



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

2018 Von Strasser Cabernet Sauvignon Diamond Mountain - \$59

My first exposure to the wines of Rudy Von Strasser happened in the early 1990s, when I was still working for Dexter Richardson, running the wine store that used to be part of the Winter Park restaurant. Dexter would often visit California and relied on a couple of local wine merchants in the area to direct him to up-and-coming wineries. He would always buy a couple of cases of wines to ship back, then we would taste through them and contact those who we felt offered something special. During one of those tastings, the standout was a small producer from Diamond Mountain named Rudy Von Strasser. The wines showed fantastic finesse, along with a frame of strong tannin and great capacity to age. I can make this statement because a few years ago we just drank my last bottle of his 1994 on my son's 21st birthday. It is amazing that a subsequent vintage has never been a club selection except for a few cases used a few years ago when the distributor ran out of one of our selections.

Diamond Mountain is the northern-most AVA on the Mayacamus Mountain range that creates the western border to Sonoma County. Although the boundary ends at the county line, most of the actual mountain, along with the peak, lie on the Sonoma side. The soils of this appellation are volcanic with reflective flecks of volcanic glass, which is where the name Diamond Mountain is derived. The appellation is higher elevation than most of Napa, and the farthest AVA from the fog that rolls in from San Pablo Bay to the south. As a result, the area receives more sunlight hours than other areas of Napa, but is not as warm as nearby Calistoga or Spring Mountain. For this reason, most of the 500 acres of vineyards are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and other late-ripening varieties.

When I first spoke with Rudy in the early 1990s, he and his wife, Rita, had purchased the the old Roddis Estate, which is one of the older wineries on Diamond Mountain. For almost 35 years, they have developed the property, which is now 35 acres of planted vineyards, and they contract with five other sites to buy grapes. In 2015, they sold the property but retained the label and inventory, and they now make a few other wines under the Rudy label.

One of the reasons I have always enjoyed the wines from Von Strasser is the way Rudy manages to create structured wines that retain great elegance. Although they show fine when released, my extensive experience with his Cabs is that they age beautifully and show best seven to 10 years after release. In great years, like the aforementioned 1994, they can easily go two decades. The 2012 bottling is a blend 87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Malbec, 6% Petit Verdot and a half percent each of Merlot and Cabernet Franc. The wine was aged in French oak, with 30% of the barrels being new. There were 2,492 cases of this wine produced.

When you open this wine, allow it to develop for about two hours in a decanter. The first glass is very subtle, with notes of fresh blueberry and blackberry, highlighted with notes of fresh ground coffee, milk chocolate, new ball mitt leather and black licorice. In the mouth, this wine is understated, with the fruit hidden behind a thin veil of tannins and Diamond Mountain minerality. Drink this wine between 2025 and 2035.

2016 Terraces Zinfandel - \$49

Some of you may remember I selected the 2007 vintage of this wine back in 2010, and comments then were very favorable, especially since Zinfandel is pretty unfashionable. A few weeks ago, owner and winemaker Timm Crull was in the market and we tasted through his current lineup; true to form, all of the wines are top notch. Initially I thought the Petite Sirah would make a nice feature, but there was not enough stock. Rather than take the easy path and choose his fantastic Cabernet Sauvignon, I decided to place the spotlight back on their Zinfandel, which is as good as ever.

Although prominently positioned on Silverado Trail, across the street and down a bit from Quintessa, not many visitors make their way to the Terraces at Rock Quarry, the official name of the winery. They do not have a public tasting room but do see guests by appointment. The property has a long history of wine production, beginning in the 1870s. In the 1920s, the Werle family bought the estate for \$10 and produced a Zinfandel field blend for many years. They also reopened the quarry and sold the stone used to build many of the buildings in St. Helena in the 1950s. In the 1970s, the Werle family sold 21 acres to Wayne Hogue, which he used to start Terraces Vineyards. Wayne also worked with the Wagner family and provided them with Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel for Caymus. In 1993, Timm and Sharon Crull bought the Werle property and started to replant with the assistance of Beringer. In 2001, the Crulls purchased the Hogue property, reuniting the estate and acquiring the winery built by Wayne Hogue.

If you ever visit the property, it won't take long to figure out where the winery gets its name. After pulling through their gate and driving about 50 yards past their fruit tree orchard, you begin the quick ascent up to the winery. The road is very steep, and the terraced vineyards create the border as you start the climb. The winery is more than halfway up the hill, and the vineyard continues to climb for several hundred more feet. Most of the vines around the winery are Zinfandel, from a particular clone dubbed the Werle clone.

For this wine, the Crulls harvest a vineyard planted in 1981 that is entirely Werle clone Zinfandel on St. George rootstock. What makes the Werle clone unique is that it is a small cluster, and the grapes are loose on the bunch. Many clones of Zinfandel produce large, tightly packed clusters of grapes that ripen unevenly and are prone to rot in wet weather. The Werle clone has neither problem, as the cluster is small and allows plenty of airflow around the grapes. The combination of the low yielding clone with low vigor St. George rootstock and the poor, stoney soils of the terraced vineyards mean that yields are naturally very low— less than two tons of fruit per acre.

The vineyard was divided into six blocks, and they were harvested individually between September and October. After hand sorting, the fruit was placed into open top fermenters and cold soaked for four days. At that point, the fermenters are allowed to warm up and they were inoculated with yeast. Timm punched down the fermenters during alcoholic fermentation until dryness and then inoculated for malolactic fermentation in tank. Once complete, the wine was racked to barrel. For the 2018, Timm used neutral French oak to age the wine for six months before bottling. The final blend for this wine is 88% Zinfandel and 12% Petite Sirah. They produced 806 cases of this wine.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for up to an hour before serving. Once you pour a glass, it delivers a rich combination of clove, allspice, cigar wrapper, fresh black raspberry, black licorice and milk chocolate. On the palate, this wine delivers a very Cab-like sense of structure, with dry, moderate tannins framing the fruit into the finish. This is drier than many Zins on the market and will be best consumed from 2025 to 2030.

Vasse Felix Cabernet Sauvignon Premier - \$49

This estate is not well known in America, but around the world they are seen as one of the top addresses outside of “traditional” wine regions for both Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. The reason they are not well known here is the winery is located in the Margaret River region of Australia, which is just about as far from the eastern coast of the US as any wine region in the world. Coincidentally, the region exists thanks to the wisdom of two Americans and a handful of scrappy Aussies.

The Margaret River region of Western Australia is located three hours south of the city of Perth, just below Geopraphe Bay, on an outcropping of land that gives the continent of Australia a small horn on the southwest side. Until the 1950s, the isolated area was primarily devoted to cattle farms and intrepid surfers chasing some of the largest waves in the world. Then the legendary UC Davis professor Harold Olmo spent eight months in the region conducting a feasibility study to determine if the area would be right for wine production. Thanks to his efforts, several families began planting vines in the area in the early 1970s. These include such noteworthy estates as Leeuwin Estate, Cullen and Vasse Felix. It was during this time that Robert Mondavi, acting on the advice of Olmo, visited the region looking for a new property to expand his empire. Even though Mondavi would later say that it is one of the most perfect grape vine growing climates in the world, it was far too isolated for him to consider the investment.

What makes this area so special is the proximity to the ocean and the timing of its rains. The Margaret River receives more than 40 inches of rain per year, but virtually all of it occurs during the winter when vines are dormant. The rains saturate the ground and provides ample water for the vines during the dry summer. In addition, the weather in this part of Australia is dominated by the cool Indian Ocean, as well as winds originating in Antarctica. The days during the summer are quite warm, but by evening the cold winds off the ocean dominate the weather, rapidly chilling the grapes. This provides for a perfect balance of ripeness and natural acidity. More than a couple expert tasters have told me the wines of this region remind them of St. Julien in Bordeaux, where the wines are known for richness, ripeness and texture.

The grapes for this wine come from a tiny sub-zone of Margaret River called Wilyabrup. It is mid-way up the Margaret River where the vines are planted in old, gravelly river bottom. The mix of gravel and clay gives the wines firm structure and lots of power. To temper their firm tannins, a portion of this wine was fermented as whole berries, with a tiny portion undergoing carbonic maceration to provide more softness. The blend for the 2017 is 93% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3.5% Malbec and 3.5% Petit Verdot, and the wine was aged in 49% new French oak barrels for 18 months.

Decant this wine for an hour before serving, and it offers you a very savory combination of soy sauce, Kenya AA coffee beans, Maduro cigar wrapper, cooked cherries, dried red plums and dried parsley. On the palate, it is relatively firm with obvious tannins and lively acidity. There is also a nice undertone of minerality that provides extra frame into the moderate finish. Drink from 2023 to 2030.