



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

When I started to think last month about the selections for this club, I happened to be drinking a bottle of dry Muscat from old vines, produced high on the slopes of Mount Luberon in the south of France. It was the exact type of wine I want to promote in this club: well crafted, unique and with a great story. Unfortunately the wine is only \$25, which is a little too inexpensive to make the cut. However, this started me thinking about aromatic grape varieties, such as Muscat, Gewürztraminer, Torrontes and Viognier, just to name a few, and how little respect they get in the wine world. Yes, they are appreciated by a few consumers, but they are hardly mainstream. This gave me an idea for selections this quarter, demonstrating a progression of wines that will demonstrate what it means for a wine to be aromatic.

In a very simple explanation what makes a white wine variety aromatic are two families of compounds called terpenes and thiols. Terpenes, and specifically monoterpenes, give wines floral aromas that are often associated with grapes like Muscat, Torrontes and Gewürztraminer. Thiols are the grass-y, melon-y aromas that are found in Sauvignon Blanc. It is also thiols that give marijuana its distinctive smell. There are also other aromatic compounds that can be created during fermentation, by doing so at very low temperature or using selective yeast strains to enhance certain aromatic compounds. For the purpose of our features, I only selected varieties that are naturally aromatic, not wines where the aroma is enhanced or created.

These selections are listed in ascending order of aromatics. As you will read, Chardonnay is not considered an aromatic variety; Albariño is semi-aromatic and Muscat is highly aromatic. All of these selections are dry as well and infinitely friendly with food.

## **2019 Les Hauts des Milly Chablis 1er Cru Les Lys - \$54**

Chardonnay is the only noble white variety considered to produce non-aromatic wines. For reference, the other noble white grapes, Riesling is very aromatic, and Sauvignon Blanc, is semi-aromatic. Traditionally the most esteemed wines produced from Chardonnay tend to come from very expressive climates, of which Chablis is one of the most famous.

For those not familiar, Chablis is a part of the Burgundy region, located four hours southeast of Paris and an hour and a half northwest of Dijon. Traditionally, the region is considered cold, hence only Chardonnay is grown, and famous for the Kimmeridgian soils that make such a huge impact on the wines. Kimmeridgian soils are clay based but rich with ancient marine fossils, which impart the saline, mineral quality for which Chablis is so prized. This is important because Chardonnay is not rich in aromatic compounds, so it is the soil that contributes the most important attributes to the wines.

For our feature I selected an incredibly savory example from Bernard and Monique Defaix, pronounced *da-fay*. They are the second generation to bottle wines under their own label and are now assisted by their two sons Sylvain and Didier. Didier manages the vineyards while Sylvain is in charge of vinification and aging. Helene Jaeger-Defaix, Didier's wife, manages the commercial aspects of the domain and contributes the grapes for their Rully bottling from vines inherited through her family. In April 2019, I visited this estate and tasted with Helene in a comprehensive examination of their entire production. The standout of the Premier Cru wines was this bottling, from the Premier Cru vineyard of Les Lys.

I am delighted to offer the Chablis 1er Cru Les Lys this year, as I missed it in 2017 and 2018. This is a micro-climate within the 1er Cru Vaillons. Twenty percent of the juice is barrel fermented and aged in neutral oak, the balance in stainless steel. This wine leans more into the citrus family with notes of fresh lemon and grapefruit, beeswax and a savory quality of lardo with wild thyme. On the palate it is very powerful and savory with really nice length. Serve this wine with pan seared sea bass or a roasted pork loin stuffed with spinach, pine nuts and lemon.

## **2019 LaBarge Albariño - \$49**

For the semi-aromatic wine I have chosen a fantastic Albariño, but not one from the spiritual home of the grape, Spain's Rias Baixas region, rather the central California Santa Rita Hills. I chose this one because it is an excellent example of the grape but also demonstrates how important this variety will be in the new world wine regions as the climate continues to change. In fact, it was after working with renowned grape vine growing expert Richard Smart that owner Pierre LaBarge learned the Santa Rita Hills is the most like Rias Baixas in climate and soil composition. The reason Albariño is gaining importance is the vines are resistant to drought and retain acidity at high levels of ripeness. As water and higher summer temperatures become bigger issues in many growing regions of the new world, varieties like Albariño

take on greater importance. Between 2011 and 2019, plantings grew by almost 50% to around 300 acres. It is also worth noting that this is also one of the new experimental varieties allowed in to be grown in Bordeaux.

Albariño is likely a very old variety that originates from northern Portugal or directly across the border in Spain. It was first noted in the mid-1800s, but plantings in Portugal, where it is known as Alvarinho, display significant diversity in the genetic material. This usually indicates a very old variety due to genetic instability. For many years, growers in the region claimed it was related to Riesling, Gros Manseng and Savignin from France, but DNA tests do not support this theory. However, it does display a bouquet of peaches and apricots, which all those varieties share.

As I mentioned before, the LaBarge winery was founded by Pierre LaBarge IV in 2009, with help from his father, who made his fortune as a defense contractor. Pierre IV did not start out intending to run a winery, but he caught the bug while working a stint at Fallbrook Winery. After that, he earned a masters degree in soil science and viticulture, which led him to work with Shadow Canyon in Paso Robles and Sine Qua Non in Ventura. He and his father purchased a virgin property in the Santa Rita Hills and have planted it to Pinot Noir, Grenache, Syrah and, of course, Albariño.

Although LaBarge has experimented with winemaking techniques for his Albariño, he has decided that a less-is-more approach is best. All of the grapes are hand-harvested and then placed in a basket press designed for red wine. To extract the juice, the grapes are foot trodded, which allows for a few hours of skin contact and better aromatics. The juice is then drained to a combination of small, neutral French oak barrels and a concrete egg. Fermentation is spontaneous, with meaning natural yeast, and lasts for a month.

When you are ready to serve this wine, let it warm to cellar temperature before serving. The wine reveals obvious notes of dried apricot, fresh pear, white peach and the tell-tale sign of Albariño, sea salt. When you taste it, the wine is quite crunchy and high in acidity, but does show some nice flesh mid-palate, with good persistence into the finish. I am tempted to tell you this wine will age nicely for a year or two, but why wait? It's delicious now with garlic shrimp, seared sea scallops on a bed of pesto angel hair or whole snapper roasted with lemon and thyme.

## **2019 La Sirena Moscato Azul - \$49**

When putting this selection together, I figured that if I was giving you a Muscat in a blue bottle it better be something spectacular, and this one certainly is. It is also easily the least expensive wine produced by legendary California winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett, whose resume includes crafting Dalla Valle, Screaming Eagle, Grace Family Vineyards and Lamborn Family just to name a few. Robert Parker has even referred to her as the First Lady of Wine. It is also worth noting that her husband is Bo Barrett, whose family owns, and he is CEO, of Chateau Montelena, the legendary estate in Calistoga.

My first experience with dry Muscat came from the Folie a Deux winery, with the 1987 vintage. At the time, the winery was owned by the Dizmangs, two psychiatrists who loved white wines. Larry Dizmang had studied in Germany and fell in love with the wines of the Rheinhessen, so in addition to Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, they also produced dry Chenin Blanc and dry Muscat. When the couple sold the winery in 1995, it was purchased by an investment group led by Dick Peterson, Heidi's father. When I asked Heidi if there was a connection she said no, that she was not aware that Folie even made dry Muscat.

Heidi's inspiration for this wine comes from a desire to produce a dry, aromatic wine, similar to examples she worked on while in Germany in the late 1980s. In an email interview, she told me that she loves this category but felt that good examples were already being made in California from Riesling and Gewurztraminer. She landed on Muscat and produced the first example of this wine with the 2003 harvest. Since then it has become something of a cult favorite, showing a playful yet quietly serious side to her impressive portfolio.

There are many different varieties that stem from the Muscat family, in this instance the grapes are Muscat Blanc a Petits Grains, or in California the official name is Moscato Bianco, which are synonyms. This is a very old variety, generally thought to be Greek in origin and carried to Italy. The Romans later carried it to France, where it remains an incredibly important grape in the Languedoc and Roussillon regions. It is unusual to find this material in California, where the less interesting Muscat de Alexandria dominates, particularly plantings in the central valley. The grapes for this hail mostly from Lake County, but about a quarter are from a Napa, including some grown at "their" vineyard, which is near Calistoga.

To capture the delicate perfume of this wine, the grapes are destemmed and then fermented and aged in stainless steel. When you pour a glass of this wine, it completely explodes from the glass with a rich bouquet of honeysuckle, lemon grass, fresh pineapple, white cardamom and crushed juniper berries. On the palate it is lively, like biting into several pieces of fruit simultaneously, then dries up in the middle and stays that way to the end. Drink this with sushi, ramen or just about any version of curry.