



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Every couple of years I like to take one Reserve Club release and look beyond California for the selections, in this case two from Washington State and one from Australia. Never fear, all three selections are at their very essence top shelf, New World wines; big texture, lavish fruit and conspicuous use of oak. I do this because I like to show that the influence of California winemaking is vast, not just in the US but also abroad. There is no mistaking the intention of the winemaker with any of these, and fans of “big” reds will feel right at home.

2016 Basel Cellars Merriment - \$65

For many years I have purchased the wines from Basel Cellars, their national sales manager, Leo Kirk is a friend and someone with whom I work well. However, this will likely be the last Reserve feature from Basel as the estate was sold in December, 2020. The new owners have rebranded the estate Yellowhawk Resort and will transition the property to an event space with lodging. Winemaking will continue but their focus is sparkling wine, a surprise to me considering how warm it is in Washington State. I can only guess their vision is to attract bridal shower weekend groups, a la Nashville, with an all inclusive party and bubbly?

The real shame is this property was just starting to hit stride under the most recent, now departed, winemaker Dirk Brink. Dirk was hired right before the harvest in 2015 and his imprint on the wines was almost immediate. Many times the wines made under his predecessor showed extreme levels of oak and alcohol, not an uncommon problem in Washington State winemaking. Under Dirk the wines remained big, as you will see, but with more harmony among the components.

One of the greatest challenges I have always found with the wines from Basel Cellars is the expansive number of offerings they have each year. They produce a number of different varieties as solo bottlings, and then a substantial number of reserve level blends, the apex being Merriment. It is a left-bank Bordeaux inspired blend, based heavily on Cabernet Sauvignon, and crafted to last years in the cellar. The early bottlings under previous winemakers carried a Walla Walla appellation and produced using fruit from their estate vineyards near the winery. Dirk expanded the program to include grapes grown in other parts of the Columbia Valley, which is part of the reason the wine is more harmonious now.

At the core of this wine is grapes grown from four exemplary vineyards, Double Canyon, Les Collines, Phinny Hill and Wallula. Double Canyon is one of their estate vineyards in Walla Walla and Les Collines is an equally famous property in the AVA as well. Phinny Hill and Wallula are both from the Horse Heaven Hills AVA, a warmer area located along the Columbia River. Wallula is best known as a component of the wines at Quilceda Creek and Phinny Hill is often listed as a source for many elite level wines in Washington State. It is the combination of fruit from these sites that appears to make this a more complete wine, as the balance is far greater now that the wine is not exclusively Walla Walla any longer.

The blend for Merriment is interesting, and despite the left-bank inspiration, points to how winemakers in Washington State must deal with higher alcohol in their wines. At the heart is 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot and 11% Cabernet Franc. The remaining wine, 22% is Malbec, a variety that is legal in Bordeaux but rarely seen. This is because the variety buds early and ripens late, a challenge for growers in the cooler areas of Bordeaux. However, it is one variety that is getting a lot of attention from growers in warmer climates who are challenged with longer, hotter growing conditions. In Washington State it is a variety that is used a lot, as it contributes firm tannins and mid-palate to any blend.

To craft Merriment Dirk selected the best 14 barrels from the cellar (430 cases), then blended them and returned the wine to barrel for 14 more months to integrate. The result is a wine that is incredibly rich and concentrated, with notes of dried cherries, cooked black raspberries, milk chocolate, orange marmalade and licorice on the nose. On the palate this wine is quite dry and oaky, but at this age starting to integrate. There is good concentration, which balances the firm tannins and holds the relatively high alcohol in cheque. Drink 2025-2035.

2018 Hedges Cabernet Sauvignon “Red Mountain Reserve” - \$49

I first met Tom Hedges in the early 1990's, one of the first producers from Washington State to visit Florida. It is hard to believe now, but in those days we had to explain to consumers that the wines were from the state of Washington, not D.C.

In those days the Hedges family was focused on their grocery store brand, CMS, which to this day are still well made, blended wines. However, the family has shifted much of their attention to the more serious offerings from their Red Mountain estate, including this Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

Starting in 1997 Tom and his wife Anne Marie began purchasing vineyards around their winery, which looks like a French chateau in Bordeaux, on Red Mountain. They now have five estate vineyards, and as of 2021 all are Demeter certified as biodynamic. Their commitment to sustainability even extends to their family, with their son Christophe being their national sales manager and daughter Sarah Hedges Goedhart handling the winemaking.

It has been a while since we have had a Red Mountain selection in this club so let me refresh your memory on why this wine is so different from the Columbia River example above. Red Mountain lies in the Yakima Valley, three and a half hours drive from Seattle. With only a little more than 4000 acres it is the smallest AVA in Washington, and all of the vineyards lie on this low mountain facing south-southwest. This gives the vines ideal sun exposure so the area actually receives the highest number of degree days of any AVA in Washington, and coincidentally, in the US. Thanks to the vineyards position to the nearby Yakima River there is a high diurnal temperature swing each day during the growing season, allowing for high levels of ripeness and good acid retention in the grapes for balance. Finally, the region only receives about 7 inches of rain each year so there is very little disease pressure, making it an area where sustainable farming is easier than most.

To make this wine Sarah uses 89% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Merlot, 4% Cabernet Franc, 1.5% Malbec and 1.5% Petit Verdot. All of the fruit comes from their 5 estate vineyards and was aged for 18 months in 51% new oak barrels, of which 60% were French and 40% American. They produced 1425 cases of this wine.

When you open the wine please decant it for a half hour before serving. I find Red Mountain Cabernet to be a bit more savory than those of the Columbia Valley and extra oxygen helps pump up the bouquet. Then you will notice an enticing combination of beef bouillon, black cherry jam, maduro cigar wrapper, dark chocolate and a significant amount of cedar. On the palate the wine is quite dry, and initially pretty oaky, but there is copious amounts of fruit to balance the tannins and give this wine some nice length. Drink 2023-2033, potentially longer with steaks or roasts.

2012 Woodstock Shiraz “Pilots View” - \$39

This final selection was made in July of 2021 but thanks to shipping issues only arrived in Florida in November. It drinks so well that I considered selling it during the holidays, but changed my mind when I realized what a good teaching moment it makes to show the true nature of Australian wines. Unlike the clunky, overly sweet examples crafted only for the US market and sold in most big box retailers, this wine is rarely seen outside of Australia and enjoys cult-like status there.

Pilots View is produced in honor of Doug Collet, who fell in love with the idea of growing grapes while flying Spitfire fighters over France during WWII. In 1973 he purchased the historic Woodstock winery, convinced that tastes were changing and soon table wines would become more popular than the fortified wines dominating the Australian wine industry at that time. He was right and soon Woodstock became one of the early wineries to produce dry table wines for the Australian market. Thanks to Doug's adventures as a young man in Europe today the family farms a wider array of grapes than the typical Grenache and Shiraz, with Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, Montepulciano, Mourvedre and Riesling planted in their vineyards as well.

This wine is produced from their best blocks of Shiraz, which grow in the Blewitt Springs sub-zone of the McLaren Vale wine region. While not well known in the US, Blewitt Springs is considered as one of the best places to grow Syrah/Shiraz in the world. The vineyards lie southeast of the city of Adelaide on rolling hills between the Mt. Lofty Ranges and the cool St. Vincent Gulf. These two geographical features allow for a very long, slow growing season with a high diurnal temperature swing. In fact, when I tasted this wine for the first time four years ago my notes describe it as too high in acidity for the US market. Thankfully time and good storage have tempered this wine and now it drinks perfectly.

When you are ready to drink this wine there is no reason to decant for more than a few minutes. I like to splash all wines bottled under screw caps just to give them air, but being nine years old this wine is ready to go. The nose is a rich combination of dried black figs, black cherries, ponzu, old leather and the telltale sign of McLaren Vale, menthol. On the palate this wine is soft and rich, with the acidity and tannins well receded and providing the perfect amount of structure. Drink this wine 2022-2023 with any dish with Asian influence, such as pepper beef or beef lo mien.