Cattleya

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CATTLEYA WINE INSPIRED BY COLOMBIA FEATURES BOTANICALLY CORRECT ORCHIDS

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Fine wine is hardly my forte, but when a client handed me two fancy bottles called Cattleya, I was intrigued. What could the connection be between the Queen of the Orchids and fermented grapes? Certainly, both have an intense and loyal following, but there must be something more.

My father was equally curious and had never seen anything like this. He's been involved with all things orchid since the 1940s and noted that the logo on the label was a botanically correct cattleya flower with all the proper parts and orientation. This artwork is refreshing given that graphic designers regularly take artistic liberty when drawing orchids and turn them into something unrecognizable.

Further examination of the bottle revealed a sophisticated design. The creamy white label featured an embossed metallic flower that was color coded such that a red bloom represented a red wine such as Pinot Noir or Syrah and a gold bloom represented a Chardonnay. Elegantly written in large cursive letters was the word, Cattleya.

The top of the container was just as refined. Stamped on the foil above the cork was another cattleya flower — also raised and colored — so that many bottles on a rack can be differentiated. This fine detail reinforces the horticultural branding and is reminiscent of the precision with which orchid breeders select and pollinate their hybrids.

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I contacted the company, Cattleya Wines, and discovered that the owner and winemaker, Bibiana Gonzalez Rave, was indeed inspired by the famed orchid. She is from Colombia where cattleyas grow wild and were so prevalent in the 1930s, that one species, C trianaei, was selected as the National Flower of the country. Her entire childhood was spent around orchids.

“I named my wine, Cattleya, to honor my native country, my family and the experiences of my upbringing” said Bibiana who immigrated to the United States in 2007 after obtaining degrees in viticulture and work experience in France. She subtitles her wines with descriptions such as “Call to Adventure,” “Meeting the Mentor” and “The Reward” to coincide with her personal journey in winemaking. Her private orchid collection is small but growing.

Cattleya trianaei is not mentioned by name in any of Bibiana's wine literature, but this is the flower that was used on the label. Orchid enthusiasts know of the wonderful qualities of the species — namely, that the flowers are well shaped, long lasting and come in a wide range of delicate lavender shades. Beginning growers often start out with a phalaenopsis or two but, as their confidence builds, they slowly make their way over to the cattleya alliance culminating with species such as C trianaei.

Back home, Bibiana's parents grow exclusively cattleyas on their balcony in Medellin, Colombia.

"They get rain when it rains, wind all the time and sunlight in the morning but are protected from the afternoon sun" said her mother.

The climate in Colombia is tropical and ideal for raising orchids. Hobbyists can duplicate these conditions by providing temperatures in the 60- to 90-degree F range and filtered sunlight so the leaves are never warm to the touch.

Medellin became a horticultural sensation in the 1970s when it hosted the World Orchid Conference and is well known today for its garden attraction, Jardin Botanico, which features Orquideorama — a seven-tiered outdoor venue of tropical plants and orchids. The architectural marvel honors 19th century Colombian botanist, Jose Jeronimo Triana, whose name also graces the national flower. August is peak tourist month in Medellin because the city hosts a grandiose orchid display at the annual Feria de las Flores (Festival of Flowers).

Cattleya Wines score very high with sommelier reviews in leading trade magazines with descriptions including "luxurious on the palette" and "of incredible elegance and purity."

Quite simply, I have found that sitting by the fire and sipping these silken beverages in the company of blooming orchids is a wonderful way to pass the long winter nights.