



Tim's Wine Market

April, 2020
By Tim Varan

You will notice a change in the write-up this quarter. Shortly after releasing the January Reserve offering, we made a layout change to all of the club narratives, making them more uniform and slightly less text-heavy. I hope you like the new version, as the response from other club members has been overwhelmingly positive. As always, I appreciate any feedback.

2017 Avid Cabernet Sauvignon Spring Mountain - \$55

Although they are a relatively new label, the team at Avid reads like something of a classic rock supergroup. Principal Hossein Namdar began his career at Chandon in the 1980s, and by 1986 partnered with their CEO, John Wright, to purchase a 214-acre parcel in what is today the Petaluma Gap AVA. Principal and winemaker Bob Goyette initially launched a little winery called La Crema in 1979 before selling out to another upstart, Jess Jackson, in 1993. Bob then went on to develop the Imagery series for Benziger and also assisted at Chalk Hill. Finally, moving the wine out of the warehouse is Alberto Lataliste, whom I have known for years. Alberto most recently ran the South American portfolio for Alejandro Bulgheroni as well as their marketing in the southeast US. Together, these men bring almost 100 years of wine experience to this new and exciting project.

If you spend any time looking up Avid online, most of the information relates to the Pinot Noir, produced from Namdar's holdings in the Petaluma Gap. Less well known is the Cabernet Sauvignon they produce from three vineyards in the Spring Mountain AVA of Napa Valley. Although the winery focuses on their Pinot, Namdar and Goyette have known the growers for this wine for decades. They feel that the high elevation, nearly 2,100 feet above sea level, and cooler climate produce a Cabernet Sauvignon that bears a kinship with their Pinot Noir. Sadly, after the 2019 vintage, the future of this wine is in doubt. All three sites lie on the eastern slopes of the mountain, where the soils are extremely poor, rain is very infrequent and the vines struggle to produce paltry, but intensely flavored grapes. The area where the vineyards grow is so arid that in 2020 two of the three sources for this wine burned down. As of this writing, they are waiting to see if the vines can be salvaged or will need to be completely replanted. This is a shame because the vines were very old, predating the phylloxera outbreak of the early 1990s.

I have known of Bob Goyette for many years, and throughout his career, his wines have consistently shown a clarity of variety and sense of place that is often lost in the ever-shifting pendulum of California winemaking. To make this wine, the grapes were hand-harvested, destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks. Once dry, the wine was moved to a combination of 70% French and 30% American oak barrels, with 30% of the French being new. The wine was only aged in oak for nine months in an attempt to keep the imprint from being too strong. They then age the wine for a year in bottle before release.

When you pull the cork on this wine, I strongly recommend decanting it for at least an hour before serving. Again, Goyette is not trying to make a gushy, steak house Cab; this one is built for the cellar. What struck me immediately about this wine is its freshness. There are notes of just picked blackberries, Morello cherries, dried brown figs, espresso roast coffee beans and then a veil of cedar. On the palate this is typical, old school Napa mountain Cabernet Sauvignon, with moderate weight and tannins that rise quickly in the middle, then frame the fruit into the finish. Although drinkable now, this wine will be best between 2024 and 2034.

2017 L'Ecole 41 Cabernet Sauvignon Walla Walla - \$55

I have to admit that I was not looking for a Washington State Cab for the second selection. My intention was to present a Napa or Sonoma Zinfandel for something different. With one of my distributors, I lined up and tasted several options but was ultimately disappointed. Exasperated, he pulled a bottle of this wine off our shelf and opened it. It is head-and-shoulders better than any of the Zins I tried, and here we are. We did feature a L'Ecole Apogee in this club back in 2009, so it is nice to see them back.

L'Ecole 41 takes its name from the original school house in the Walla Walla area, which is today home to the winery. The French name relates to the early settlers of the area, French-Canadian fur traders. It was purchased in 1983 by Jean and Baker Ferguson, who pursued their lifelong dream and established the third bonded winery in Walla Walla. For several years they ran the winery, focusing on Merlot and Semillon. In 1989, Marty Clubb and his wife Jean, the daughter of the Fergusons, moved to Walla Walla and began taking over the operation. Although they had no experience in running a winery or making wine, they managed to launch L'Ecole 41 into the top-tier of Washington producers in only a few years.

In the winemaking world, the Walla Walla AVA is a very special place. The total size of the AVA is almost the same as Napa, but currently there are only 3,000 acres of vines planted (there are more than 18,000 acres in Napa). The climate of Walla Walla is very warm and dry, but thanks to the Blue Mountains to their east, the temperatures plunge at night. Consequently, the grapes achieve high levels of ripeness but retain higher than normal levels of acidity. Thanks to the Missoula floods, the movement of glaciers during the Ice Age and prevailing easterly winds, the region has a diverse collection of soils as well. Despite significant vineyard holdings in Walla Walla, Marty chooses to purchase half the grapes for this wine from vineyards with soils different than those L'Ecole owns. He feels that to properly show the terroir of the AVA, all four major soil types must be present in what is a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon bottling. It is hard to argue when you taste the results: a wine of power, elegance, aromatics and potential to age.

When you pull the cork on this wine, allow it to breathe for up to one hour before serving. The nose then oozes from the glass with rich notes of cherry jam, creme de Mûre, hickory smoke, cola syrup, dried Montmorency cherry and vanilla bean. On the palate it is quite dense and full, with smooth, well integrated tannins and a moderate finish for a young wine. Drink 2022-2032.

2016 Catena Alta Malbec - \$55

You have probably been reading about the challenges to logistics and the movement of goods across all industries as a result of COVID. The wine business is far from isolated, and my initial wild card selection for this quarter is a victim, so you will see that wine in July instead. Pinch hitting is a wine I have put on the short list several times over the years, only to bump it for one reason or another. I have to admit that I have a prejudice against expensive Malbec, as I feel the variety delivers diminishing returns as the price grows up. However there are exceptions, and near the top of the list Laura Catena consistently finds an extra gear in this variety, such as with this magnificent example.

The Catena family began farming in Mendoza in 1902, the winery established by Nicola Catena. Seven decades later, his grandson, Nicolás Catena launched a quality revolution in Argentina, following the model of his friend and mentor, Robert Mondavi. Nicolás challenged the conventional wisdom of planting pergola-trained vineyards in the rich, alluvial soils near the city of Mendoza. Instead he moved south, almost 250 miles, into the Valle de Uco, where the elevations exceed 4,000 feet above sea level, and the soils are a nutrient poor mix of sand and rock.

Nicolás was the first winery in Argentina to hire and follow the advice of both European (Michel Rolland) and American (Paul Hobbs) viticulturists. Rather than plant using the traditional pergolas, with wide vine spacing and extensive canopy growth, Catena started farming using the now standard VSP trellising system. This requires more costly hand work in the vineyards but separates the grapes from the canopy, allowing for a more efficient ripening process. He also densely plants the vines to encourage root competition, further lowering yields in a natural process.

Today the estate is run by Nicolás daughter, Laura, who continues her father's vision of uncompromising quality, always pushing the boundaries of the status quo. For the Alta range, all of the grapes come from their Zapata vineyards, ranging in elevation from 3,000 to 4,500 feet above sea level. The wine is 100% Malbec but is sourced from five different blocks that consistently deliver outstanding quality grapes. Each lot is harvested separately by hand, then destemmed and fermented using wild yeast in small fermentors and 225 - 500 liter barriques. The wine spends between 28-30 days on the skins and then is drained and racked to 225 liter French oak barrels, all new, for 18 months. At that point, the wine is assembled and bottled without filtration or fining.

When you open this wine you will also want to let it breathe in a decanter for up to one hour. When you pour a glass, the aromas that push forward are cooked blueberries, black pepper, new ball mitt leather, dark chocolate and violets. On the palate this wine walks an interesting line, with moderate acidity and moderate plus tannins. I found it pushes fruit forward while simultaneously encapsulating near the finish. Like the other two selections this quarter, this wine can benefit from another year or two in bottle if you can wait. Drink 2023-2033.