



Tim's Wine Market

September 2021

By Tim Varan

It was Shakespeare who wrote, *"That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet,"* in the famous second act of Romeo and Juliet. This month, we will examine two wines that are made with grapes better known by other names, in more famous wine-producing regions. What is even more fascinating is how the vines have adapted to these extreme growing conditions and now are used to produce uniquely interesting wines.

2019 Argiolas Cannonau Costera - \$18

To examine the history of Sardinia is really to distill the very origins of Europe, despite the fact that this island lays 190 miles off the western coast of Italy. Today, you can visit Sardinia and see *nuraghe*, which are stone structures that were built during the bronze age. The people of that time gave way to the Phoenicians, then the Romans in 240 B.C. With the fall of Rome came the all the usual suspects who periodically sacked the region, like the Vandals, Goths and Byzantines. Then, in 1323, an army from Aragon (present day Spain) attacked the island and united Sardinia with the Crown of Aragon, where it remained until the early 1700s. This is important because it creates a veil of mystery on our subject grape, Cannonau, which is better known by the Spanish name Garnacha, or the French name Grenache.

For as long as I have been selling wine, it has always been assumed that Garnacha originated in Spain and was likely carried to Sardinia during the Spanish occupation. Then, Italian researchers in 2006 challenged the assumption it was carried *from* Spain, and pointed to some evidence that it was originally from Sardinia and carried *to* Spain. While this is compelling, recent arguments again point back to Spanish origin. This is primarily due to the incredible clonal diversity of this grape in Spain, while on Sardinia the genetic stock is very homogenous. It is common with grape vines, particularly from very old varieties, to see mutation over time. In Spain, there are red-, white- and rosé-colored grapes under the Garnacha name. No such diversity exists in Sardinia. Although little evidence exists to definitively establish the origin as Spain, the circumstantial evidence is hard to refute.

Regardless of origin, the variety has done exceptionally well adapting to the extreme growing conditions of Sardinia. Roughly 30% of the vineyards of Sardinia are planted to Cannonau, with much of the remaining plantings being white varieties. Almost all of the Cannonau is planted in the middle of the island, at higher elevation, on gravel and limestone soils. It is here that the Argiolas family farm the grapes for this wine from a single vineyard site they call Costera.

The Argiolas family started growing grapes in 1938, when founder Antonio Argiolas inherited seven acres of vines from his father. When he died in 2009 at 102, his family was in control of over 600 acres, producing wine from almost every area on the island. For many years I avoided the wines of the Argiolas family, who are one of the largest producers in Sardinia, mostly due to their size. Then, I tasted an extensive selection of their products a few years ago and decided the quality was too good to continue with my bias and started regularly buying both this and their entry level Vermentino. What I learned is that in the 1980s, the family shifted their focus from quantity to quality, and now 40 years later they are not only big, but recognized as one top wineries in all of Italy.

When you are ready to drink this wine, you can expect that it offers unique attributes that are not common from the burlier examples of Garnacha/Grenache from the European mainland. Decant this wine for a half hour, and it offers you an intoxicating combination of high-toned dried tart cherry, dried red plums, fennel pollen, dried oregano and white pepper. On the palate, the wine is juicy and relatively rich to start, then a lifting sense of acidity provides some frame into the finish. Drink with grilled pork kabobs, brushed with garlic and rosemary oil, or the delicious shrimp and fregola recipe this month.

2019 Pipeta Toro - \$17

Our next "imposter" is a variety of Tempranillo, called Tinta del Toro, from the Toro region of Spain. This region is located in the Zamora province, west of Rueda DO and only 40 miles from where the Duero river crosses the Portuguese border. Most of the vineyards lie on a high plateau, between 1,800 to 2,400 feet above sea level, where the soils are primarily sand. What is unique about Toro is the climate is more continental than Mediterranean. This means they have

cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers. In fact, Toro is one of the hottest, and driest, wine-growing regions in Spain. All of these factors contribute to the unique characteristics of this version of Tempranillo.

Like Garnacha above, Tempranillo is a very old variety as well. However, where there are many genetic clones of Garnacha, there are very few of Tempranillo. While it is not understood why, the most commonly accepted theory is that the expansion of plantings of the grape happened very quickly. Most experts point to the epicenter being Rioja, shortly after the phylloxera scourge of the early 1900s. While the genetic material may be similar, that does not mean that the wines are not distinctive.

I often read comparisons of Tempranillo to Pinot Noir, and I see that if only looking at the wines of Rioja. However, examples of pure Tempranillo from Ribera del Duero show wines that are much darker and more muscular and tannic. Even further to the extreme is Tempranillo produced in Toro, which is very deeply colored, extremely tannic and often reach 15% alcohol.

This example is made by Javier Ortega, Jr., known as 'Pipa,' who is one of the leading oenologists in Toro. He produces this wine from 50-year-old vines that are planted at 10,000 vines per hectare. Such dense planting creates incredible competition between the vines for nutrients, which naturally lowers yields. To help craft a wine with balance, Pipa ferments in stainless steel, then transfers the wines to wood tanks for malolactic conversion. Once dry, the wine sits on the gross lees for two months, and then is racked to older, French barriques for six months.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant it for up to an hour. The nose is a bold combination of cherry cordial, black raspberry, red licorice, bay leaf and dried brush. On the palate, there is good concentration, with firm, moderate tannins and surprisingly fresh acidity. Drink over the next two years with roast lamb or pot roast.

Shrimp with Fregola

Fregola is a classic pasta type of Sardinia, similar to Israeli or pearl couscous, but toasted. For this recipe from Milk Street, I suggest toasting Israeli couscous in the dry pan before you start cooking the recipe. After five minutes, the flavor is very similar, however you may need to add a little more liquid.

1½ lbs extra large shrimp, peeled and deveined, shells reserved
2 - 8 oz bottles of clam juice
3 cups low sodium chicken broth
4 bay leaves
1 sprig fresh thyme
1 tbsp black peppercorns
Kosher salt and ground pepper
4 tbsp olive oil, divided
1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1 medium carrot, peeled, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced
2 medium garlic cloves, finely grated
1 cup Fregola (or Israeli Couscous)
2 tbsp lemon juice
½ cup parsley, finely chopped

In a medium microwave-safe bowl, combine the shrimp shells, clam juice, chicken broth, bay, thyme and peppercorns.

Microwave on high until the shrimp tails have turned pink and the mixture is very hot, 4 to 5 minutes. Pour through a fine mesh strainer and set over another medium bowl; discard the solids in the strainer.

Season the shrimp with salt and pepper. In a large pot over medium-high, heat 1 tablespoon of oil until barely smoking. Add half the shrimp and cook without stirring until well browned, 2 to 3 minutes.

Transfer to a large plate. Repeat with 1 tablespoon of the remaining oil and the remaining shrimp.

Return the pot to medium-high and add 1 tablespoon of the remaining oil. Add the tomatoes, onion, carrot and ½ teaspoon salt, then cook, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes are spotty brown and the onion has softened, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the garlic and fregola then cook, stirring, until the garlic is fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in 2 cups of the shrimp broth, then bring to a simmer. Reduce to medium and cook, stirring occasionally, until most of the liquid is absorbed, 8 to 10 minutes. Stir in 2 cups of the remaining broth, return to a

simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until most of the liquid is absorbed, 8 to 10 minutes.

Stir in the remaining 1 cup broth and cook, stirring constantly, until the fregola is tender and the mixture is creamy but not soupy, another 6 to 8 minutes. Off the heat, stir in the shrimp and accumulated juices, the remaining 1 tablespoon oil, the lemon juice and parsley. Cover and let stand until the shrimp are opaque throughout, 5 to 7 minutes. Taste and season with salt and pepper.