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by Tim Varan

This month, as the vines in the northern hemisphere are now fully in their vegetative cycle, we will look at the difference in trellising techniques and how this affects quality. We will do this by looking at two wines from the Maipú sub-zone of Mendoza, Argentina. Both of our features are made by the same winery using the same techniques for production and aging, the only difference is the variety. In this case, it is also a showcase of our old favorite, Cabernet Sauvignon, compared with the relative newcomer, Petit Verdot.



It has been more than six years since we shined the spotlight on the Petit Verdot grape variety, so the selections this month offers something really different. During my trips to Bordeaux and California this year, I was surprised how many winemakers are sliding this variety into their blending palette. It is a variety that has a lot of dimension to add when incorporated with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, but also makes a very compelling wine when left alone.

The origin of Petit Verdot is not known, but records show it being grown in the late eighteenth century in Bordeaux. DNA testing names its parents as Duras and Tressot, both very old varieties commonly grown in the regions east and south of Bordeaux. The name Petit Verdot means, "*little green one*" and likely comes from this variety being such a late ripener. It is always the last thing to ripen in the vineyard, and historically it may have been picked when some berries were still green.

Traditionally, there have not been many wines bottled exclusively from Petit Verdot because the variety is considered to be extremely finicky by grape growers. If left untended, the vine will produce way too many clusters of grapes, so it is hard to get them all ripe. To fix this problem, most producers "green harvest" up to half the clusters. This is a process where vineyard workers cut off a portion of the grape clusters from the vine mid-way through the growing season. This lets the vine focus more ripening energy on fewer clusters. Unfortunately, the grape clusters of Petit Verdot are small relative to Cabernet Sauvignon and especially Merlot. So the yield per acre is about half of that of Merlot and sixty percent of Cabernet. This makes it a very expensive grape to grow since the per acre farming costs for Petit Verdot are higher than Cabernet and Merlot. As a result, this grape makes up less than five percent of the total plantings of Bordeaux, but that figure is starting to grow as the climate is warming and vignerons find ripeness easier to attain. Fortunately for us, the growers in the New World, especially Argentina, have much warmer growing seasons than Bordeaux.

Growers like it because the small berries are intensely colored and high in tannin, so it provides needed backbone to the relatively flabby Cabernet Sauvignon wines. Many winemakers find that if incorporated in a percentage much above five to ten percent it will dominate the wine, including even the most powerful Cabernets.

It is interesting that I see a lot of wineries in Argentina producing Petit Verdot as a stand alone variety. Several properties we work with produce pure examples, often at a substantial premium to their other wines. The reason I selected the **2015 Proemio Petit Verdot (\$22)** is that it is priced exactly the same as their Cabernet Sauvignon, so I believe the comparison is more accurate.

The Proemio winery was established in 2000 by Marcelo Eduardo Bocado and his wife, Patricia. Marcelo is a third generation winemaker who always dreamed of making wine under his own label. They purchased an existing winery in Mendoza, built in 1930, and modernized it. This includes a new design using gravity to move the grapes, juice, and wine along the production process. Fermentation is completed in a combination of stainless steel and concrete tanks, then aged for a year in French oak, a selection of various sizes.

All of the grapes for the **2016 Proemio Cabernet Sauvignon (\$22)** and Petit Verdot come from their vineyard called Finca Miravalles in the Maipú. This region lies just to the southeast of the city of Mendoza, near the Mendoza river. Maipú was really the first wine zone in Mendoza to gain popularity with quality centered producers due to its rich, alluvial soils, warm climate, and proximity to the city of Mendoza. The old vines in this area are still primarily grown on pergolas, a technique that trains the vines to grow up and over a system of poles. This protects the grapes from excessive sun, and shades the soil, lessening the evaporation of precious water. Younger plantings are now planted using modern trellising techniques which lower the yields and produce wines with greater concentration. This is because the most common method, called vertical-shoot-positioning (VSP), creates much greater vine concentration per acre, forcing their roots to compete for nutrients and moisture. In VSP, it is not uncommon to see plantings of up to 3200 vines per acre, so the vines are naturally smaller and set less clusters of grapes. This will reduce yields in vineyards in this area to as little as three tons of grapes per acre, making each grape more concentrated. By comparison, using the old pergola method, there may only be a few hundred vines per acre, often yielding up to ten tons of grapes per acre. As you can imagine, their flavor is more dilute. VSP also allows for greater control of the ripening process, as leaves can be removed late in the season to hasten ripeness or slow it down in hot, sunny years.

To make both of these wines, the grapes are hand harvested, destemmed, and fermented in small concrete tanks. Bocado uses a technique called delestage, where the juice is emptied from the fermentor and pumped back over the skins, which he feels creates a softer extraction of tannins. The wine is left on the skins after fermentation for twenty-five days, then racked to small, French oak barrels. Both wines are aged in barrel for twelve months before bottling, without filtration.

When you are ready to serve the **Petit Verdot**, decant the wine for up to an hour before serving. This wine then explodes with notes of violets, blueberry compote, cooked blackberries, graphite, and toasted marshmallows. On the palate, this wine is quite dense and full with a thick core of fruit framed by moderate tannins, minerality, and relatively low acidity. Drink over the next three to five years with steaks, roasts, or this killer recipe for chicken chilaquiles.

For the **Cabernet Sauvignon**, decant this wine for up to an hour as well, but it does not need as much time as the Petit Verdot. This wine shows a completely different nose, with a strong sense of dried black cherries, black raspberries, milk chocolate, caramel, and a hint of eucalyptus. On the palate, it has good concentration as well, although not as much as the Petit Verdot, with moderate tannins and acidity that pull the fruit together into the finish. This one will also be ideal for the next three to five years with the aforementioned meats, or these chicken chilaquiles.

Chicken Chilaquiles

I am writing this month's offering from Flagstaff, Arizona, where my family and I are almost finished with a ten day trip to hike many of the amazing national parks in Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. Along the way, we have gorged ourselves on Mexican food, and one of my consistent favorites is chilaquiles.

This recipe from Cook's Illustrated takes a long process and cuts it down to about an hour of preparation. You can find dried guajillo chiles in Mexican markets. Although this is a chicken dish, it works very nicely with the Cabernet and the Petit Verdot.

16 (6-inch) corn tortillas, cut into 8 wedges

1/4 cup vegetable oil

Salt

5 dried guajillo chiles, stemmed, seeded, and torn into 1/2-inch pieces (2/3 cup)

1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes

1 cup finely chopped onion

1 poblano chile, stemmed, seeded, and chopped

1 jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeded, and chopped

3 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped

8 sprigs fresh cilantro plus 2 tablespoons minced

1 1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed

1 1/2 cups chicken broth

4 ounces queso fresco, crumbled (1 cup)

1 avocado, halved, pitted, and cut into 1/2-inch pieces

2 radishes, trimmed and sliced thin

1. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 425 degrees. Spread tortillas evenly in 2 rimmed baking sheets. Drizzle each sheet with 2 tablespoons oil, sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon salt, and toss until evenly coated. Bake, stirring occasionally, until tortillas are golden brown and crisp, 15 to 20 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking.

2. Toast guajillos in 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fragrant, 2 to 6 minutes. Transfer toasted guajillos to blender and process until finely ground, 60 to 90 seconds. Add tomatoes and their juice, 3/4 cup onion, poblano, jalapeño, garlic, cilantro sprigs, and 3/4 teaspoon salt to blender and process until very smooth, 60 to 90 seconds.

3. Pound thicker ends of chicken breasts as needed to create even thickness. Combine guajillo-tomato mixture and broth in now-empty skillet and bring to simmer over medium-high heat. Nestle chicken into sauce. Reduce heat to gentle simmer, cover, and cook until chicken registers 160 degrees, 10 to 15 minutes, flipping chicken halfway through cooking.

4. Transfer chicken to carving board, let cool slightly, then shred into bite-size pieces using 2 forks. Meanwhile, increase heat to medium and simmer sauce until thickened and measures 4 cups, about 6 minutes.

5. Stir shredded chicken into sauce and cook until heated through, about 2 minutes. Off heat, stir in tortillas, cover, and let sit until tortillas have softened slightly, 2 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle with queso fresco, avocado, radishes, remaining 1/4 cup onion, and minced cilantro. Serve immediately.