



Tim's Wine Market

October 2021

By Tim Varan

This month, the selections are both from our friends at Basel Cellars, which is now called Yellowhawk Resort and Sparkling House. I have featured this winery several times over the years because I find that their wines are really popular with club members. I am also friends with their national sales manager, Leo Kirk, who gives us generous pricing to help move out some of their harder-to-sell wines. It is a win-win for everyone, as you get great wines at bargain prices, and they quietly move a few hundred cases of wine each year.

To bring you up to speed on Basel Cellars, the winery has had a few ownership changes over the years, mostly as founders gave way to investors, who then brought in new capital as well. Then, late last year it was announced that the current ownership sold to a hospitality group who operate several restaurants across the state. They are now in the process of converting the massive underground winery into an event space and building rental cabins on the property. To me this is brilliant, as Walla Walla is becoming a popular destination of wine tourists for which there is a dearth of accommodations. Not sure how the "Sparkling House" fits in, as they do not currently make bubbles, but I am sure they know what they are doing.

As is his way, a few weeks ago Leo sent me a case of samples with the usual direction of "make me an offer on any hits." While this sounds like fun, let me tell you that this has not always been easy. Long-time members may remember some of the selections from Basel I selected in 2018, made by then winemaker Trey Busch. Trey is now the genius behind Sleight of Hand Cellars of which I selected one of his wines as a Reserve Club selection. However, his style is more oak-driven, and I did not find it worked as well with the grape sources at Basel Cellars. When Trey left to focus full time on Sleight of Hand, he was replaced by South African Dirk Brink, and I remember Leo telling me that the releases were a bit less oaky. That is true, and over the past few years I have selected a dozen different Basel wines as club and weekly newsletter features.

When I tasted through the most recent selections, I found many wines that could be potential features. Additionally, they have good inventory of back vintages, and those were also put on the block. So this month, my selections focus on non-Cabernet Sauvignon wines and the different styles they produce in Washington State. In a couple of months, we will examine their Cabernet Sauvignon and one of the older blends to show how the wines age.

2017 Basel Cellars Malbec - \$25

I have written often that the climate in most wine regions is changing, and again, we can debate the cause but not the effect; some varieties may become too difficult to grow. There is already one winemaker in Napa who feels the climate is too hot to grow world-class Cabernet Sauvignon, and in Washington State the growing season is even warmer and sunnier. Most of the producers I know in Washington State are starting to increase their plantings of heat- and sun-loving varieties, particularly Grenache, Tempranillo and Malbec. Right now, you mostly see the wines from these grapes as part of a blend, but lucky for us Basel bottled a couple hundred cases to use in their wine club and we are cleaning up the balance, at a substantial discount (winery price is \$39).

Malbec has certainly become one of the phenomenal success stories of the 21st century, but most consumers are only familiar with examples from Argentina and occasionally France. It is a very old variety, with the earliest mention of use in the 17th century, a reference from the region around Cahors in the southwest region of France. Prior to the middle 20th century, almost all examples were from France, where the grape is better known as Cot. It was carried to Argentina in the 1840s and now is the most significant commercial variety grown. It is gaining popularity around the world due to the vine's tolerance of high temperatures, particularly in Washington State, southern Oregon and several Australian regions.

It is not hard to see why this variety is gaining popularity. In warm climates, the grape can produce large framed wines, similar to Cabernet Sauvignon, but it harvests a couple of weeks earlier. This is important, because one of the challenges of growing Cabernet in really warm places is the vines shut down before the grapes are fully ripe. The result is high-alcohol wines with unpleasant herbal/green notes. Growers also like Malbec because it sets a large crop that ripens easily, so the return on investment is similar to Cabernet Sauvignon. Finally, the other contenders for Cabernet replacement, Grenache and Tempranillo, lack the consumer appeal as Malbec is already seen as a New World darling.

The example from Basel is really showing nicely after a couple of years in bottle. Augmented by 22% Syrah to bolster the middle palate, this wine displays rich notes of fresh black raspberries and fresh blueberries, toasted marshmallows, dried chili peppers and cigar box. On the palate, it shows the plump nature of Malbec, with a dark fruit core that is framed by smooth, oak tannins. Drink 2021-2026 with anything off the grill or sesame-crusted tuna steaks.

2016 Basel Cellars Cabernet Franc “Walla Walla” - \$25

Like the Malbec, this wine was produced for the Basel direct-to-consumer club, but we were able to buy some of the extra wine at a big discount (winery price is \$49). The grapes for this wine came from their estate vineyards that surround the winery in the Walla Walla appellation. For those unfamiliar, this is the elite sub-region of the Columbia River AVA.

In 1984, the Walla Walla American Viticultural Area was established, which straddles the Washington/Oregon state borders. In fact, there are almost 3,000 acres of vines planted in this diamond-shaped region, with 57% in Washington State and 43% in Oregon. The town of Walla Walla lies in the southeast corner of Washington State, in the rain shadow of the Cascade Mountains, so rainfall is rare during the growing season. Soils in the AVA are similar to many regions of the Columbia Valley, but thanks to less impact from the Missoula floods, are deeper in pockets. This is important because frost is a major problem for vineyards in this area. To combat this, most growers plant self-rooted vines, which grow deeper than those planted on phylloxera resistant rootstock. Roughly one year in six, the region has a devastating frost that kills significant portions of some vineyards. However, the fruit that is produced each year displays great richness and a fantastic minerality from the deep, volcanic soils of the area.

Last month we shined the spotlight on one attribute of Cabernet Franc, the spicy/peppery nature this grape can display in their aroma and flavor. However, those very characteristics, the result of the presence of pyrazine compounds, can be ripened out of the wine, particularly in Washington State. It turns out that pyrazine compounds degrade in the presence of UV light. In Washington they receive 2 hours more sunlight per day than lower latitude Napa Valley, which allows the growers a longer window to achieve this effect. Also, the diurnal temperature change in Washington State is greater, so the grapes retain greater natural acidity. The result is Cabernet Franc that is riper than our example from last month, and still relatively balanced.

When you open this wine, make sure to decant for half an hour before serving. When you are ready, give this one a swirl in the glass and take in the rich nose of baked cherries, sweet paprika, hickory smoke, vanilla wafers and sorgum molasses. On the palate, this wine is incredibly smooth and rich, with fantastic concentration and the hallmark of Cabernet Franc, long, sinewy tannins. Drink 2021-2026 with and herb-crusted standing rib roast or smoked ribeye.

Sesame Crusted Tuna Steaks

While one tuna company used to call their canned example the “chicken of the sea,” when it comes to good-quality steaks, they are closer to a New York strip. I find that tuna fills in nicely for those of us seeking less red meat in our diet, while still craving a hearty animal protein for big red wines. This is an easy recipe that really focuses more on technique than ingredients. Buy the best tuna you can find, and then cook to the internal temperature you prefer. Serve over a bed of greens or with rice. The only thing I recommend is to avoid dressings or any type of sauce that is too sweet, as that will make the wines taste lean.

3/4 cup sesame seeds

4 tuna steaks, 8 ounces each and about 1 inch thick

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

Salt and ground black pepper

Spread sesame seeds in shallow baking dish or pie plate. Pat tuna steaks dry with paper towel; use 1 tablespoon oil to rub both sides of steaks, then sprinkle with salt and pepper. Press both sides of each steak in sesame seeds to coat.

Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat until just beginning to smoke; swirl to coat pan.

Add tuna steaks and cook 30 seconds without moving steaks. Reduce heat to medium-high; continue to cook until seeds are golden brown, about 1 1/2 minutes. Using tongs, carefully flip tuna steaks; cook, without moving steaks, until golden brown on second side, about 1 1/2 minutes for rare (opaque at perimeters and translucent red and cool at center when checked with tip of paring knife) or 3 minutes for medium-rare (opaque at perimeters and reddish pink at center). To serve, cut into 1/4-inch-thick slices.