



**August 2019**

by Tim Varan

The theme for this month is something of a happy accident, due to my inability to take accurate notes and, ironically, planning features several months in advance. When I sat down in April for my annual tasting with Denise Isenhower, I was pretty sure there would be NWR features in her sample bag. This is a pretty well-worn path for us, established over several years of tasting together. She was proud to showcase the new Isenhower wines, as well as pre-bottling samples of the I Series. New in the sample bag are wines they are producing on a “negotiant” basis under the labels Cocobolo and Photobomb. These are very solid wines but, unlike the Isenhower and I Series



wines, not ones they have produced from grape to bottle. Having done an effective job of burying the lead we now have our theme, the difference between wines that are made and those that are “crafted.”

Wines like **2016 Photobomb Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20)** are a very important, but rarely discussed, component of the wine business. Virtually all of the wines that appear as our club selections are made by brick-and-mortar wineries who produce them from grapes they grow, or which are farmed to their specifications, and bottled under their own label. Less well known are labels like this where the wine was made by someone else, and bottled by a third party. For the Isenhowers they choose not to use their own brand, creating two new labels for this category. There are many wineries who simply bottle these wines under their own labels, or blend them into the flagship wine. The Isenhowers take too much pride in their primary label to use it for these wines, so they adopt the age-old practice of creating a *negotiant* label made from product purchased on the bulk market.

The term negotiant comes from France and is the name used to describe the middlemen who play(ed) an important role in bringing wines to consumers and restaurants. For more than a hundred years, small producers in both Bordeaux and Burgundy often did not have the resources to bring their wines to market. In Bordeaux, the chateaux developed a system where their wines are sold to a tier of middlemen called negotiants, who then market the wines to importers from other countries. In the years following WWII many negotiants developed another level of wines, those they bottle under their own labels, made from purchased grapes, juice and wine. They buy these components from small farms who do not have the resources to finish the winemaking process. The term for these is *bulk wine*. In Burgundy the same process developed except that most of the negotiants only bottle under their own label, using the raw materials of many different growers. Of course this system has evolved over the past fifty years but the model remains relatively the same. It is an efficient way to bring wines to market in a cost effective way to consumers.

The reason this is relevant to us is because longtime NWR members are familiar with the wine shortage that I wrote about often over the past five years. Primarily due to a prolonged drought the yields in California, Oregon and Washington harvests were increasingly smaller from 2012 through 2015. This caused a shortage in production, and as a consequence grape prices climbed from growers. (As an aside, most wineries do not own most of their vineyards, buying grapes from growers under long-term contract.) In Oregon and Washington State this was offset a little by significant increases in vineyard plantings so prices did not rise dramatically. In California, where vineyard growth is slower, this resulted in much higher prices for grapes and wine made by one party and bottled by another. Thanks to near-historically large harvests since 2016, the shortage is gone and some growers struggle to find enough buyers for their grapes. Rather than lose the harvest, they pick them and have the wine made to be sold in the bulk market at a reduced price. This is where we pick up our feature with the Photobomb Cabernet Sauvignon.

I have featured so many Isenhower wines over the years that I will truncate this story a bit for the sake of space. In 1998 Brett and Denise Isenhower, both pharmacists, moved from Colorado to Walla Walla, Washington with the dream of making wine. In 1999, they crushed their first harvest at a neighboring winery, and quickly developed a reputation for small lots of hand crafted, varietally focused wines. Because of their success, they built their own winery in 2002 and expanded their offerings, focusing on single vineyard wines highlighting the best of the Columbia Valley. They also began producing a second series of wines, under the Paintbrush label, made from grapes often produced by the same growers, but from younger vines or less interesting portions of the vineyard. When the recession struck in 2008 the Isenhowers made the bold move to shrink production and focus on their higher priced, vineyard focused wines. This was so counterintuitive that the New York Times featured them in an article of how the recession was effecting wineries. Now with three young girls at home, and looming college and wedding expenses, they need to expand beyond a couple of thousand cases a year production. Their first level of growth was to create the I Series, of which the other feature is part. These are wines they produce from grapes

purchased from longtime grower/partners. The Photobomb is a negotiant wine they purchased on the bulk market, where they crafted the finished product in their cellar.

To make the Photobomb they use the legal minimum for a varietal wine, 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, then add a little meat onto the bone with the addition of 20% Syrah and 5% Merlot. When they purchased the Cabernet Sauvignon it was not aged in oak, so they then “broke in” some of their new barrels destined for the I Series. After a few months they racked it to older barrels, along with the rest of the wine. My first taste in April I found the wood to be a bit aggressive, but it is settling down nicely after bottling. When you prepare to serve this wine, give it a splash into the decanter, and I would chill it down to cellar temperature. Once you do, this wine jumps out of the glass with notes of blackberry preserves, dried black cherries, vanilla wafers, milk chocolate and oil-cured black olives. On the palate it has a surprising texture for a wine in this price, with a sweet core of fruit framed by moderate tannins and oak. Drink over the next two to three years.

Our second selection is the **2017 Isenhower Malbec “I Series” (\$24)**. My original intention was to feature this wine with their Cabernet Franc back in April, but I crossed wires with our distributor and the wine was never ordered. Better late than never, as it works nicely to demonstrate our theme for this month.

Unlike the wine above, of which the majority was from an unnamed source, here it comes from a single block of vines within a single vineyard. This 100% Malbec is from the Olsen Vineyard, which lies at the eastern edge of the Yakima Valley. Malbec is well suited to the growing conditions in Washington State, where it is hot and dry during the growing season. These are very similar conditions to Mendoza, where 80% of all Malbec grown in the world is located. All of the grapes were hand harvested and sorted, then fermented using indigenous yeast. Once dry, the wine was racked to neutral barrels where it is aged for eleven months.

It is quite a contrast to taste this wine versus the one above, and not just because they are different varietals. Decant this one for up to an hour, again giving it a chill, then prepare for a very different experience. The nose is decidedly more red fruited, with notes of raspberry jam, fresh red cherry, candied orange peel, dried brush and wet clay. On the palate it is quite deep and concentrated, with a very nice sense of length and polish. Drink this wine from 2020 through 2028.

### **Prosciutto Wrapped Pork Tenderloin**

My kids often make fun of my enthusiasm for pork tenderloin and how often I cook them for Sunday night dinner. What is not to love? They are easy to prepare in many different ways and provide a neutral background for sauces and stuffings. This version is really about the pan sauce, with the added bonus of being wrapped in prosciutto. Do not use the good stuff for this one, the less expensive domestic Boar’s Head works fine. This dish is superb with both of the features this month.

**24 ounces pork tenderloins (2 loins, 12-ounces each), trimmed**

**6 ounces thinly sliced prosciutto**

**2 tablespoons vegetable oil**

**1 tablespoon all-purpose flour**

**2 garlic cloves, minced**

**2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme**

**1 ¼ cups low-sodium chicken broth**

**1 teaspoon chopped, fresh thyme**

**¼ cup lemon juice (2 lemons)**

**3 tablespoons minced fresh chives**

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Pat tenderloins dry with paper towels and season with pepper. Wrap each tenderloin with prosciutto.

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook pork until browned on all sides, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer meat to wire rack set in foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Bake until meat registers 145 degrees, 15 to 18 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in now-empty skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add flour, garlic, thyme and cook, stirring constantly, until

fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in broth and lemon juice and cook, scraping up any browned bits, until slightly thickened, about 3 minutes. Off the heat, add chives. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Slice pork and serve with sauce.