



April, 2016



Like creating a piece of artwork, each month I sit down with a blank page and hope that what I write is entertaining and informative to you. Some months I find that the wines have such compelling stories that they write their own narrative. Other months it feels like every word has to be pulled from the belly of a beast, clawing and scratching the whole way. This is one of those months when the wines tell the story and my job is to try and keep them to 1800 words. Buckle up and get ready, because this month you are in for a ride.

The first selection is one from one of the legendary estates of the Barossa Valley of Australia, Torbreck. Founded in 1994 by David Powell, this estate has been a critical darling for two decades and a tasting of the current releases left me speechless. Their **2013 Torbreck Shiraz “Woodcutter’s” (\$23)** is officially their “entry level” example of this grape, but it has few equals at twice the price.

Although the Shiraz bubble burst over a decade ago, a few estates remain in the public eye. Sadly for Torbreck, this has not been for the best reasons. Co-founder David Powell did not come into the wine business through the front door with a winemaking degree from an esteemed university. His path started as a lumberjack in the Scottish highlands, where he worked for several years in the Torbreck forest before moving to Australia. Eventually he purchased an old property in northwest Barossa Valley and began clearing the land for a homestead. During this time he discovered a parcel of untended, century old vines and began to nurse them back to health. In 1992, he harvested his first crop and made a small amount of wine. By 1994 Powell was confident enough in his efforts to launch a winery, with the help of co-founder Jack Cowin. For the next two decades Powell produced some of the most sought after, highly rated and expensive wines in the Barossa Valley, most named for the forests where he previously worked as a lumber jack. For enthusiasts, it was all they could do to procure a few bottles of the Struie, Steading and Bothie, or the rarest of all RunRig. The wines were made from old vines they were acquiring across northeast Barossa, specifically from very old vines.

Trouble started in 2008 when, per contract, it was time for Powell to buy out Cowin. For David, the dream was to build a winery he could pass to his two sons. After a chance meeting with Pete Kight, an Atlanta businessman, the two created a new deal that would provide Powell with the money needed to buy out Cowin. The winery, flush with new working capital, also continued to expand vineyard land and built a new winemaking facility. In 2013 Powell was the contractually faced with buying out Kight. This time, when he was unable to raise the capital, he was locked out of this winery and eventually his home. The 2012's were the last vintage produced by Powell but I have to say, the new Woodcutter's Shiraz is the best I have ever tasted from the winery, so the story may have a happy ending for consumers after all.

To produce the Woodcutter's Shiraz the new winemaking team uses grapes grown in several different vineyards owned or under contract to Torbreck. The sites read like a veritable 'who's who' of sub-zones within the Barossa; Marananga, Greenock, Ebenezer, Gomersal, Moppa, Lyndoch & Kalimna. All of the vineyards are old and dry-farmed, with each vine tended and the fruit harvested by hand. Once picked, the grapes are fermented in several different vessels; stainless steel, concrete and upright oak casks. In a further nod to old methods, once dry the grapes are basket pressed and the resulting wine is aged in a combination of 500 liter hogsheads and larger foudres for twelve months.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for at least an hour to get the full picture of what it has to offer. Then when you pour the first glass take in the color, which is an almost opaque purple, with deep staining of the thick tears. This is a sign you are about to receive a mouthful of flavor. The nose is an inviting combination of ripe, black cherries, dried black figs, a wisp of eucalyptus, some black licorice, black olive and dried sage. On the palate it is very deep, but the fruit is still quite bright, with good concentration and very smooth, polished tannins. This beauty drinks very well now but should improve and evolve for a decade. Serve with grilled leg of lamb with rubbed with black olive tapenade or tri-tip steak.

My second pick for this month is the **2013 Altocedro Cabernet Sauvignon (\$23)**, which is the new vintage of a selection I made in the fall of 2014. Although not my original pick for this month, the Mendocino Cabernet that was my selection disappeared at the end of last month. Thankfully I recently tasted this wine and was knocked out by the new release, so the substitution is easy. If anything this wine is a better partner to the powerful Torbreck bottling.

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This wine comes from the La Consulta, a sub-region of the Valle de Uco. This winery is owned by Lebanese-Argentinian Karim Mussi Saffie, who named the winery for the tall cedar that looms over the winery. To him the cedar is a tie to his heritage and symbol for how far his, and the wines of Argentina, can reach.

The Valle de Uco is a long, flat valley that begins almost three hours south of the city of Mendoza. All of the vineyards in the region are planted on the valley floor in the shadow of the Andes. For millions of years the climate has weathered the mountains causing a massive pile of rock, gravel and sand to form at the base. It is this quick draining, warm soil that provides the perfect medium for grapes, and quince trees too, based on my observations.

While the soil may be the most obvious feature of the Valle de Uco the other reason this area is so important for grape growing is elevation. When I was standing on the valley floor looking up at the towering Andes, it was hard to remember that I was already 3300 feet above sea level. At that height the UV rays are much more intense, and the climate is much cooler, than the area around the city of Mendoza. As a result the grapes develop thicker skins and ripen slower. I visited during harvest while picking was underway in Santa Rosa, near Mendoza, and the vineyards of the Valle de Uco were still three to four weeks from being perfectly ripe. This long, slow ripening produces wines with uncommon dimension and complexity.

For this wine the vines are 17 years old, which is not uncommon in the region. The Valle de Uco was not a traditional wine region until two decades ago when Nicholas Catena, led by American Paul Hobbs, identified the regions' potential. Since then plantings have exploded, limited only by the owners access to water. That is the regions' final piece of the quality puzzle. All of Mendoza is desert but this area receives less than four inches of rain a year. That eliminates almost any threat of rain during the harvest and allows the growers to let the fruit hang deep into the fall.

To produce this wine Karim has the grapes hand sorted, then fermented using wild yeast in small concrete vats. Once the wine is dry it is moved to French oak barrels, of which 30% are new, where it is aged for eight months. In a further nod to quality, it is not filtered or fined. There were only 780 cases of this wine produced.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant it for half an hour to let it develop. The color of the 2013 is deeper than the 2012, showing a rich, ruby color. It is also riper than the previous year, with the bouquet showing a thick combination of black currant jam, pomegranate syrup, milk chocolate, soy sauce, sage, thyme and bay leaf. On the palate it is quite deep and smooth, with a thick core of fruit framed by a hint of tannins. What I love about the Cabernets from the Valle de Uco is their freshness, with this one showing a lively sense of acidity that keeps it interesting to the bottom of the bottle. Drink this wine over the next five years with grilled duck breast or fatty steak like a tri-tip.

Grilled Tri-Tip Steaks

If you have never visited the Santa Maria valley of California then you may have not heard of the tri-tip steak. This odd, triangular cut of meat is taken from the bottom sirloin and there is only one per animal. On the east coast it is often processed into ground sirloin but if you look around, particularly at Fresh Market or Whole Foods, you should be able to find it. Then prepare yourself for one of the easiest to cook and beefiest cuts around.

Although the grain of this cut looks similar to brisket, it lacks the connective tissue. Tri-tip should be grilled and served medium rare. To ensure a tender mouthful of meat, cut it across the grain. If you have left-overs, serve sliced very thin, spread across a fresh ciabatta roll with sautéed mushrooms, onions and peppers.

- 1 tri-tip roast (about 2 pounds)**
- 6 garlic cloves, minced**
- 1/2 tsp ground celery seed**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil**
- 3/4 teaspoon salt**
- 2 cups wood chips, preferably oak**
- 1 teaspoon pepper**
- 3/4 teaspoon garlic salt**

1. Pat roast dry with paper towels. Using fork, prick roast about 20 times on each side. Combine garlic, oil, and salt and rub over roast. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 1 hour or up to 24 hours.

2. Soak wood chips in bowl of water to cover for 15 minutes. Open bottom vents on grill. Light large chimney starter filled with charcoal briquettes (about 100 coals) and burn until charcoal is covered with fine gray ash. Pour hot coals in even layer over one half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, open lid vents completely, and let grill heat for 5 minutes. Scrape cooking grate clean.

3. Using paper towels, wipe garlic paste off roast. Rub pepper and garlic salt all over meat. Grill directly over coals until well browned, about 5

minutes per side. Carefully remove roast and cooking grate from grill and scatter wood chips over coals. Replace cooking grate and arrange roast on cooler side of grill. Cover, positioning lid vents directly over meat, and cook until roast registers about 130 degrees (for medium-rare), about 20 minutes. Transfer meat to cutting board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 20 minutes. Slice thinly across the grain. Serve.

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