



Tim's Wine Market

November 2021

By Tim Varan

This month, we take a deep dive into California Syrah, a category that is all but ignored by consumers, much to the bewilderment of the wine trade. In fact, there is even a joke told in the California trade about Syrah-based wines:

What is the difference between a case of Syrah and a case of pneumonia?

You can take antibiotics to get rid of a case of pneumonia.

While it is a little funny to us insiders, I cannot tell you how many times I have tasted a good example of California Syrah, only to tell the salesman that I don't buy them because customers don't want them. Then we both exchange the, "yeah, I get it" look and move on (keep in mind that in the Orlando store, we have 12 different Loire Cabernet Francs, so we are willing to fight the good fight). Yet, when wine professionals get together there is often a lot of Syrah consumed because the variety offers so much in terms of aromatic complexity, site specificity and food pairing ability. By the way, Riesling is the same way for white wine. Trade people adore it, but American consumers avoid it like the plague despite our desperate pleas. But this is the New World Red club, so I digress....

The last pure California Syrah that I selected for this club was in November 2015, an example from Midnight Cellars in Paso Robles. That wine was an example of the deep, rich side of the variety that is produced from warm growing sites to appeal to Cabernet Sauvignon drinkers. The wines for this month show an entirely different side of the variety, from a cooler vineyard that produces wines that are more elegant and aromatic, with higher acidity. This makes the selection the ideal red for an upcoming meal with turkey as the centerpiece. For that matter, if you are part of the growing, "why do we have to eat turkey on Thanksgiving?" crowd, the selections this month also work great with salmon, prime rib or ham, as long as the glaze is not too sweet. It is the versatility of Syrah that should make it so appealing.

2014 Meeker Syrah Dry Creek - \$40

2012 Meeker Syrah Dry Creek - \$40

The Meeker winery was founded in 1984, when Charlie and Molly Meeker purchased vineyard land in Dry Creek Valley. In those days, most of the land in Dry Creek, which lies in northern Sonoma County, south and west of the town of Healdsburg were family farms. The few vineyards were primarily owned by Italian families who grew a few acres of grapes for house wine, so there were only a few commercial ventures. At the time, Charlie was a movie industry lawyer and producer, who in 1990 would become head of MGM Studios. For the first few years, Charlie made the wines and flew back and forth between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Eventually he hired a full time winemaker until he left MGM in 1999. Charlie remained the winemaker until 2010, when he elevated his son Lucas to co-winemaker, handing off the reins completely in 2014. Sadly, Charlie passed away this past April.

Like Charlie, Lucas has no formal training as a winemaker. After attending Colgate University and graduating with honors with a degree in English, he returned back to the family winery and started at the bottom, cleaning tanks. Over time he launched his own brand, Lucas J., while learning winemaking from his father. Also like Charlie, Lucas rejects a lot of the conventional wisdom of Napa/Sonoma winemaking, preferring to produce wines that age well rather than appear flashy when young just for critical scores. Their feeling is that low pH and high acidity give the wines more aging potential than simply tannins. Lucky for us, we can taste these wines with a few years of age!

The grapes for all three vintages are sourced from the Pena Creek Vineyard, located high in the hills of the Dry Creek AVA. The vineyard sits at between 850 and 1,300 feet above sea level and is saddle shaped, creating several expositions. Since this wine is 100% Syrah, Lucas uses various blocks within the site to create complexity in the finished wine. For all three vintages the winemaking is the same; five days of cold soaking on the skins before fermentation in open top T bins. To

extract color, they punch down the cap several times a day, then rack the juice of the skins when they feel the wine has enough tannin. All three wines are aged in once used, French and American oak barrels for 24 months.

Please decant these wines for at least half an hour before serving, and they will be best at cellar temperature, between 55 and 60 degrees.

2014 - 305 cases made. 14.8% alcohol. Vintage note - early bud break, warm year, third year of drought conditions. Production level was low due to hydric stress, creating very concentrated, more tannic red wines. The nose of this vintage shows notes of dried red cherry, menthol, rosemary, lavender and charcoal. On the palate, it shows good weight with firm, dusty tannins and moderate acidity. Drink 2021-2030.

2012 - 214 cases made. 14.6% alcohol. Vintage note - very moderate year, never too hot or too cold. Production level was large and quality was very high. Most evolved nose with notes of brown sugar, coffee grounds, leather, cinnamon, menthol and dried cherries. On the palate it is still moderately firm and fresh, with moderate tannins and receding acidity. Drink 2021-2025.

Turkey Mole

I tried not to suggest a Thanksgiving turkey recipe, but the pairing of mole sauce and Syrah is a natural. I have experimented with many versions but this one from Cook's Illustrated remains my favorite. Save this one for another night and serve with fresh corn tortillas or over rice.

1 (6- to 7-pound) turkey breast whole bone-in
Salt and ground black pepper
5 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 medium onion, chopped
6 medium cloves garlic, peeled and crushed,
plus 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or
pressed through a garlic press (about 1
tablespoon)
2 sprigs fresh thyme
1 bay leaf
2 tablespoons chili powder
2 tablespoons Cocoa powder
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/8 teaspoon ground cloves
1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained
1/4 cup raisins
2 tablespoons creamy peanut butter

Adjust an oven rack to the lowest position and heat the oven to 250 degrees. Using kitchen shears or a chef's knife, trim the rib bones and any excess fat from the turkey. Pat the turkey dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper.

Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add the turkey, breast side down and scatter the onion, crushed garlic, thyme and bay leaf around the turkey. Cook, turning the breast on its sides and stirring the vegetables as needed, until the turkey and vegetables are well browned, 12 to 16 minutes, reducing the heat if the pot begins to scorch.

Off the heat, place a large sheet of foil over the pot and press to seal, then cover tightly with the lid. Transfer the pot to the oven and cook until the thickest part of the breast registers 160 to 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 hours.

Remove the pot from the oven. Transfer the turkey to a cutting board, tent loosely with foil, and let rest while making the sauce. Strain the juices from the pot into a fat separator, reserving the strained vegetables. Let the juices settle for about 5 minutes, then defat the juices; set aside.

Meanwhile, add the remaining 3 tablespoons oil, minced garlic, chili powder, cocoa powder, cinnamon and cloves to the pot and cook over medium heat until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the defatted juices, strained vegetables, any - accumulated juices from the turkey, tomatoes, raisins and peanut butter and simmer over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened, 8 to 10 minutes.

Discard the thyme and bay leaf, then puree the sauce in a blender until smooth, about 20 seconds. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Carve the turkey and serve, passing the mole separately.