Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This month, the selections focus on the Syrah grape variety, specifically from Australia, where it is known as Shiraz. Much to my surprise, this is the first time we have featured both selections from this grape from Australia in the 16-year history of the NWR. Scanning the archive of club selections, this surprised me a little, especially because the grape was so popular in the early 2000s. By the time this club was established in 2010, the craze was over. However, now the variety is enjoying a renaissance with consumers, and with good reason. Let's take a deep dive into the category and discover why.

First, let's take a moment to continue our lesson on how wines are produced and discuss another necessary topic: irrigation. Most of you in Central Florida likely irrigate your yards because our climate is a unique combination of subtropical for half the year and semi-arid for the other half. Right now, we are finishing the semi-arid part, so irrigation is necessary to maintain your lawn at the recommended 1 inch per week. In the summer, we receive, on average, six to seven times that amount. Grapevines, by comparison, are drought-tolerant and only need 30-35 inches of rain per year to survive. This is why most wine regions are in areas where water is limited; too much water creates disease pressure, mostly in the form of mildew on the vines. In areas where the natural rain cycle has historically delivered 30-35 inches of rain per year, the need for irrigation is minimal. Many farmers in these regions choose to "dry farm," meaning no irrigation. This is the case with our pick from Thistledown, the Cunning Plan Shiraz. However, some areas do not receive the necessary rainfall, such as Mendoza and our featured region, Bendigo, Australia; therefore, irrigation is needed. Space does not allow for a deep dive into this topic, but here are two other thoughts to consider when drinking these wines.

The first point is very polarizing among wine enthusiasts because some, myself included, believe that adding water to vines is unnatural and diminishes or eliminates the sense of terroir. For this reason, irrigation is almost completely illegal in Europe. By comparison, some winemakers believe that helping the plant with water produces a healthier crop and, therefore, better wines. This is the argument used by most New World winemakers, who also believe that without irrigation, the vines might not be viable. There are places like Washington State and Mendoza, which are both deserts, where this is likely true. Yet, there are also old Grenache vines growing across the equally dry Central Meseta of Spain that are not irrigated. As always, it generally comes down to money, with irrigated vines producing a bigger crop at a lower cost. But is it really cheaper?

Many vineyard owners who choose to dry farm point to the lower costs associated with their crop. The vines are less vigorous, therefore needing less pruning, and with less water, there is reduced disease pressure, minimizing the need for mildew sprays. Additionally, they highlight the higher quality grapes they believe a vine slightly under stress produces, allowing them to sell at a premium. Finally, they point out that irrigation is expensive to install and maintain, which brings us to the second point: economics.

Adding irrigation lines to a vineyard costs, on average, between $1,800 and $2,200 per acre in the U.S. The cost of maintaining the system is expensive too, as we all understand based on how many irrigation heads our lawn service manages to break each year. Then there is the cost of maintaining the pumps, which are not the small 1 horsepower ones we have in Florida for shallow wells. Most good vineyards sit in the hills where water is less available, creating the need for deep wells and powerful pumps. These are considerably more costly to drill and maintain. In California, where water is at a premium, many wineries are now no longer allowed to pump as needed and face restrictions on usage. This is creating the need, and in newer wineries, the requirement, to collect and store water on-site for irrigation. As a result, many wineries are adding reservoirs to capture winter rain and snowmelt for dry weather needs. These too are expensive, not to mention the space that could be dedicated to vines lost to the reservoir, which adds to the final cost of production.

Without getting political, the need for water is also exacerbated in most wine regions due to climate change. I do not know any farmers who do not recognize that in the past thirty years, the climate of their wine region has changed. In most areas, it is now warmer and drier than the historical norm, creating hardships, especially where irrigation is not allowed. Our features this month showcase two interesting, high-quality examples representing the two schools of thought regarding irrigation.

2021 Water Wheel Red Wine | $28

Before anyone comments that this wine is not a Shiraz, it is 86% Shiraz, with the balance being Cabernet Sauvignon. The rules in Australia require 85% for varietal labeling. In this case, owner Peter Cumming prefers to use the "Red Wine" designation every year to keep costs down for label printing, as some years there is slightly less than 85% in the blend.

Cumming founded Water Wheel in 1970 as the scion of a farming family that is a major producer of tomatoes and cherries. He started small, with just a couple of acres of land dedicated to grapevines. In 1972, he was encouraged enough to purchase another vineyard located near an old, water-powered flour mill. That is when he named the winery Water Wheel and began to expand it. Shortly after, his family purchased a large tract of land intending to plant tomatoes. A soil study revealed limestone just below the surface of the topsoil. Knowing that the best wines are made from limestone soils, which are rare in Australia, he commandeered the land and planted vines. These are the foundation of his wines today and one of the reasons that Water Wheel is acclaimed for wines with vibrant, natural acidity.

Although they make white wines, Peter often jokes that his wines are designed to pair with “both food groups: beef and lamb.” To combat the dry climate of Bendigo, his vines receive precision drip irrigation from the neighboring Loddon River. Drip irrigation is standard for wineries, as it allows for precise delivery of water to the base of the plant. This method is not only efficient but also reduces the need for spraying to combat mildew, a common problem when using overhead irrigation heads. For this wine, 45-year-old Shiraz vines from the winery’s original plantings are blended with equally old Cabernet Sauvignon for additional color and tannin, which is picked earlier to provide natural acidity. The wine was also aged in older American oak barrels for a year before bottling.

When you open this wine, I strongly suggest decanting it for at least half an hour. Once you do, you will be rewarded with notes of blackberry preserve, cassis, blackcurrant jam, and licorice, bolstered by a hint of black pepper and a lingering finish. Drink now through 2030 with beef, lamb, barbecue short ribs, or even cheeseburgers.

2023 Thistledown Shiraz The Cunning Plan | $29

Many of you may be familiar with Thistledown, a winery owned by two Masters of Wine, Giles Cooke and Fergal Tynan. Originally, they created Thistledown to preserve old vine Grenache vineyards that were being torn out by growers to plant more Shiraz. We have featured their Gorgeous Grenache in the past, an excellent example of the often overlooked Grenache variety. Over the past few years, they have expanded into producing Shiraz from old sites, naming this the “Cunning Plan” due to the military-like preparations necessary for a successful harvest and fermentation.

Based in the Adelaide Hills, they have developed an excellent reputation for crafting small batches of wines from single sites. However, this bottling comes from four very tiny vineyards, where individual bottlings would not be economical. As it is, they only produced 3,833 bottles of this wine. All four vineyards are located in the McLaren Vale, which is situated south of the city of Adelaide at the base of the Fleurieu Peninsula. This region lies close to the Bay of St. Vincent, providing cooling breezes across McLaren Vale, which lengthen the growing season. This allows for the slow, steady ripening of the Shiraz grape, which can be prone to overripeness in hot climates. In 2023, it was an unusually cool growing season, with harvest occurring later than any previous year this century. As a result, the quality of the grapes was exceptional, with a fantastic balance between alcohol and acidity in this wine.

All four vineyards used for this wine are dry-farmed, meaning no irrigation. In this region, that is not uncommon, as the groundwater is relatively close to the surface, and older vines have root systems that reach it without the need for supplementation. Yields are naturally low, around 2.5 tons per acre, although curiously, that is more than the irrigated vines used for the Water Wheel Red Wine, which come in at 1.5 tons per acre. This difference has a lot to do with the higher rainfall, which invigorates the vines and encourages them to produce more fruit.

Decant this wine for half an hour and chill it to cellar temperature before serving. Once you do, it offers a restrained nose of cooked cherry, cooked raspberries, dried red plum, and bay leaf. On the palate, it is precise and keenly focused, with delightfully prickly acidity. This is a revelation with regard to Shiraz and is well suited to not only strong seafood flavors like tuna and salmon, but also goes great with lamb and slow braised beef.

Boneless Leg of Lamb with Herb Crust

There are few pairings better to me than Syrah and lamb, especially spring lamb. This is one of my favorite preparations for leg of lamb from America's Test Kitchen, because it is easy and the results are magnificent. Serve with either wine feature this month, or your favorite Cabernet Sauvignon as well.

3 tablespoons olive oil

3 medium cloves garlic, peeled

3 tablespoons fresh rosemary

2 tablespoons fresh thyme

¼ cup fresh parsley leaves

⅓ cup grated Parmesan cheese (about 1 ounce)

1 cup bread crumbs (fresh), coarse

1 boneless half leg of lamb (3 ½ to 4 pounds), untied, trimmed of surface fat, and pounded to even ¾-inch thickness (see illustration 1), at room temperature

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

1 tablespoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon pepper

Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Meanwhile, in work bowl of food processor fitted with steel blade, process 1 teaspoon of olive oil with garlic, rosemary, thyme, and parsley until minced, scraping down bowl with rubber spatula as necessary, about 1 minute. Remove 1 1/2 tablespoons herb mixture to small bowl and reserve. Scrape remaining mixture into medium bowl; stir in cheese, bread crumbs, and 1 tablespoon olive oil, and set aside.

Lay lamb with rough interior side (which was against bone) facing up on work surface; rub with two teaspoons olive oil, and season with 1½ teaspoons kosher salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Spread reserved 1½ tablespoons herb mixture evenly over meat, leaving 1-inch border around edge. Roll the roast and tie in a fat cylinder. Season tied roast generously with 1½ teaspoons kosher salt and ½ teaspoon pepper, then rub with remaining 1 tablespoon oil.

Place roasting rack on rimmed baking sheet. Heat 12-inch heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat until very hot, about 3 minutes. Sear lamb until well browned on all sides, about 2 minutes per side; then, using tongs, stand roast on each end to sear (see illustration 4), about 30 seconds per end. Transfer to rack and roast until instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part registers 105 to 110 degrees, 30 to 35 minutes. Transfer lamb to cutting board then remove and discard string. Brush lamb exterior with mustard, then carefully press herb and bread crumb mixture onto top and sides of roast with hands, pressing firmly to form a solid, even coating that adheres to the meat. Return coated roast to rack; roast until instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of roast registers 125 degrees (medium-rare), 10 to 15 minutes longer. Transfer meat to cutting board, tent with foil, and let rest 10 to 15 minutes. Cut into 1/2-inch slices and serve.