



For 2019 I want to use my feature selections to delve deeper into the world of wine, by following the year long process of grape growing and winemaking. Each quarter I have made selections that will examine different aspects from vine to bottle, with this quarter focusing on the vine. Since in the northern hemisphere all of the grape vines are dormant in January, we are looking at soil, and how this impacts the wines you drink. For the selections this month they come from very similar soils but climate shapes how different the results are in bottle. As an added bonus, they also allow me the opportunity to discuss texture and body, as they are very different wines in those regards, with some striking similarities.

2017 Zantho Blaufrankish (\$17)

For over a year I have been really into Austrian red wines. It is a category of wines that offer quite a bit to the adventurous consumer, especially with regard to how well they play with a wide range of cuisines. It is also a pretty easy category to understand, as Austrian red wines are primarily produced from three grapes. For this wine it comes from their most famous indigenous variety, Blaufrankish.

Many customers are surprised that Austria produces red wine and usually the first question is, “are they sweet.” The resounding answer, which by the way is the same for Austrian white wines, is “no.” Almost all wine produced in Austria is dry, even those produced from Riesling. My typical answer is that they are closer to Italian red wines, but typically with less obvious acidity. In the case of Blaufrankish, importer Terry These describes the grape as, well, no one can quite describe anything like Terry, so here it is:

“Blaufränkisch is essentially the wine Sauvignon Blanc would be if it were red. It rarely has a lot of “fruit” but it seems to have every possible berry and cherry, and if you taste bilberry, juniper, huckleberry, blackberry, black raspberry, black cherry, regular old cherry, I won’t argue. BF (Blaufrankish) also seems to have every herb under the sun, and I mean under the sun, as it tastes as though the herbs were hot when you plucked them. If you’re an imaginative type and you write “weeds” or “garrigue” you’re also getting the signal. If you smell and taste cracked black peppercorns, you’re in. BF will appeal to the lover of Cabernet Franc, and if you’re a habitué of Old-World Malbec or Tannat, you’re also in the ballpark. It also feints toward Cabernet Sauvignon though in Austria it is far more interesting.”

Does that get your mouth watering? This example is also an exceptional value and a great opportunity to test the waters.

Almost all of the red wines are produced in the extreme eastern edge of the country, in areas surrounding the vast Neusiedlersee (Lake Neusiedl). What makes this site so unique is the nature of this very large, and shallow lake, which acts as a cool sink for the surrounding vineyards. The climate in this part of Europe is generally “continental”, meaning hot summers and cold winters, but the effect of the lake moderates the heat during prime growing months. As a result the grapes retain better acidity than normal. Also, the soils in this area were formed primarily by the movement of glaciers during the ice age, which deposited a deep layer of gravel and sand on top of a bedrock of limestone. The combination of these factors yield wines that are plump and fruit forward, with polished tannins and moderate acidity. In wine speak I call this “lip smacking.”

So when you are ready to open this wine, first be advised that the closure is a vin-lock. Once you remove the metal cap, simply take your finger nail, or the edge of your wine key, and pry off the crystal plug on the top of the bottle. This is one of the finest closures to mitigate oxygen ingress in the wine and is completely inert, as the wine only ever touches glass. Make sure you decant this wine because the lack of oxygen causes the nose to shut down, but it is quickly revived with air. Then the bouquet explodes with notes of fresh black raspberries, cooked black currants, dried tart cherries, arugula and black peppercorns. On the palate it delivers a plump and forward sense of fruit, with moderate acidity and smooth, almost invisible tannins. Here you should also pay attention to how this wine offers a ton of flavor, but is not heavy on the palate. Drink this wine over the next two years with this killer Tikka Masala recipe, take out Chinese orange chicken or grilled pork tenderloin.

2017 Lamadrid Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve (\$18)

As a contrast to the wine above, this selection offers a bigger, more structured feel on the palate. This is in part because it is Cabernet Sauvignon, which by its nature is more tannic than many varieties, and also because of the conditions in which the grapes were grown. Drinking both of these wines within a few days of each other should give you a very good lesson in the differences when I describe wines as “big” and “powerful” versus “polished” and “elegant.”

The Lamadrid winery was created in 2008 when Hector Durigutti and Guillermo García Lamadrid purchased an older estate from the Maza family, who had founded the property in 1959. Hector and Guillermo injected enthusiasm and a bunch of cash into the old facility in order to produce wine from the estate’s 80 year old vines. In just a few short years Lamadrid has leaped onto the short list of top producers in Mendoza.

Their vineyards and winery lie in a sub-zone of the Mendoza region of Argentina called Lujon de Cuyo, in the village of Agrelo. This area is about a half-hour drive south from the center of the city of Mendoza, on flat land with a stunning view of the Andes Mountains in the background. Due to their close proximity to the mountains, the soils of this area are the result of millions of years of erosion from massive, ancient rivers of snow melt that rolled down the towering Andes mountains to their west. This created a thick layer of sand, mixed with smooth rocks, which range in size from those as big as a car down to the perfect size to skip across a lake. These soils are very low in organic material and have perfect drainage. They are the ideal conditions for Cabernet Sauvignon, and Malbec, which are both varieties that thrive when their roots are relatively dry.

To that end, the Mendoza region only receives about eight inches of rain a year so the vines require additional irrigation to keep them alive but not enough that they flourish. The stress they endure during the growing season causes the grapes to have thicker skins, meaning bigger, more concentrated wines and greater potential for complexity. This is also enhanced by the elevation of the region, at roughly 3000 feet above sea level. At this height the UV rays are more intense, which creates thicker skins on the grapes, amplifying color and tannin for more robust wines.

When you are ready to drink this wine, I also encourage you to decant it for a half-hour before serving. As soon as you pour a glass and take a sip, take note of how this wine has the same level of initial power as the Blaufrankish, but shows more density on the mid-palate, while both have about the same length of finish. This phenomenon is due to the nature of the two varieties. Cabernet Sauvignon has a higher level of soluble solids, meaning the stuff in the wine other than acid, alcohol and water, than Blaufrankish. You see this in the concentration on the mid-palate. The bouquet of this wine is a combination of dusty, dried chili peppers, blackberry jam, black peppercorns, caramel and dried sage. On the palate it is nicely deep and polished, with a good sense of fruit framed by firm, but integrated, tannins and a smooth, slightly oaky finish. Drink this wine over the next three to five years with grilled or braised meats.

Chicken Tikka Masala

Despite being a white meat dish, this works really well with both wines this month, which is great because I have run out of room for two recipes. A couple of things to note about this recipe. Please do not be put off by the large number of ingredients, most are pantry staples and the components come together quickly. Second, you can use low-fat yogurt in step one, but non-fat does not yield good results. Finally, you can control the level of heat in this recipe by trimming out the ribs and removing the seeds from the serrano chili, or leave it out altogether. The tiny amount of cayenne in the dry rub does not lend much heat but enhances the overall flavor of the dish.

Chicken Tikka

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon table salt
2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed of fat
1 cup plain whole-milk yogurt
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 2 teaspoons)
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger

Masala Sauce

3 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 medium onion, diced fine (about 1 1/4 cups)
2 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 2 teaspoons)
2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
1 fresh serrano chile, ribs and seeds removed, flesh minced
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1 tablespoon garam masala
1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
2 teaspoons sugar
1 teaspoon Kosher salt
2/3 cup heavy cream
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves

1. FOR THE CHICKEN: Combine cumin, coriander, cayenne, and salt in small bowl. Sprinkle both sides of chicken with spice mixture, pressing gently so mixture adheres. Place chicken on plate, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 30 to 60 minutes. In large bowl, whisk together yogurt, oil, garlic, and ginger; set aside.

2. FOR THE SAUCE: Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until light golden, 8 to 10 minutes. Add garlic, ginger, chile, tomato paste, and garam masala; cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 3 minutes. Add crushed tomatoes, sugar, and salt; bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in cream and return to simmer. Remove pan from heat and cover to keep warm.

3. While sauce simmers, adjust oven rack to upper-middle position (about 6 inches from heating element) and heat broiler. Using tongs, dip chicken into yogurt mixture (chicken should be coated with thick layer of yogurt) and arrange on wire rack set in foil-lined rimmed baking sheet or broiler pan. Discard excess yogurt mixture. Broil chicken until thickest parts register 160 degrees on instant-read thermometer and exterior is lightly charred in spots, 10 to 18 minutes, flipping chicken halfway through cooking.

4. Let chicken rest 5 minutes, then cut into 1-inch chunks and stir into warm sauce (do not simmer chicken in sauce). Stir in cilantro, adjust seasoning with salt, and serve.