

Space is tight this quarter, so unfortunately I had to drop the paragraph defining the theme of these wines. I'll try and post something on the TWM blog about it, but nonetheless, you have three really kickin' bottles of wine to try.

My first selection, the **2014 Slight of Hand Cellars "The Archimage" (\$65)** admittedly did not interest me when the rep first pulled this wine from his sample bag. I am not big on 'cutesy' labels, and this one looks a little like some other wines I'm begrudgingly familiar with. Then I found out that winemaker Trey Busch is a massive Pearl Jam fan, and one of the labels bears the face of Neil Patrick Harris. Intrigued, I ran through the complete offering and found that, while these are not subtle wines, they are well crafted. The standout to me is this blend, although the other wines were also quite good.

This wine is produced from grapes grown primarily in their estate vineyards on Blue Mountain, in Walla Walla, and Red Mountain west of Yakima. It's no wonder the wine is deep purple! Both areas are known for producing powerful wines, and in this case the combination of regions and grapes produces a wine that is not only powerful, but also quite polished.

The foundation of this wine is grapes that grow in the southeast corner of Washington State, on the border of Oregon. The Walla Walla AVA offers a unique look at the soil types of eastern Washington and Oregon. Most of the lower elevations in the area are composed of gravel and sand soils, remnants of the Missoula floods of 15,000 years ago, and the shifting riverbed of the Columbia River. As you climb the slopes of the hills in the area, below 1,100 feet you find a layer of silt left over from the Missoula floods that backed up and settled in the area. These soils are very dense and rich in nutrients and minerals. Above 1,100 feet you find deep silts, called loess. These soils are often found in dry climates, created by millions of years of dust blowing across a flat landscape. In some areas, these soils can be eight to 11 feet thick. This soil has great water retention properties, which is important in the arid Walla Walla AVA.

Grapes from Red Mountain, which is roughly two hours northwest of Walla Walla, grow in very different soil conditions. On the western side of Red Mountain, where the vineyards are located, this area was less impacted by the Missoula floods. Here, the soil is more the result of weathered basalt, which is the remnant of the ancient lava beds from the volcanoes that covered the northwest US in the earliest days of the North American continent. For hundreds of millions of years, this deep crust of volcanic material has been weathered and broken, creating a mineral-rich but nutrient-poor soil. Starting in the early 1970s, farmers began planting grapes here at the urging of Dr. Walter Clore, the father of the Washington State wine industry. Not only was he impressed with the soils of Red Mountain, but also the gentle slope. Wines from this area tend to be more structured than those from farther south and east, giving this wine great balance.

To make this wine, Trey uses a combination of 53% Cabernet Franc and 47% Merlot, from fruit split between seven different vineyard sites. The wine is then aged in 33% new French oak barrels for 20 months. You will want to decant this wine for at least an hour before serving, as it is young and quite powerful. As soon as you pour the first glass, this wine explodes with notes of baked cherries, black plums, milk chocolate, tangerine peel, cedar, black tea leaves and dark roasted coffee beans. On the palate, it is firm to start, with a deep core of fruit framed by polished tannins and relatively low acidity. Drink this wine between 2020 and 2028. As this wine shows a lot of baby fat, try with leaner cuts of meat such as file mignon, smoked pork loin or a New York strip.

In contrast to the wine above, the **2013 Volker-Eisele Cabernet Sauvignon (\$59)** shows more restraint and aging potential. When I tasted this wine a few weeks ago, it was the day after I tasted the Slight of Hand, and I thought they offer a good contrast in styles. Curiously, the wine above is considerably bigger in weight, even though it is a blend of the "lighter" varieties blended with Cabernet Sauvignon. It is a good example of how you cannot assume a wine will be a certain weight just because it is not a variety that traditionally makes big wines. The contrast here is a Cabernet Sauvignon, almost pure, that is lighter and more elegant than the wine above. The site where the grapes grow plays a big role, as does the intention of the winemaker to produce a very balanced, finished wine.

To make a wine like this, it starts with the right vineyard location, and the Volker-Eisele estate is situated high in the Vaca mountains, in a sub-appellation of Napa called Chiles Valley. This is one of the coldest parts of

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Napa Valley because the vines are planted between 600 and 1200 feet above sea level. Due to the elevation, Chiles Valley is also often blanketed by fog for a couple of hours longer than the valley floor. This cuts down on the sunlight each day, causing a very slow growing season, and grapes that retain much higher acidity than is common in the rest of Napa and especially Washington State. As a result, the Cabs from Chiles Valley have a reputation for being very long lived. In this case, the family holds the wine back quite a while in order to release the wine closer to its drinking window.

When the Eisele family purchased this estate in 1974, it was a vineyard in need of repair. They carefully planned the 60 acres of vines, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot for red wines and Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon for white. The majority of the plantings are Cabernet Sauvignon, 72%, and to build diversity they use six different clones. The vineyard has always been farmed using organic practices and the family even implemented set backs and improvements to the natural waterways on the property to encourage more native growth. All of this builds up to a Cabernet that is quite expressive of the place where it is grown.

For the 2013 vintage, they use a blend of 94% Cabernet Sauvignon and 6% Merlot. To ensure ripeness, they made five passes through the Cabernet blocks, all in the middle of October. Nevertheless, this wine has a pH of 3.57, which is pretty low for Napa Cab, and weighs in at only 14% alcohol. The wine was aged in 50% new French oak barrels for 22 months and has been held back an additional three years in bottle.

When you open this wine, decant it for up to an hour before serving. This wine immediately delivers a very savory sense on the nose, with a combination of dried red plums, cherries, red currants, dark chocolate, cedar and clove. On the palate it delivers a good sense of power, with firm and restrained tannins encapsulating the fruit, with good acidity providing lift. This wine is nice now, but will improve for up to 15 years, between 2025 and 2035. Because of the structure of this wine, serve with fattier cuts of meat, such as lamb chops or ribeye.

My final selection for this quarter is a new wine for me, **2015 Keplinger Vermillion (\$39)**. This wine comes from one of the up-and-coming “it” winemakers of Napa, Helen Keplinger. Helen’s love for wine began at her father’s side, watching him make wine in Ohio. This led her to UC Davis, where she ended up working with David Abreu and Heidi Peterson Barrett, two of the biggest names in California winemaking. After a stint in Spain, working in Priorat, she came back to the US and landed as the winemaker at Kenzo and Bryant Family. Today she is the winemaker for Carte Blanche and Liparita as well. She also produces several wines of her own, earning big scores for her work using primarily Rhone varieties.

With the price that Cabernet Sauvignon commands in the North Coast, Keplinger turned her attention to finding the grapes she prefers in the Sierra Nevada foothills of eastern California. This area, originally famous for the gold rush of the 1850s, is today home to pockets of some very interesting varieties. Although not as well known, this region has a history for wine grape production that reaches all the way back to the time of the gold rush. Many prospectors who found some success in gold returned home for their loved ones, but also carried vine cuttings with them. Vineyards started appearing in the area as early as the mid-1850s.

The Sierra Nevada foothills are considerably drier than Napa and Sonoma, so over time the Rhone varieties have been found to thrive here, along with other late ripening varieties such as Petite Sirah and Zinfandel. This area is also thought to be quite a bit hotter, but most of the vineyards in the foothills experience a wide diurnal temperature swing. While days can often reach 100 degrees, nights are often in the mid-50s. Grapes ripen very slowly in these conditions and retain great natural acidity, which also gives them surprising freshness along with relatively high alcohol. Helen uses grapes from this area, as well as sites in Napa and Sonoma, to make this wine from sites she feels contribute something interesting to the final blend. For the 2015, she used a combination of 62% Grenache, 21% Mourvedre, 10% Syrah, 6% Petite Sirah, and 1% Cunoise. Technically this wine is a “second label” made in conjunction with her husband, DJ Warner. I found it gives a great demonstration of her style, pure fruit and well integrated structure, without dropping \$70 for her primary wines.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for at least half an hour, as I find it a bit tanky when you first pull the cork. The color is a beautiful shade of ruby, or should I say, Vermillion? With the first swirl of the glass, this wine blows up an aroma of raspberry jam, fresh black raspberries, jasmine, caramel, dried blueberry and sage. On the palate it is incredibly dense and concentrated, with muscular, firm tannins, slightly low acidity and good length. Drink this wine from 2019 to 2023 with slow braised pork ribs or smoked brisket.

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