



Tim's Wine Market

July 2021

By Tim Varan

The wine business is not immune to the shipping issues that are creating havoc with the supply chain, and the features this month are a good example. I had these wines scheduled for later into the fall, not July. However, the importer had to decide which wines to ship now and which would leave France later. For reasons not disclosed to me, these selections were moved to the front of the line, so here we are. I promise, no more Bordeaux after this until early 2022.

I selected the features this month to focus on what makes a great vintage, specifically the combination of weather and, perhaps even more important in the age of technology, the corresponding human intervention to repair what nature takes away. This is pretty abstract stuff for the casual consumer, but the topic was frequently discussed between myself and my two travel companions in Bordeaux; the late Craig Baker and Jason Main, a retailer from St. Louis.

To give you context for this discussion, in 2018 and 2019 I visited Bordeaux to participate in the Union des Grands Cru tasting, which is when the chateaus reveal the wines from the most recent harvest. In 2018 we tasted the 2017 wines, and frankly the wines were underwhelming from a mediocre vintage. However, there was a lot of excitement about the 2018 wines were arrived to taste in March, 2019. Each morning we would visit a negotiant, the Bordeaux equivalent of a middle man, who presented a collection of petite chateau wines they were hoping to sell us, as well as another 20 retailers from around the US. After that appointment we would then spend the next ten hours visiting the classified growths of Bordeaux, tasting the new wines they are hoping to sell as futures. Despite the hype on the 2018 vintage, Craig, Jason and I often left these prestigious addresses with the unanimous belief that the wines were almost too concentrated, lacking vitality and freshness. Was it possible that the wines displayed too much of a good thing? By contrast, each morning we were almost giddy at the high quality of the less expensive wines we were tasting at the negotiants. These less expensive wines, similar to the ones featured this month, offered higher-than-usual concentration *and* freshness, something many of the marquee wines lacked. We kept coming back to the same debate: could the the big name chateaus of Bordeaux be trying to hard to craft great wines instead of letting nature do the work? Time will tell for the classified wines from 2018 which will begin to arrive in the late summer, but for now you can see two great, inexpensive examples from exceptional vintages. And heck, you can buy two or three *cases* of these wines for what a bottle of Chateau Mouton-Rothschild cost in 2018.

2019 Chateau des Judes Bordeaux - \$16

We featured this wine as a weekly feature, and it was met with such enthusiasm that I was delighted to have made a bigger commitment for this selection. This property is owned by the Lavaud family, who farm several chateaus in the Entre-deux-Mers and right bank regions of Bordeaux. Their mini empire was established by George Lavaud in 1960, when he purchased the Chateau du Gravillon in St Emilion. Georges was an agricultural consultant who dreamed of making wine, and the tiny Chateau du Gravillon, which was only 12 acres, was the perfect experiment. Since then, the family has acquired several properties across St. Emilion and the satellite appellations, as well as this relatively large, 230-acre property in the Entre-deux-Mers region.

To make this wine, they use a blend of 70% Merlot, 25% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc. The wine is fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks, letting the pure expression of the site shine through. Give this wine a splash in the decanter and it will quickly reveal a bouquet of fresh blueberries, blackberries, dried black plum, graphite and wood ash. On the palate it is plump, with a soft fruit core of fruit framed by the thinnest veil of tannins. Drink from 2021 to 2025 with everything from smothered pork chops to roast chicken.

2016 Tertre de Vrai Canon Bouché Fronsac - \$24

This wine has a bit more pedigree than the des Judes, this being a second label of the prestigious Chateau Vrai de Canon Bouché. The property sits in the Canon-Fronsac region of Bordeaux, on the border of the very

famous Pomerol region. Fronsac is an area known for a high clay content in the soil, which gives the chateau here quite an advantage in hot, dry years.

For many years, the estate was considered an underachiever in the region. Then, recognizing the potential Philip Haseth Moller purchased it in 2005. Moller's first move was to hire the renowned oenologist Stephane Derenoncourt, who was famous for his work at many top-tier chateaus as well as Rubicon in Napa Valley. It was Derenoncourt who created this second label and implemented many changes to emphasize the quality of the fruit at this estate. Since 2008, the chateau has been known for delivering exceptional value, even though their total production is only 2,500 cases. Our club purchase for this wine was a big chunk of what was shipped to the US.

Under Derenoncourt's direction, all of the grapes are hand-harvested, which is rare in Bordeaux at this price, and fermentation is done in concrete using indigenous yeast. After fermentation is complete, a selection is made for the top wine and everything is racked to barrel. One of Stephane's techniques is to leave the wines on the lees for six months in barrel to help build extra richness. While common in other parts of the world, it is unusual in Bordeaux. For Terte de Vrai, roughly 10% of the barrels are new, and the wine ages for 12 months. The blend for the wine is roughly 60% Merlot and 40% Cabernet Franc.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant it for half an hour, or even more, before serving. Immediately this wine lets you know it is something special, as the rich notes of cooked blackberries, black cherries, dark chocolate, soy sauce and orange marmalade waft from the glass. On the palate, the oak is evident almost immediately, but there is ample fruit to compensate as this wine stretches out into a surprisingly long finish. Drink from 2021 to 2028 and serve with richer cuts of beef, like standing rib roast or ribeye, or slow-roasted rack of lamb.

Smothered Pork Chops

Who says that you can only drink Bordeaux with fancy dishes? This take on an old southern staple works great with both of the features this month. My only advice for this recipe is to make sure the chops are not thicker than 1/2 inch or they will be tough when fully cooked.

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Combine onion powder, paprika, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/2 teaspoon pepper and cayenne in small bowl. Pat chops dry with paper towels and rub with spice mixture.

Heat oil in large skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Brown chops, 3 to 4 minutes per side, and transfer to plate. Melt butter in now-empty skillet over medium heat. Cook onions until browned, 8 to 10 minutes. Add garlic and thyme and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in 3/4 cup broth and bay leaf, scraping up any browned bits, and bring to boil. Return chops and any accumulated juices to pan, cover and transfer to oven. Cook until chops are completely tender, about 1 1/2 hours.

Transfer chops to platter and tent with foil. Discard bay leaf. Strain contents of skillet through fine mesh strainer into large liquid measuring cup; reserve onions. Let liquid settle, then skim fat. Return 1 1/2 cups defatted pan juices to now-empty skillet and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium and simmer until sauce is reduced to 1 cup, about 5 minutes.

Whisk remaining broth and cornstarch in bowl until no lumps remain. Whisk cornstarch mixture into sauce and simmer until thickened, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in reserved onions and vinegar. Season with salt and pepper. Serve.

1 teaspoon onion powder

1/2 teaspoon paprika

Salt and pepper

1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

4 bone-in blade-cut pork chops, about 1/2 inch thick

1 1/2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

2 onions, halved and sliced 1/4 inch thick

2 garlic cloves, minced

1/4 teaspoon dried thyme

3/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon beef broth

1 bay leaf

1 teaspoon cornstarch

1 teaspoon cider vinegar