

May, 2017

Tim's Wine Market



I go through phases in my wine drinking, and right now I am stuck on bottles from Portugal, Italy and South Africa. I think it's because I am an acid freak, which does not mean a disciple of Timothy Leary. Rather, I am digging wines that offer freshness on the palate, even if they carry some significant weight. The features this month spotlight how acidity can balance a wine, even those that I would classify as full-bodied.

2013 Symington Altano (\$12)

It is hard to discuss the dry wines of Portugal without recognizing the contributions of the Symington family, even though they are nearly synonymous with Port wine. For five generations, they have built an empire in the Douro Valley, home to Port wine, which includes the great houses of Graham, Dow, Warre and Cockburn. They own over 5,200 acres of vineyards, divided among 27 individual estates, and produce a staggering 32% of all the premium Port for the world. One of the reasons they have been so successful is they have a vision for the future. A couple of decades ago, they recognized that the world is not drinking as much Port wine as in the past and began moving some of their production over to dry table wines. They formed a partnership with Bruno Prats, who had just sold his famed 2nd Growth Bordeaux, Chateau Cos D'Estournel. Prats brought considerable know-how in both viticulture and winemaking, and as a result their wines are now the standard for Portuguese dry reds. Although Altano is not from that partnership, there is no mistaking the skill they have acquired.

The grapes for Altano come from several vineyards in the Douro sub-zones of Douro Superior and Cima Corgo. The Cima Corgo, which lies in the middle of the Douro region, begins at the mouth of a tributary called the Temi-Lobos, and stretches east to Cachão River. This is the traditional home of the best estates in the Douro, which are called *Quintas*, because the climate is hot and dry. The Douro Superior runs from the boundary with the Cima Corgo to the border with Spain. Despite the lofty name, the Douro Superior is an area that has not traditionally been planted. The climate is extremely hot and dry, requiring irrigation for most vineyards, and it is also quite isolated. That said, as producers are looking for where the best potential is for dry table wines, there is considerable interest in the Douro Superior.

To make their table wines, producers are picking the grapes one to two weeks earlier than those used for Port production. At this point they have higher natural acidity and their sugar is not as high, so the finished wines have better balance. For Altano the Symington's use a traditional blend of Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca. All of the grapes for the wines of the Douro are hand-harvested, as the slopes are way too steep for mechanical pickers. The grapes are de-stemmed and fermented in stainless steel, then aged in large, 400 liter barrels of French and American oak for eight months.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for half an hour before serving. Once you do, it delivers a knockout nose of ripe black figs, black cherry, milk chocolate, and fresh orange peel. On the palate, it is nicely focused and firm, with a strong sense of fruit that despite the ripe aromas, is not cumbersome on the palate. Drink this wine over the next two or three years with hearty pork dishes, like Feijoada Tresmontana (pork and bean stew) or linguica, the classic Portuguese sausage and lentils.

2013 Valiano Chianti Classico (\$20)

The sub-theme of this month could be, "families who built a fortune in the wine business." Like the Symingtons, the Piccini family have amassed a fortune over four generations of winemaking. The estate was founded in 1882 by Angiolo Piccini and his wife Maria Teresa, when they purchased 16 acres of vineyards in Chianti. During their leadership, the couple built production on straw basket Chianti, and more important, greatly expanded their initial vineyard holdings. Their son, Angiolo, had the daunting task of guiding the winery through the depression and WWII, but expanded their market through exporting. The current generation now runs an empire that includes 1,000 acres of vines, spread across five estates, and under their Piccini label produce 10-12% of all wine labeled as Chianti.

Success in their volume brands, such as the Piccini orange label Chianti you will find in grocery stores, allows them to direct a lot of resources to their more expensive wines. Their Valiano estate is located in the Castelnuovo Berardenga, the southern-most of the sub-zones of Chianti Classico. The property covers over 400 acres of vineyards, on the rolling hills of the area that vary between 900 and 1,200 feet above sea level. Even at this height, Castelnuovo Berardenga is the lowest elevation of all sub-zones. The wines are considered the richest, and most powerful of the sub-zones, often blended for balance with the more austere examples from higher elevations. That said, the diurnal temperature swings are still extreme, often 40 degrees between afternoon and evening, so the grapes retain good acidity.

When it comes to freshness and balance, Chianti Classico is a category that is hard to beat. The wine is based on the Sangiovese grape, which is noted for both high acidity and tannins. Traditionally, producers would blend Sangiovese with local varieties, primarily Canaiolo and Colorino, to add color and additional structure to the wines. Until 1995, they were also required to use white varieties in the blend, favored by large producers who argued they added aromatics and a bit of delicacy. During that time, a number of serious producers rebelled, leaving their marketing consortium, then called the

Consorzio di Gallo Nero, arguing that quality standards were too low. With the 2005 vintage, it was decided that Chianti Classico could include up to 20% “other” varieties than Sangiovese, and still carry the DOCG sticker. All of this is apparent by the neck label, showing the Consorzio sticker depicting the black rooster, and the DOCG sticker denoting quality. For this wine, winemaker Paolo Vagaggini uses 5% Merlot to soften the aggressive side of Sangiovese.

To make this wine, the grapes are harvested and fermented in stainless steel tanks. Vagaggini uses lots of “pump-overs” in which the fermenting wine is removed from the bottom of the tank via hose and redistributed over the cap of skins at the top. This helps to extract extra color from the relatively pale Sangiovese grapes. After the wine is dry it is moved to a combination of French, American and Slovenian oak casks for nine months of aging.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for a half-hour to help the bouquet develop and the acids to soften. Once you do, it exhibits a high-toned nose of crushed red currants, macerated strawberries, orange pekoe tea, baked potato skins, and star gazer lilies. On the palate, it displays a deep sense of fruit, restrained by a good bit of acidity and tannins that frame the finish. You can certainly drink this wine now, but it will also last for up to five years in a wine cooler. Serve this with classic Tuscan dishes like grilled T-bone drizzled with olive oil and lemon juice, or Cacio e Pepe.

Cacio e Pepe

This is a classic Italian pasta dish based on very few ingredients, so you will want to buy high quality Pecorino-Romano cheese and olive oil. The technique creates a simple, creamy sauce that highlights the flavors of Chianti Classico perfectly, as well as other high acid red wines.

6 ounces Pecorino Romano
4 ounces finely grated (about 2 cups) and
2 ounces coarsely grated (about 1 cup)
1 pound spaghetti
table salt
2 tablespoons heavy cream
2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 ½ teaspoons finely ground black pepper

1. Place finely grated Pecorino in medium bowl. Set colander in large bowl.

2. Bring 2 quarts water to boil in large Dutch oven. Add pasta and 1½ teaspoons salt; cook, stirring frequently, until al dente. Drain pasta into colander set in bowl, reserving cooking water. Pour 1½ cups cooking water into liquid measuring cup and discard remainder; return pasta to now-empty bowl.

3. Slowly whisk 1 cup reserved pasta cooking water into finely grated Pecorino until smooth. Whisk in cream, oil, and black pepper. Gradually pour cheese mixture over pasta, tossing to coat. Let pasta rest 1 to 2 minutes, tossing frequently, adjusting consistency with remaining ½ cup reserved pasta water. Serve, passing coarsely grated Pecorino separately.

Braised Lentils with Sausage

Like Cacio e Pepe, this regionally inspired dish is perfect for the full-bodied, higher acid wines of the Douro river valley, regardless of Portuguese or Spanish origin. It is hard to find linguica, a Portuguese pork sausage with a tangy flavor, so this recipe uses kielbasa. If you can find linguica then by all means try it, and this dish works nicely with chorizo as well.

1 cup lentils du Puy, picked over and rinsed
5 sprigs fresh thyme, tied into a bundle with
kitchen twine
1 ¾ cups canned low-sodium chicken broth
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 medium cloves garlic, slivered
1 medium onion, diced
Salt
1 ¼ teaspoons smoked bittersweet paprika or
regular sweet paprika
1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
8 ounces kielbasa sausage, split lengthwise,
then halved crosswise to yield 4 pieces
Ground black pepper
2 medium scallions, sliced thin on the bias

1. Bring the lentils, thyme sprigs, broth, and 1 ½ cups water to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the lentils are almost tender but still a little crunchy, 20 to 25 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 475 degrees. Heat the olive oil and garlic in an ovenproof 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. As the oil begins to sizzle, shake the pan gently back and forth to prevent the garlic from clumping (stirring with a spoon will cause the garlic slivers to stick together). Once the garlic turns very light golden brown, after 2 to 3 minutes, add the onion and 1/2 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion softens, about 4 minutes. Add the paprika and cook until aromatic, about 1 minute. Stir in the tomatoes. (If the lentils are not ready, set the skillet aside).

3. When the lentils are ready, add them and any liquid left in the saucepan to the skillet with the other ingredients and arrange the kielbasa, cut-side up, across the top of the pan. Set

the skillet in the oven and cook until the liquid has evaporated and the lentils are soft, 10 to 12 minutes. Cool for at least 5 minutes. Discard the thyme, adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper to taste, and garnish with the scallions. Serve immediately.