requests he is getting for a white is prompting him to reconsider. "If we can raise more money by welcoming new consumers who don't drink red wine or who would like a white, you may just see a Colby White in the future."

Until recently, Colby Red has been available only at some Walgreens drug stores, but the company just relinquished its exclusive hold on distribution of the wine, which now is expected to become available in other outlets.

Colby, meanwhile, often makes personal appearances at heart-related galas about the country, urging guests to dig deeper into their wallets and purses. After an appearance in Chicago, he was invited to throw out the first pitch at a game at Wrigley Field. He's developed into a southpaw with a wicked sinker.

Colby Red 2009 California Red Blend (\$10/\$12)

By the numbers: 13.9 percent alcohol, 25,000 cases, \$10/\$12.

Context: The grace of this wine calls for it to be served with pasta dishes in a refined and mellow ragu, though it also has the complexity, acidity and backbone to stand up to grilled steaks. For \$10, it's exceptional, given its layering of fruit, herb and earth tones.

The tannins are stretched, making it a red wine rare for the pleasure it delivers even when sipped on its own. The Grooms enjoy the wine mostly with simple foods like pizza, hamburgers and grilled meats, as well as cheese.

Availability: Aside from select Walgreens stores, Colby Red can be ordered through the website www.colbyred.com, though there it is listed for \$13, still a fine buy.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

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

- Read more articles by Mike Dunne