



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan & JP Donnelly-Davis

## Man vs. Machine - The modern harvest question

For our ongoing wine education series this month, we tackle the question of whether it is best to hand-harvest the grapes or use machines. Much like screw cap closures were once seen as inferior, machine harvesting was primarily used for inexpensive grocery store wines. However, the process is gaining popularity among winemakers for several reasons, exemplified by our selections this month.

The Impressionists loved the imagery of grape harvesting, with Van Gogh, Renoir, and Gauguin (though technically a post-Impressionist) all crafting masterpieces on the subject. It is an image that cuts to the heart of “handcrafted” wines, and the process has changed little in the nearly two centuries since these great paintings were created. However, much has changed in the economy of winemaking, as well as in culture at large, creating several reasons why many wineries today choose to machine harvest. This is particularly evident in the New World wine regions, where high costs, a lack of inexpensive labor, and the need for speed during harvest are all significant factors that determine how grapes are picked.

While many aspects of farming have been automated, several jobs still require a human eye and careful handwork to accomplish. In grape farming, there is pruning, cane positioning, shoot thinning, topping, and leaf stripping that occur throughout the growing season, all of which are best done with human hands. When it comes time to harvest, wineries pay a premium for pickers who know which clusters to harvest, trim, or leave on the ground in order to achieve the best quality at the crush pad. Machine harvesters have been around for decades, but until recently, they were not selective about what they picked, resulting in not only grapes but also leaves, stems, and other MOG (material other than grapes) being deposited in the storage hopper. In the past decade, innovations such as optical sorters, precision jet sprays, and fans have improved the quality of the grapes picked. This has vastly enhanced the quality of the grapes delivered to the wineries and adds to the debate over whether hand harvesting is superior.

Then there is the issue of cost. In the U.S., a typical vineyard paid roughly \$750 per acre to hand-harvest grapes in 2023, with premium wineries in Napa and Sonoma paying twice or even three times as much. A machine harvester can pick an acre for between \$100 and \$300, depending on factors like vine orientation, density, and grade. There is a significant upfront cost to acquiring the equipment, but wineries can also contract with those who own them to offset that expense. Finally, there is the speed factor. Machine harvesting can be accomplished in one-fifth the time it takes for a team of pickers to clear an acre. Historically, farmers monitored the weather forecast in anticipation of rain, which is detrimental to harvest. If rain was forecasted, they would rush the pickers into the vineyard to bring in the crop if possible. While that is still a factor, it is increasingly important to pick at optimal ripeness due to hotter summers hastening ripening. Winemakers want a balance between acidity and sugar in the grapes, which makes for easier and more complete fermentations. Today, temperatures stay hotter longer, meaning that the grapes need to be picked before they become overripe, so time is of the essence.

In conclusion, while there is a romantic element to hand harvesting and a small quality advantage, the realities of the workforce and the economics involved make it less viable. This month, both of the featured wines are from grapes that were machine-harvested, and I think you will agree that quality has not suffered.

## 2025 Rieslingfreak Riesling No. 55 | \$22

Rieslingfreak is a winery project located in Australia's Eden Valley, northeast of Adelaide, and surrounded on all sides by the world-famous Barossa zone. Though predominantly known for its warm-climate Shiraz, the Barossa zone is home to a varied array of climates and soil types. The Eden Valley's cool, foggy climate and higher altitude, with vineyard plantings up to 2,000 feet above sea level, combine with prehistoric limestone soils to provide an ideal growing environment for Riesling and other Germanic varieties. While this may seem like a recent invention, this part of Australia was actually

home to a number of German and Polish immigrant families in the 19th century, many of whom helped kickstart the country's wine industry. In a way, Riesling has been a part of Australian winemaking since the beginning.

Growing up in the neighboring Clare Valley, another cool-climate zone known for its Riesling production, winemaker John Hughes was equally fascinated by both dry and sweet examples of this variety and began to collect both. Taking inspiration from German winemaking traditions and other local producers, John started the "Rieslingfreak" label based on an old college nickname. He is joined in the winery by his wife, Belinda, who made high-quality Riesling at a rival winery for years before they decided to join forces. Never let it be said that wine cannot bring people together!

The "No. 55" bottling is crafted in a deliberately off-dry style, similar to the traditional wines of Germany's Mosel region. Do not let the off-dry designation scare you into thinking the wine will taste sweet; Marlborough Sauvignon Blancs and most California Chardonnays also finish with residual sugar. Winemakers use acidity and alcohol to create balance in the wine, so sweetness is not noticeable. For example, this wine has a lower alcohol content and a few grams of residual sugar, but it also packs a wallop of 10 grams of acidity per liter. The two complement each other well, delivering plenty of fruit-forwardness and versatility while finishing dry on the palate. To achieve this, the wine undergoes a short fermentation in stainless steel before being chilled to stop fermentation, leaving a bit of residual sugar behind. What makes this style of wine even more remarkable is the fact that 2025 was one of Australia's hottest years on record, with unpredictable drought and frost conditions early in the season. Creating a wine like this required a tremendous amount of effort in the vineyard, including hail management and careful early harvesting. The results, however, speak for themselves.

When you open this wine, serve it chilled, but not ice-cold. For best results, pull it out of the refrigerator about 15 minutes before serving. In addition, it will benefit from a brief decanting to bring out the natural aromatics of Riesling. Once this wine has had some time to open up, it delivers notes of Macintosh apple, papaya, lemon drop, and lemongrass. Drink it between 2026 and 2035 with Thai coconut curry, spicy stir-fried dishes, or flaky baked fish such as cod or sea bass.

### **2020 Oliverhill Shiraz "Red Silk" | \$28**

During the Shiraz craze of the early 2000s, the Oliverhill Jimmy Selection was one of the highly rated, sought-after examples that we would actually allocate to customers. Prices for it, and many Shiraz wines like it, spiked, with customers often paying more than \$100 a bottle for the highest-rated wines. At that time, Oliverhill owner Stuart Miller wanted to produce a less expensive Shiraz for customers who did not want to spend the price for Jimmy Selection, and thus Red Silk was born.

The Oliverhill wines are produced in the McLaren Vale appellation, which lies south of the city of Adelaide, close to the Fleurieu Peninsula. This area enjoys warm days and cool evenings thanks to its proximity to the Bay of St. Vincent. The Jimmy Selection vineyard lies adjacent to the famed D'Arenberg Dead Arm vineyard on Seaview Road. This is considered the premium region for great wines of the McLaren Vale appellation, including many other highly rated, rare examples.

Rather than buying bulk wine and slapping a label on it, Miller actually used fruit from the original Jimmy Selection vineyard, simply changing the oak regime from 100% new oak to using less expensive, older, neutral barrels. The challenge is that the Jimmy Selection vineyard is only 5 acres, and the vines are more than 50 years old, meaning they do not produce a copious amount of grapes. To increase production without compromising quality, Miller purchased the nearby Nine Gums vineyard, which consists of 20 acres of 25+ year-old vines planted in the same soil as the Jimmy Selection. He farms both sites in the same way.

After hand harvesting and fermentation, this wine is aged in one-third new French oak barrels, one-third older French oak barrels, and one-third in large hogsheads, which are barrels of up to 500 liters.

Decant this wine for half an hour before serving and chill it to cellar temperature. You will quickly understand where the name "Red Silk" comes from, as the rich nose of Luxardo cherry, dark chocolate, dried black plums, mocha, and a subtle note of eucalyptus lift from the glass. On the palate, it shows a deep and rich core of fruit, with the muscle of ripe Shiraz showing up late, accompanied by tannins and even a touch of acidity. Enjoy this wine with steaks, lamb, or even tuna.

## **Ginger Garlic Shrimp with Coconut Milk**

The selections this month are at the extreme ends of weight, so I decided to focus on the food pairing potential of Riesling. Shiraz is easy; serve it with meat, LOL! However, Riesling is the greatest wine for pairing, working with almost any cuisine except Italian dishes with tomato sauce. This recipe demonstrates that it is far and away the best pairing for the Asian pantry, working exceptionally well with curries and spices, as well as with this Thai-inspired dish.

This recipe comes from the New York Times Cooking section and has 5 stars based on nearly 10,000 reviews. It is versatile, and you can use shrimp, scallops, cubes of fish, tofu, or chicken thighs—just adjust the cooking time accordingly. My only tweak is to remove the shrimp after the first two minutes and set them aside. Then, add them back once the sauce has reduced after adding the spinach. This prevents the shrimp from becoming overcooked.

**2 large garlic cloves, minced or grated**  
**1 teaspoon minced or grated ginger**  
**1 teaspoon ground turmeric**  
**Kosher salt and black pepper**  
**1 tablespoon olive oil**  
**1 pound large shrimp, peeled and deveined,  
tails on or off**  
**2 tablespoons vegetable oil**  
**1 (14-ounce) can full-fat coconut milk**  
**1 tablespoon soy sauce**  
**3 packed cups baby spinach**  
**1 lime, halved**  
**1 fresno, jalapeño or serrano chile, thinly  
sliced**  
**2 scallions, white and light green parts,  
thinly sliced**  
**½ packed cup cilantro leaves and tender  
stems, roughly chopped**

In a mixing bowl, mix together the garlic, ginger, turmeric, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon pepper and the olive oil. Add the shrimp and mix to coat well.

Heat the vegetable oil in a large skillet over medium-high until shimmering. Add the shrimp in an even layer and cook, undisturbed, for 2 minutes. Pour in the coconut milk and soy sauce, stir to combine and turn the shrimp. Raise the heat to high and adjust it to maintain a simmer (avoid bringing to a boil), and cook until the liquid is slightly thickened and shrimp are almost cooked through, stirring occasionally, about 3 minutes. Stir in the spinach in batches until wilted.

Remove from the heat and squeeze in the juice from a lime half. Adjust seasoning with more lime and salt as needed. Top with the chiles, scallions and cilantro, and serve with rice, noodles or naan.