STAY HOME & DRINK WINE
Is wine essential? As mandated business closures swept across the US last week, that question was raised in state houses from New York to California. The answer, for the agricultural and production side of the wine business, so far is yes. Beyond that, many of us have spent the last week working remotely, occasionally pouring what seems like a very necessary glass of wine.

Though wine, itself, may not be essential to our existence, it is essential to the wine community, and important to the food community, too. Wide swaths of both communities are decimated. Crushed in a week or a day. Lost in a new, surreal landscape. As wine journalists, we’ve taken the week to consider what the communities can do to cope, and how all of us in the wine community can help. We hope you’ll join us in our attempt to stay calm, drink a little wine and find appropriately distant ways to come together and support each other. Our community can nourish others. There is heroism in feeding health-care workers, as The Herbfarm is doing in Seattle. There are organizations with cash, who can help hospitality workers struggling to pay their bills. And there are thoughts we can share about a community in crisis, thinking every day about what we can do, sheltering in place, to make things better.
I've been forced to weigh the pros and cons of matters that have no business being anywhere near the same playing field: My livelihood and everything I own. My staff's livelihood and whether they can afford to eat next week. My neighborhood’s need for community and a feeling of belonging and meaningful impact on our social fabric. My community’s mental health (alcohol is a very effective drug, after all). My and my husband's and our three-year-old's sanity along with the preservation of our family unit while we have no childcare in this tiny urban apartment. And then, casually, there's the health and safety of the greater world and our human population at large.

My first instinct, of course, is to protect myself and my business. I think that's how we're all wired. I need to work to stay sane, I need to provide for my family, I need to maintain everything we have materially and socially built over the past six years. Next, I think of my team. Oh, shit. I need to provide for them. Then I think of my guests. I need to provide for them, too! The problem comes when I get to considering the world, and collapse under the weight of my feelings.

I am going to stir the pot in a possibly offensive way right now, but the old cliché keeps echoing in my ears: If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. As a writer with an extreme fondness for words, when I heard the order stipulating only “essential” businesses remain open, I consulted Oxford and Merriam-Webster. Oxford: "absolutely necessary." Webster: "of the utmost importance: basic, indispensable, necessary."

Ha! The first joke is such low-hanging fruit: “But wine is essential!” Soon—and I speak only for myself—that joke started to feel crude. It really started to feel off-color when I realized that this temporary shelter-in-place ordinance that is profoundly affecting a major swath of our population was not going to end at three weeks if we didn’t all start taking it very, very seriously. My business can absolutely survive a three-week closure. My family (with ample tears and maybe some therapy) can survive it. My team, with some extra resources and support, can survive it. But if, because in those three weeks everyone took their own opportunity to balk at the order, to seek out loopholes, to push the envelope, then the order wouldn’t last just three weeks. It would last seven. Or 12. Or 20.

Was I really planning to offer curbside pickups, delivery, limited hours in a face mask with flimsy Lysol wipes at the register, to demand that my vendors and my team and my guests risk their and our greater population’s health for a bottle of wine that clearly, in a court of law, would not qualify under the definition of “essential”? Ooooof.

Tomorrow, I am sure, my decision will change... Just like that! Because tomorrow the world will be entirely different than it is today. In the past week, we have seen just how fast sci-fi fantasy can become nightmare can become reality can become problematic can become outrageous can become an entirely uncharted way of coping and being forced to make decisions—on the fly—about the pros and cons of profoundly heavy matters—matters that have no business being anywhere near the same playing field.

Stevie Stacionis is a writer who, along with her husband, Josiah Baldi-vino, runs Bay Grape, a wine shop in Oakland, California.
WHAT REMAINS HIDDEN

Clarete, Criolla and Radiohead By PATRICIO TAPIA

Last week, I spent a few days in Soria, in the easternmost corner of Ribera del Duero. I was filling up on baby lamb and tasting wines for a story in Wine & Spirits. And as always, there were memorable moments. One in particular, drinking clarete, the traditional style of wine of the region, with three old producers. The three men were retired, and their few concerns in life included caring for barrels full of that delicious, fresh juice, so simple to drink, with so many stories to tell.

Back in Santiago, the local health authorities immediately quarantined me. So, the last few days, I have been locked in my apartment, suddenly with a lot of time, time to think, for example, about those claretes and the powerful connection they have with the books that I admire, with the movies that I enjoy and with the songs that give me goose bumps. “Videotape,” for example, a song by Radiohead. So, there is Thom Yorke, sitting at the piano, in a concert in Japan. He plays the first notes of “Videotape” and people go crazy. There are just four notes that make up what appears to be a song, a slow sort of lullaby. Yorke follows the rhythm of those four notes and sings to the beat. His voice sounds pained and plaintive. More than a lullaby, now it seems like a funeral dirge. The question, then, is why the rest of the musicians in the band are shaking their heads to a completely different rhythm. Colin Greenwood, on the synthesizer, dances like he’s at a rave party.

I eventually figured out what might be happening from Warren Lain, a Los Angeles-based musician and teacher. His YouTube video delves into the importance of syncopation in music, in many musical genres. And, in particular, in Radiohead’s “Videotape.”

“Videotape” is the last track on In Rainbows, released in 2007, when the band had already reached the cult status it has today. On that album, it is a melancholic song, but above all a very simple one. Four notes on the piano. However, if you turn up the volume and listen carefully to Phil Selway’s hi-hat, you might realize that there is something there, something hidden. The cymbals go at a speed at least three times faster. Do you hear it? Yorke’s piano follows one beat, but underneath, there is a totally different rhythm, a song within a song.

A year before releasing the album, Radiohead had already played the song in a concert at the Bonnaroo festival in Manchester. However, in that earlier performance, the band brought the syncopation to the surface—“Videotape” as a fast-paced dance track. Why did they decide to slow it down and hide the rhythmic tension in the album version? I have no idea. But it works. And not only that, in my quarantine head, that hidden syncopation connects with what I really appreciate in wine.

When I started writing about wine, at the beginning of the 1990s, what I appreciated was what I could understand. If the wood was evident, then I liked it; if the wine was intense and concentrated, even better. Everything in front. Nothing hidden. Wines like Radiohead performing “Videotape” at Bonnaroo, offering everything at once, without disguises. But as I have grown older, what seemed clear and resounding to me before, today seems excessive and boring. And my taste leans towards what, in appearance, seems very simple. In my glass, as I write, I have the Criolla Chica from Cara Sur. Criolla is a synonym for the país or mission grape, this one made by a group of friends who, in a fascinating journey, have found very old vines high up in the Andes, in San Juan, north of Mendoza. The wine, apparently, is designed to quench your thirst, a vin de soif all its delicious expression. However, and like the claretes from my friends in Soria, there is something else there, something in the flavors of the wine that expand little by little in the glass, and something in the history of those vines, plants that have survived for centuries, rescued by this group of friends, their fruit made into this little Chica.

I hadn’t wanted to leave Soria. I would have stayed there, in that almost abandoned town with my new trio of friends, drinking clarete, listening to their stories, accepting more and more wine, slowly getting drunk as the day passed by. Maybe the quarantine offers me a glimpse of that same calm, a calm to enjoy listening to “Videotape” and drink wines that, in their simplicity, seem to say nothing, but actually tell us much more than we might think.

Patricio Tapia, based in Santiago, Chile, publishes Descorchados, an annual guide to South American wines.
We felt strong in Brooklyn, with the pride of the underprivileged. As if we’d been waiting at the corner when a luxurious convertible pulled up to the light, just as a surprise summer storm arrived...and we’d stand there, smiling at the sidewalk, all sweaty and thankful for that rain.

Here at our restaurant we don’t have many people who drive luxury cars, no businessmen from Europe, no rich Asian tourists. And we don’t put on fancy events (PDR... what?). We have our neighbors, everyday regulars, who want to support a local business.

And we killed it on March 12. President Trump had spoken the day before. Maybe people didn’t take the president seriously, because the next day they packed restaurants in Brooklyn, celebrating the beautiful weather. Or maybe it had to do with a subway commute to Manhattan, which seemed scarier than ever.

However, on that Thursday, I was frozen in the middle of the dining room, trying to remember what table needed a wine recommendation. I was paralyzed, having realized the magnitude of the problem. This time we, ourselves, were the scenario of the disaster; the same streets that we walk everyday were on the front pages of the Times, below the alarmist headlines.

I was paralyzed between two forces.

On one side, there was the ethical struggle of feeling like a partner of the coronavirus, offering the means and the setting to spread it. We were cleaning our hands at the bar sink so many times, and my staff was blaming me for not buying hand sanitizer. (Sorry, you were right, I thought.)

At the same time, guests were hugging each other in the dining room. The other force came from my staff and the threat to them of losing their jobs. Rachel, my head waiter, had just moved, leaving her boyfriend’s apartment two months after they broke up. Alpha, a cook from the Ivory Coast, sends money to his Japanese wife who lives in the Philippines. And Maguendy, the dishwasher, lied to me so he could head to Miami last weekend to film a Trap music video. “Those dancers with huge boots were not cheap,” he confessed to me, when I had to let him go.

I had seen what was coming by reading and listening to Spanish media as Spain, the country where I grew up, went on lockdown. I knew that New York restaurants would have to close.

You are out of a job. You are eating two dozen oysters for Sunday dinner because your restaurant is closed, and it’s the saddest oyster feast ever. Your friends—or even worse, your brother-in-law—kept their all-day-looking-at-a-screen jobs. Me, I need people (some days maybe more than others), and I surprise myself every day with how much I enjoy conversations with my guests. Maybe it does not sound very “New Yorker,” but I love people.

It’s now less than a week since last Thursday and this nightmare show doesn’t stop. Before I could apply for unemployment, Cuomo threw us a bone: Now, we can deliver wines or offer them for pickup.

Yesterday, as I put some wine orders together, I felt like I was offering orphan kittens to be adopted. I had always seen my wines being enjoyed at the restaurant. Feeling the cork elasticity and smell, proudly showing the label, looking at my customers, their eyes opening and closing as they taste these wines:

Now what? I will most probably be the one who delivers these bottles. I wonder whether people at home will drink the wine at the right temperature. Will they let the wine breathe for enough time? What glasses will they use?

During this uncertain time, I promise I will take care of temperature, and I will drive as carefully as when I take my daughter to school. Just one request: Would you let me describe to you the wine through the intercom?

Please do...

Nacho Monclús is a co-owner and sommelier at Camperdown Elm, in Brooklyn, NY.
We have Scrabble and Bananagrams, Monopoly and a mancala board; shelves of books and reams of paper and a power strip full of digital devices. We also have piles of homework and paying work, not to mention housework. Yet although we’re doing all this within the same 800 square feet, there’s only one activity that really brings us all together, on the same team: eating. By 7 pm, we’re ready to give in to the scent of whatever’s on the stove and crack open a bottle of wine. We made it through another day of isolation. It’s dinnertime.
Kimchi
Former W&S tasting coordinator Lauryn Chun wrote the book on kimchi (literally). Before she left us to start her own company, she'd schooled us in the amazing simplicity of making our own.

That’s come in handy this week, as Napa cabbage is one of the few green things left in our grocery stores. Her basic recipe needs mostly salt and time, plus some garlic, onion and chili flakes. Waiting is the hardest part of the process, as we all know that when it’s gently bubbling and tangy, it’s going to make everything from rice to grilled cheese sandwiches more interesting.

And yes, it goes well with wine, especially things that are juicy and fruity, like Beaujolais or Austrian zweigelt.

Hummus
Working at home is challenging; working at home while homeschooling is near impossible. While I’d love to report that we’re bonding over homemade pasta and doing math lessons with cookies, I’m not in that place at 6 pm. What we can do, however, is whip up some hummus.

Soaked overnight, the chickpeas can simmer on the stovetop with a bay leaf and some garlic, onion and chili flakes. Waiting is the hardest part of the process, as we all know that when it’s gently bubbling and tangy, it’s going to make everything from rice to grilled cheese sandwiches more interesting.

But that was then. Now, there is bread, but it’s the white and spongy sort that takes up space at the local bodega. I don’t resent them for selling bad bread; it’s cheap and lasts forever, and it works okay for toast. But it’s not the sort of bread that makes a meal—the kind that you can simply slice and serve with some cheese and call it a day.

And so, we’ve started making our own. Just the simplest sort, using Jim Lahey’s no-knead recipe. It fits well into a work-at-home schedule, as it’s very forgiving (just stick it in the fridge when you need to slow down the rise; longer is better for flavor development anyway). And there’s some relief in mixing four simple ingredients—flour, salt, water and a pinch of yeast—and watching it come alive. Here’s a case where the invisible beauties are giving life rather than taking it away, turning a blob of dough into a golden, crusty loaf of nutty, savory goodness. It may not be nearly as good as the farmers market loaves and artisan rounds, but it re-instills some faith in the world. And it makes a damn good dinner, especially with some cheese and a bottle of white Burgundy.

Sustenance Spinach Pie
It felt ridiculous, on my last trip through the grocery store before holing up for the coming weeks, to be searching for phyllo dough. Who needs the stress of paper-thin pastry in the midst of a crisis? Or do we all? I know that it’s a crapshoot, when I unfold it, whether it’s going to break in half or stick together; I know that if the filling is too warm when I layer it on, it will turn the pie to mush. But I know I can fill phyllo dough with anything—anything—from frozen spinach to last week’s butternut squash. And if I take enough care in lifting each leaf, brushing it with olive oil before layering on the next, they’ll mostly be whole. The broken ones, who cares; the filling hides the tears. Normally I’d throw in handfuls of herbs with the greens, but this isn’t a party; the dried leaves of my windowsill thyme will have to do, along with some salt and pepper and the tin of Bulgarian feta I keep in the fridge in case of emergency. (Yes, my love of Greek food runs so deep that I have feta emergencies.)

There’s a pattern I follow in building the casserole, for no reason that I remember anymore; now, it just feels like good luck: seven sheets on bottom, three in the middle, and seven on top, then it’s scored with a sharp knife and sliced with olive oil. After it goes into the hot oven, I flick some cold water over it before quickly shutting the oven door, letting the steam help lift the leaves. An hour later, when it’s golden and bubbling juices through the slits on top, it’s ready. I think of all the hundreds of pies that have sustained me through my annual trips through Greece’s vineyards—the ones eaten in airports and on ferries, as well as morning hotel buffets. Of bakery versions and homemade, gifted to me on plates and in napkins, or wrapped up for the plane. This is sustenance spinach pie.

Tara Q. Thomas, a CIA graduate, is the executive editor of Wine & Spirits Magazine.

Bread
We live in a city of great bread. For our tastings at W&S’s New York office, production director Vivian Ho brings in crisp, chewy baguettes from Cannelle, near her apartment in Long Island City. For lunch, Black Seed Bagels and Eataly’s bread counter are just a short walk away. Breads Bakery, near Union Square, is worth the slightly longer walk for its multi-seeded chalallah, although if it’s a Union Square Greenmarket day, it competes with She-Wolf (try the polenta loaf) and Lost Bread (Buck Honey Rye). We can also get pretzels as good as any in Munich in the Great Northern Food Hall at Grand Central Station and Finnish rye rounds from Nordic Breads, tender, flat Moroccan m’smen from Hot Bread Kitchen and crunchy buckwheat baguettes from Runner & Stone in Brooklyn.

And so, we’ve started making our own. Just the simplest sort, using Jim Lahey’s no-knead recipe. It fits well into a work-at-home schedule, as it’s very forgiving (just stick it in the fridge when you need to slow down the rise; longer is better for flavor development anyway). And there’s some relief in mixing four simple ingredients—flour, salt, water and a pinch of yeast—and watching it come alive. Here’s a case where the invisible beauties are giving life rather than taking it away, turning a blob of dough into a golden, crusty loaf of nutty, savory goodness. It may not be nearly as good as the farmers market loaves and artisan rounds, but it re-instills some faith in the world. And it makes a damn good dinner, especially with some cheese and a bottle of white Burgundy.
It didn’t take long for the wildlife to come out. I leave my apartment at night for air and to take in the quiet streets of “shelter-in-place” San Francisco, and also just to keep an eye on my corner.

The second or third night of the order, a gaze of raccoons brazenly crossed Church Street where the streetcar normally rumbles by every 15 or 20 minutes. One of them stopped and slowly looked around before continuing to the other side.

The following night, I saw a mouse scurry up the middle of the crosswalk, only to be stalked by a stealthy black cat about ten feet behind. Both animals froze when they saw me, and then the mouse made a break for a nearby planter. The cat gave me a long look as if to accuse me of stealing dinner, before she slipped away under a parked car.

Somehow, it’s the eerie nights with their deserted streets and almost complete absence of vehicular traffic that I’m focusing on most right now. The days cycle between full-bore worry and a reassuring faith in human interaction and community, even if that’s now online only, or more than six feet away.

It’s the exact opposite from my usual routine, working as an independent importer and distributor. Selling wine may be an endless hustle, but, for me, it’s mostly about people—about the connections between individuals, a place and a specific moment in time. It’s about taking a moment to savor the fact that with a good bottle and good company, you can hit the pause button and just be in that moment. For a lot of people, that’s a foundational part of their daily lives.

The novel coronavirus removes anything social from what is essentially a high-impact social business. Sheltering in place and social distance are now the norm, and while necessary to control this pandemic, they have been devastating to the American wine business.

In response, people are getting creative: takeout menus, curbside pickup and contactless delivery are becoming operational norms. Friends of mine own a bottle shop in the Mission District, and I helped connect them with an organic farmer in Salinas; as his usual clients, all restaurants, have closed their doors indefinitely, he’s selling his produce at the wine shop, which allows it to become an essential business.

Likewise, we’ve had to pivot this week along with our clients, at the same time trying hard to not sound uncaring, or just out for a quick sale. That means a certain flexibility on pricing or, at least, offering volume discounts on much smaller orders, just to keep wine moving through the distribution chain. But that’s just a Band-Aid on a much larger wound. We’re at the start of the spring new-release season and there is a massive amount of wine in the pipeline waiting to be sold.

Typically, March and April are among our strongest months, setting up a cash flow that essentially runs well into autumn and the busy fourth quarter. Perhaps we can claw our way back in the coming months (we will certainly try), but how much and how far we come back from this hit depends on the state of our customers. Retail in general will survive this, but the outlook for restaurants isn’t so clear, and they represent more than half of our business. Without as many points of distribution in place, all of those new-release wines are going to quickly back up. And this is before we even start the conversation about unpaid bills for wine that’s already shipped to clients who may not survive.

Right now, it’s an open question as to what constitutes an essential business in a shelter-in-place society, but grocery stores are at the top of the list, and wine is a part of every big store and corner bodega in San Francisco. That realm is firmly in the pocket of the big distributors. The beauty of the independent scene has always been the partnership with locally owned and highly personal businesses, built around people. It would be a shame to lose that element of the wine industry entirely. It would be a bigger shame if, when the conditions do change, we haven’t found a way to make whatever comes next more sustainable for servers, salespeople, tasting-room staff and consumers—for everyone involved.

Wolfgang Weber, a former senior editor at W&S, is the California sales manager for Revel Wine and Selection Massale.
Aside from that green, there wasn’t much—a package of tofu, some gingerroot, a jar of dilly beans a friend had given me over the holidays. And, in the cupboard, brown rice in a mason jar. Along with garlic, tamari, Sriracha and hot red pepper flakes, it was everything I needed for a riff on Sichuan quick stir-fried cabbage, once my favorite dish at La Vie en Sichuan, the miraculous hole-in-the-wall restaurant on 33rd Street in Manhattan, right around the corner from the W&S office, where we sourced any number of extraordinary staff lunches (these superlatives are not exaggerations) prior to its closing in February, an apparent casualty of the novel coronavirus. Foot traffic into New York’s Chinese restaurants had ground to a halt.

If I’d lost La Vie, I still had the spirit of its stir-fried cabbage. I grabbed a clean hand towel, some by-now-valuable paper towels, a wooden cutting board and a heavy cast-iron Dutch oven. Then I rinsed the tofu brick and cut it into thick slices, laid them out on the paper towel, which was layered over the hand towel, wrapped them up, then weighted them down with the cutting board and the Dutch oven—my tofu press.

On to the cabbage: Shorn of its outside leaves, there were still plenty of crisp, jade-green ones in the center to tear into bite-sized pieces, which I soaked in cold water.

I used a spoon to peel the gingerroot, then a sharp knife to slice it so thin that it’s virtually transparent and will melt into the tofu. The same thin slice for the garlic and for a few dilly beans, to stand in for Chinese pickled vegetables (not in La Vie’s version, but neither is the tofu).

Lining up an arsenal of olive oil (I know, you’re supposed to use high-temperature oils in a wok, but it’s what I’ve got), tamari (gluten-free!), Sriracha and hot red-pepper flakes, I was missing white wine. Usually, there’s a half-empty bottle in my fridge to use for cooking, but all were red. So, I headed to the basement in search of riesling. Instead, there was an Alsace pinot gris from Lucien Albrecht. It was that, or an assyrtiko (now almost as valuable as the roll of paper towels). I didn’t want anything too ambitious, so the pinot gris won out.

Now to cook: Drain the cabbage. Unwrap the tofu and cut it into squares (about 1.5-inch squares). Heat a wok as hot as possible. Add some oil, a third of the ginger and garlic and all of the dilly beans, tossing them around the hot wok to release their fragrance. Then throw in the cabbage and mix it fast and well. Shake in some pepper flakes and add a few splashes of tamari and keep stirring until the cabbage just begins to wilt. Splash in some white wine to keep the cabbage moist; it’s ready when it is tender but still has a little crunch.

Then set all the cabbage aside, wipe out the wok and put it back on the flame. When it’s superhot, add olive oil (sometimes I like to fry the tofu crisp, with a lot of oil; other times, I go for a silken stir-fry using just enough oil to coat the wok). Toss in the rest of the garlic and stir it for a moment. Then add the tofu, being careful not to crowd the pieces; best to cook it in batches. Add a splash of tamari, then keep tossing until the tofu begins to crisp and darken at the edges (adding half the garlic, halfway through, so it doesn’t burn). Scoop it out, including the bits of garlic and ginger, onto the resting cabbage, and drain any excess oil from the wok. Heat the wok one last time, and then give it all one last stir-fry. Then serve it over rice.

The pinot gris worked surprisingly well with this dish—as would a dry Alsace gewurztraminer, especially if you have some Zind-Humbrecht or Trimbach on hand. I’ve also enjoyed variations on this dish with unoaked assyrtiko from Santorini, Finger Lakes rieslings from Weimer, Ravines, Red Newt and Dr. Konstantin Frank, alvarinho from Soalheiro or Anselmo Mendez in Melgaço (Vinho Verde) and with albariño from Pazo de Señorans or Raúl Pérez in Rías Baixas…and then there’s the Loire, for Muscadet or a light chenin. What do you have in your cellar?

*If you have leftovers, this makes pretty great fried rice, refried in the wok with an egg scrambled in—and pour another glass of gris.

Joshua Greene is the editor and publisher of Wine & Spirits Magazine.
READING GLASSES

Some books and wines to divert you from the current news cycle

By STEPHANIE JOHNSON

Hilary Mantel’s 
Wolf Hall Trilogy

Wolf Hall
Bring Up the Bodies
The Mirror and the Light

The Mirror and the Light, the long-anticipated third volume in Hilary Mantel’s Thomas Cromwell series, was just released this month. The three volumes in total offer 1,900 pages of escape into Henry VIII’s England, which Mantel recreates with compelling nuance and detail. Follow it up by streaming the BBC’s superb production of Wolf Hall on PBS; its cast includes Mark Rylance (Bridge of Spies, Dunkirk), Damian Lewis (Billions, Homeland, Band of Brothers) and Claire Foy (The Crown).

While you’re reading or watching, you could also dine and drink like Bluff King Hal, with mutton chops and a good claret or a Rhenish wine. Check out dry rieslings from Domdechant Werner, like the 2017 Rheingau Guts Trocken, or Robert Weil’s 2016 Rheingau Trocken. For claret, look to Château Suau 2010 Côtes de Bordeaux or Château de Brousse 2015 Castillon Côtes de Bordeaux. All cost less than $20.

Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet

My Brilliant Friend
The Story of a New Name
Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay
The Story of the Lost Child

There’s no telling when Italy will be open to travelers again, so why not let Elena Ferrante transport you there? Her four-volume saga follows childhood friends Lenu and Lila from the slums of post–World War II Naples along their divergent paths through neighborhood rivalries, political upheavals, professional achievements and betrayals. HBO offers a beautiful seven-part adaptation of My Brilliant Friend, and they’ve just released the first episode of season two, covering The Story of a New Name. If you still have time on your hands after all that, go online and track down the various theories on Elena Ferrante’s true identity.

Meanwhile fill your glass with something Neapolitan. For whites, you could pour Vadiaperti’s 2017 Irpinia Coda di Volpe or Clelia Romano 2016 Fiano di Avellino Colli di Lapi. My reds for Ferrante include Il Verro’s 2017 Terre del Volturano Pallagrello Nero and Mastroberardino’s 2013 Irpinia Rediimore Aglianico.

A Gentleman in Moscow, by Amor Towles

It’s 1922 and the Bolsheviks have upended life in czarist Russia. Count Alexander Rostov, accused of writing subversive poems, is placed under house arrest in the luxury Hotel Metropol. Rostov builds a rich and fulfilling existence during his confinement, exhibiting “an essential faith that by the smallest of one’s actions one can restore some sense of order to the world.” Key scenes feature the hotel restaurant’s legendary 100,000-bottle cellar and competing wine recommendations for a Rioja and a Mukuzani, the latter an inky red made from Georgia’s native saperavi grape.

You can decide between tempranillo and saperavi as you work your way through A Gentleman in Moscow. Try Marqués de Murrieta’s 2015 Rioja Reserva or Viñा Olabarri’s 2015 Rioja Reserva. Then look east to Batono’s 2015 Kakheti Mokuzani De’Vino Saperavi or Terra Initia’s 2015 Kakheti Mukuzani Saperavi. Any will improve your own quarantine.

Distractions

DRAW

The Brooklyn Art Library is offering a 28-day drawing challenge. The first assignment? “Make a drawing of all things, both real and fictional, that could live under your bed.” Then share it using #BAL_Draw. Wine may help to get the creative juices flowing.

— TARA Q. THOMAS, W&S executive editor

Stephanie Johnson, a former book editor, covers Italian wines for Wine & Spirits.
I went with sumac.

Sumac, the spice associated with the Levant, with Lebanon and Turkey and other places I’ve never been, a spice that never entered the flavors I’d grown up with in the lap of America’s Midwest. I was familiar with it; sumac bushes were everywhere in southern Wisconsin, and in the fall their clusters turned a subdued, Christmasy scarlet. As a teenager, under the dubious guidance of Euell Gibbons, I made tart and astringent red teas I wasn’t grown-up enough to drink. If you’d told me that in other parts of the world people used it as a spice, I’d have laughed.

Now that sheltering in place is the order of the day, I’ve been reacquainting myself with the darker corners of my spice shelf. It felt prudent, like a practice—and who could say? One day my supplies might dwindle to the point that I’d be resorting to unfamiliar ingredients, like sumac.

In normal times, I shop at LA’s ethnic markets—the Galleria in Koreatown, Bangluck for Thai, Northgate and Superior for Mexican, Kavita for Indian and the Little Tokyo Market near our West Coast office for Japanese. The last ethnic market I worked into my routine was the Super King, an Armenian superstore near Atwater Village where the produce was fresh and cheap, the grains and beans plentiful, and there was an array of spices and condiments like no other.

That’s where I stocked up on sumac, thinking back perhaps on those sour teas of my youth, without a clue as to what to do with it. As an ingredient, sumac is so particular. I can’t think of a spice that brings such tartness and such earthy depth of flavor simultaneously: high tones and bass notes, belted out at an equal volume. Fortunately, Yotam Ottolenghi’s book was on hand with his signature dish, a simple roast chicken made unsimple by sumac and za’atar.

And this week, the New York Times published an Ottolenghi recipe for chard and potato gratin laced with sumac-spiced onions. I made it yesterday and it was marvelous, the spice framing the earthy intensity of the chard, gathering in on both sides with its punchy acidity and astringency.

Eric Asimov, at the Times, recommends Chablis and Beaujolais (among other wines) for this dish; either would have made a great pairing. But that evening I let the out-of-my-wheelhouse sumac push me into other wine realms. Italian whites made with falanghina and fiano would have done the trick, whites that seemed, like sumac, to have dual virtues of depth and acidity; but I had neither on my wine rack. Instead, I found myself reaching for the Ronchi di Cialla Friulano from Collio, a cool expression of friulano that had enough roundness to grapple with this ancient spice, new to me, rescued from the inner depths of my pantry.

Patrick J. Comiskey is a senior correspondent at W&S covering US wines.

Tom Schnabel is one of the founding DJs at KCRW’s Morning Becomes Eclectic, and still puts together some wonderful playlists, drawing from his encyclopedic knowledge of world music, especially African, Brazilian and Arabian, not to mention several eras of jazz. He taps all of these genres in this lovely contemplative playlist he put out this week on spotify.com. —PJC.
THE SHOWER BEER

…is the Best Beer
By COREY WARREN

The classic picture of a self-care bath includes a thick paperback, rose petals, loose candles and a tall glass of red wine, but let’s be honest—nobody likes chipping wax off of their bathroom tiles; warm tannins and steam don’t go together; and who’s got time to pull a bath? Instead, there’s the shower beer. Run a steaming hot shower, strip down, run to the fridge for a cold one (make a mental note to apologize to your roommates later) and get in there. This will be the best beer of your life. Maybe it’s the temperature difference. Maybe it’s the fact that the bottle gives off steam when you hold it near the stream. Like the Backstreet Boys, the shower beer becomes more than the sum of its individual parts.

You should have already selected your playlist. Put anything on there that makes you swing your hips. Forget a fancy speaker; the acoustics in bathrooms are great. Dance like nobody’s watching, because you’re in the shower and nobody should be watching. Carve out a moment of true, naked freedom from your day. It’s about what the shower beer says: “This is my time, and I am going to ignore Marsha-from-accounting’s emails for twenty minutes.” “I hate Mondays, but I love Monday nights.” “Hot water. Cold beer. Good.”

The experience of the shower beer blows away any other possible beer. First beer after dry January? Swill. Blue Mountains Coors Light right from the cooler on a speedboat? Tastes like warm urine. Cold one with the boys, six feet apart from each other? Try harder. The only possible contender with the shower beer is the Russian bathhouse beer, but that requires an Olympian confidence that I do not yet have.

Close your eyes and let the water run over your head. Keep your beer out of the line of fire. Do not stop grooving. This is your time. You are your own person. This is your moment, and it’s fogged up the glass.

When it comes time to turn the water off, do not let the sudden chill of the air dampen your spirits. Your song is still playing. Your moment is not over, it’s merely passed on to the next track. The shower beer sets the tone, just keep that note going.

Step out of the shower. You forgot your towel. Make a mental note to apologize to your roommates a second time.

Distractions

San Francisco’s MX3 Fitness is streaming free yoga classes for hospitality employees every Monday at 11 am PST.—T.Q.T.

EXERCISE

Corey Warren is a tasting coordinator in the W&S NYC office.
HOW TO HELP

DONATE

To out-of-work bartenders:
● United States Bartenders’ Guild’s Bartender Emergency Assistance Program.

To unemployed restaurant staff:
● The Restaurant Workers’ Community Foundation COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund.
● Southern Smoke Foundation’s Emergency Relief Fund.
● One Fair Wage Emergency Coronavirus Tipped and Service Worker Support Fund.
● The James Beard Foundation Food and Beverage Industry Relief Fund.

To the children of restaurant employees:
● Core provides support for workers with children in need.

To restaurants hoping to be back in service soon
● Buy dining bonds.

To your favorite restaurants on gofundme
● Donate funds to sustain their teams.

To The Herbfarm’s project feeding health-care workers in greater Seattle:
● In one of the hardest hit spots in the country, chef Chris Weber and co-proprietor Carrie Van Dyke have teamed up with volunteers to deliver multi-course boxed meals to doctors, nurses and service workers at area hospitals. They are close to meeting their goal of $50,000 to deliver 2,000 meals, and will keep building from there until the crisis abates.

To World Central Kitchen:
● Chef José Andrés’ nonprofit organization brings meals to those in need in COVID-19 hotspots throughout the US.

BUY

● Our LA staff reports that Zine Café, down the road from our office, has turned itself into a market for locals to buy milk/eggs/toilet paper without wearing a hazmat suit at Trader Joes. Curtis Stone at Gwen is making chicken pot pies and other items that families can just pick up and reheat. In NY, the team at Amali will send you an entire tasting menu, complete with wine; at Gaudir, the team is delivering Spanish food and wine. Dozens of other restaurants have quickly pivoted to providing food to go as a way to keep business alive; they are also helping locals by offering farm-fresh vegetables as well as now-hard-to-find items like toilet paper and paper towels. Check TimeOut, Eater and other local publications that are keeping a running tab.

● And don’t forget wine stores: Jancis Robinson’s team is keeping tabs on wine retailers around the world who are doing non-contact deliveries.

TIP

● the brave person who delivers food and wine to your door.

● a bartender or waiter while you drink and dine at home.

SIGN

American Chefs petition
● to our governors, mayors and legislators to Save America’s Restaurants

ROAR (Relief Opportunities for All Restaurants) petition
● to help restaurants affected by the crisis who are #toosmalltofail

BE KIND.