



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

It is no surprise that the wine business is not been immune to the logistical challenges affecting, well, everything. In mid-September I left for an eight day trip with my wife to visit several of our favorite towns in the south; Birmingham, Chattanooga, Asheville and then finally Athens, GA. It was my intention to write this during that trip, however, tying up loose ends regarding the wines arriving delayed my start until well after my return. In a peek behind the curtain I do not mind telling you that I am starting two days before release! Regardless of the timing, I am delighted to say this quarter came together well and I have no doubt you will enjoy the selections.

Imperium Premia Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 - \$79

I will admit that this wine is the last minute substitution for a selection I made in July, that for some reason is still sitting in a warehouse in New Jersey. However, this wine has been on my short list for two previous quarters so I am glad that the stars aligned for a spotlight now. The only reason I kept bumping it was because this is a virtual winery with little information available, which normally does not give me much to write about. Thanks to the efforts of my sales rep, and a little time perusing the second page of a Google search, I was able to piece together enough information to make a good write up.

As I mentioned before, Imperium is a virtual winery, meaning they do not have a brick-and-mortar facility that can you visit. Based on their website it is apparent that they are making several Cabernet Sauvignon based wines from different Napa Valley appellations, this one is entirely sourced from Oakville. It is produced from a small vineyard that lies adjacent to Screaming Eagle and Rudd Estate, meaning the east side of the valley near Silverado Trail. The wines from this part of the valley are typically quite ripe and powerful in part because the vineyards receive sun from mid-morning through the later part of the afternoon. This is different from vineyards that lie on the west side of the valley, where they fall into the shadow of the Mayacamus Mountains in the mid-late afternoon. Soils here are also typically quite poor, a combination of alluvial sediments from the Napa River as well as the weathering of the Vaca mountain range directly to the east. The combination of poor soils and extensive sunlight give the wines fantastic ripeness and concentration.

Winemaking at Imperium is handled by Sean Foster, a Napa veteran who has manned the helm at Merryvale/Starmont and Peju, as well as consulting at a number of other wineries. The wine was fermented half in stainless steel tanks, half in French oak barrels, and was left on the skins for a total of 35 days. It was then aged in French oak, 70% new, for 20 months before bottling. It is 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot. They produced 125 cases of the 2017.

When you pull the cork on this wine you will want to make sure and decant it for at least a half hour before serving. This wine shows the big Napa nose of cola syrup, fresh cut cedar, boysenberry preserves, dark chocolate and espresso roast coffee beans. On the palate it is big and rich, with the tannins coming forward mid-way and then framing the copious fruit into a long finish. Drink 2024-2032.

Vinum Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2016 - \$55

I have been a fan of Vinum Cellars almost since their inception in 1997, when partners Richard Bruno and Chris Condros launched their winery focusing on Chenin Blanc and Petite Sirah. They both had day jobs working for other wineries so their vision for Vinum was to produce wines from grapes that are often overlooked. Thanks to their connections working for others they soon put together a stable of growers from Paso Robles to Sonoma and as far east as El Dorado county. This now provides them with incredible sources for grapes and a wide range of quality levels. Their production is relatively high, 150,000 cases, but only a small fraction is bottled under their own labels. Much of their wine is made for high end clients who charge considerably more than they do.

Historically the dynamic duo have purchased all of their grapes, but a couple of years ago Richard had the opportunity to purchase the Longhorn Ridge Vineyard on the east side of Napa, just below the Atlas Peak AVA. They had purchased grapes from this tiny, 8 acre vineyard since 2005 and were very familiar with the high quality of the production. Being in the hills the vineyard is littered with granite deposits and little organic material. The grape clusters are very small and the

berries themselves are incredibly intense, producing fantastic wines. Currently all 8 acres are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon but in 3 years they are expanding by 2 more acres, with a half acre planted to Merlot.

To produce this Cabernet the wine was aged for 26 months in 50% new French oak and 50% second pass barrels. While this wine shares many similarities with the Premia above, on the palate it is a very different Cabernet. The nose is a more savory, with notes of pipe tobacco, muddled black currants and blackberries, vanilla wafers, graphite and a note I get only from Napa Cabs, wet concrete. On the palate this wine is not as dense either, but it has ample fruit in and more freshness. It is also more obviously structured, with higher acidity and more tannins, which hold the finish slightly in check. Drink this wine from 2022-2036.

Kanonkop Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 - \$55

Of all the wild stories I can tell you about club features, and shipping issues, this is one of the best. In February I tasted this wine and was totally blown away, deciding right then and there it would be a Reserve Club selection in April. This was just when we started having problems with shipments and the distributor missed the deadline for that quarter. "No problem, we will use it in July" I told them. When it finally arrived what we received was 2016 vintage, not this 2015. So I ordered a sample to taste, confident that it would be similar. It was not at all. In fact, the 2016 was so bad I am certain the bottle was flawed. "No problem, we will ship you another bottle," the distributor told me. That bottle sucked too. And a third. At this point I told them to keep it and moved on. Then a week later, in mid-August, 19 cases of the 2015 arrived in their warehouse, my original order. I ordered a sample, two actually, and they were both amazing, so here we are.

The name Kanonkop literally means "canon rock" in Dutch, and is used by this winery as their property was the lookout for ships moving down the coast from Europe heading to Cape Town in the 17th and 18th century. From this promontory the observers would fire a cannon, not in defense, but to alert the farmers of Stellenbosch to bring their wares to the docks in Cape Town so the ships could provision on their way to the Far East. I cannot find a record of when this property first began producing wine, but the Kanonkop winery was established in 1973 by Paul Sauer, a career politician who grew up on a wine farm just down the road from this estate. Space does not allow me the luxury of explaining the rich history of this family and their contribution to the Western Cape wine industry, but I encourage you to check out their website as it is laid out in detail.

Today the estate is managed by Paul's grandsons, Paul Krige and his brother Johann. It was they who made the decision in 1986 to stop selling their wines to the local cooperative and begin bottling their production exclusively under their own label. Unshackled from the demands of the cooperative they turned their attention to the quality of their wines, not the quantity produced, with a series of decisions that now establish their prominence.

While having lunch with Paul Krige, we tasted a selection of the estate's Pinotage bottlings from several vintages. The wines were a revelation to me as I generally did not enjoy the variety. He explained that the climate in their area, on the Simonsberg Mountain, facing the ocean with a perfect exposition and poor soils, provided ideal growing conditions to slowly ripen red grapes. For these reasons they are known for their high quality Pinotage, a tricky feat, but when you taste this wine you will see why the Cabernet Sauvignon is a Reserve Club selection.

The winemaking at Kanonkop demonstrates the brother's attention to quality. All of the grapes are hand harvested and destemmed. Fruit is sorted three times; by hand, on a vibrating sorting table and using a computer driven optical sorter, before being deposited in large, concrete vats. Fermentation is done over 5-6 days and then the wine is moved to new or second pass, French oak barrels for malolactic conversion and aging. The Cabernet is left in wood for 24 months in large French barrels, half new, then bottled and held for an addition 24 months before release. This models the classic aging approach of the great chateau of Bordeaux.

When you are ready to drink this wine you will want to splash it into a decanter but it shows nicely within minutes. The nose is quite ripe, a mix of dried blueberries and cooked blackberries, dark chocolate, Maduro cigar wrapper, new leather and vanilla custard. On the palate this wine is dry but hardly austere, showing plenty of oak, which is necessary to contain the deep core of fruit. This wine is an interesting juxtaposition of the other two selections; not as over-the-top as the Premia, nor as restrained as the Vinum. The one thing I will guarantee, it will open your eyes to the high quality of Cabernet Sauvignon coming from South Africa. Drink this wine from 2021-2031.