



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

2010 Pesquera Ribera del Duero Reserva Especial - \$64

I have been doing this long enough that I can comfortably write that I have watched many great wine regions of the world emerge during my career. Sure, the big ones like Bordeaux, Burgundy, Barolo, etc. have been legendary for centuries, but you might be surprised how new many of the now-iconic wine regions of Europe truly are. According to Kerin O'Keefe in her excellent book, **Brunello di Montalcino**, in 1967 there were only 139 acres of vines classified as Brunello in the Montalcino region. By the time the region was elevated to Italy's first DOCG in 1980, there were still less than two dozen estate bottled wines produced. Even in 1989, when I began selling wine, examples were few and far between.

The same can be said for one of the most important wine growing regions of Spain, the Ribera del Duero. Although vines were cultivated in the region even before the arrival of the Romans, when the region was granted DO (Denominación de Origen) status in 1982, there were only two well known estates within the boundaries. The first was the legendary Vega Sicilia and the second was Pesquera, founded by Alejandro Fernandez only a decade earlier. However, it was Alejandro who recognized what amazing wines the region had the potential to produce and lobbied tirelessly until the government established the DO.

Several years ago I had lunch with Alejandro, along with his then-wife, Esperanza Rivera, at the old Park Plaza Gardens in Winter Park. At the time Alejandro was easily 80 years old, and yet he worked the room, including a table of women having lunch next to us, like a man half his age. I have met many of the world's greatest winemakers, and they all share a sparkle in their eye and passion in their tone when talking about their wines. To this rare breed, it is more than just the synthesis of grapes, terroir and technique; it is a burning desire to produce elite wines every vintage. For Alejandro, it was obvious that compromise was not a word he understood or settled on.

Alejandro was born in the region near Valladolid and left school at the age of 12 to support his family by working in the fields. At the time, most of the agriculture of the region was growing and harvesting sugar beets, which is laborious, back-breaking work. Alejandro recognized there must be a better way, and eventually he developed and patented a machine that would remove the beets from the ground. Eventually he sold the patent, and with that money, he and his wife purchased a broken down winery outside of Valladolid that they dubbed Pesquera for the village where it is located.

The early wines were fairly rustic, as Alejandro came to understand grape growing in the region. After hand-harvesting, the grapes were foot trodded, whole cluster, and then fermented in large concrete tanks. Once dry, he aged in older American oak barrels for a couple of years. These wines were surprisingly good and soon caught the attention of wine critics Robert Parker and Jancis Robinson, MW. In 1982, the year the DO was established, Alejandro had learned enough to produce his first reserve wine, Janus, which Parker called "the Petrus of Spain." With such accolades, the winery took off, allowing him to eventually expand his holdings for Pesquera to almost 600 acres of vines and purchase four other properties in nearby regions.

Always the perfectionist, the wine you have this quarter was only made in 2010 and will likely never be made again. This is because in 2017, the region was devastated by a spring frost that greatly reduced the potential crop for the year. Then the summer was torrentially hot and dry, so by harvest the vines struggled to ripen even a tiny yield of grapes. While almost every quality producer declassified most of their production, Pesquera made the decision to make none. Instead, they reached into the deep cellar and pulled out bottles of this wine from the incredible 2010 vintage and labeled it simply as Reserva Especial.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for an hour before serving. The nose is a heady and rich combination of Vietnamese caramel, cigar box, dried black plums, balsamic syrup, raspberry fruit leather and black raspberry preserves. On the palate, this wine shows good concentration and length, with the substantial amount of oak only starting to fade. Drink 2021 through 2031.

2016 Domaine de Saint Paul Chateauneuf-du-Pape - \$59

This is the fifth Chateauneuf-du-Pape (CdP) I have selected for this club in seven years, in part because I find the category so interesting. When I started working in a retail wine store in the late 1980s, the "new" book about wine

everyone was reading was Robert Parker's **Wines of the Rhone**, first edition, which I devoured. For a kid from Western PA selling wine in Florida, the region seemed so exotic, and I wanted to be an expert. Additionally, my boss was an encyclopedia regarding Burgundy and Bordeaux, so I wanted an area of expertise where I could stand out. For better or worse, today the region is very popular thanks to the efforts of many winemakers who rode the wave of popularity that Parker created with his book 40 years ago. This estate, owned by the Jeunue family, is a stunning example of how this region shines when traditional grapes meet modern techniques.

Domaine de St. Paul was established in 1934, two years before Chateauneuf-du-Pape would become the first AOC established in France. Little is known about the property in those years, but it grew in prominence when purchased in 1952 by the Establet family, who had a long history in the region. In the 1960s, the daughter of Charles Establet, Elie, married the son of Pierre Jeune, also a family with a deep connection to the region. Today, the Jeune family runs this estate, and just like the other properties they own, Domaine du Grand Tinel and Domaine du Montpertuis, the winemaking is directed by Rhone mega-consultant Philippe Cambie. While I am frequently a critic of the overripe style of wines Cambie promotes to many of his clients, at this estate the wines show an elegance and slightly rustic nature that is still very authentic to the region.

Under Cambie's guidance, the Jeune family converted this estate to biodynamic farming, achieving certification in 2012. They prefer old vines, with the average for this bottling being around 50 years old. This wine is produced from four parcels within the appellation, three south of the town on sandy, gravelly soils, and one to the north with rockier conditions. Like all Chateauneuf, this wine is based on Grenache (70%), and while they farm several other varieties and use them depending on the vintage, in 2016 they chose to only use Syrah for the balance. At this estate, all of the varieties are fermented and aged in large, upright wood tanks, then aged in concrete tanks and smaller barrels, called demi-muids, except for Syrah which is aged in small barriques.

When you are ready to drink this wine, you will want to decant it for half an hour before serving. It then offers a fantastic nose of milk chocolate, orange marmalade, dried black plums, black pepper, dried sage and dried rosemary. On the palate it is nicely concentrated and smooth, showing a bit more new oak than you may expect for this category, but it is nicely integrated. Drink 2021 through 2030.

2019 Chateau Serilhan St. Estephe - \$35

Like the rest of the wine world, the fortunes of the producers of the Bordeaux region, and appellations like St. Estephe, have grown significantly in the past three decades. The most prominent chateaus in St. Estephe, Calon-Segur, Montrose and Cos d'Estournel, now produce wines that rival the first growth estates almost every vintage. As the rising tide lifts all ships, it has also improved the fortunes of many lesser known estates, including this one, which spurred the current owner to invest heavily in improving his family's wines.

Chateau Serilhan is run by Didier Marcelis, whose family has owned the property for several generations. Growing up in the 1970s, Didier experienced a time when the Bordeaux business was struggling and the humdrum work of running estate held no appeal. Instead, he went into the tech business for more than 20 years with stints at IBM, Fujitsu and finally Cisco Systems. At 45 years old, he decided it was time to go back to his roots and take over the family estate.

Unlike many properties of the time this one was not dilapidated, but the quality of wine they were producing was also not inspired. Didier enrolled in a winemaking program, and upon completion, rolled up his sleeves and began to make changes. He converted the farming to organic practices and switched to using manual labor instead of machines for pruning and harvesting. Investments were also made in the cellar for new technology, as prior to his arrival the wines were made and sold in bulk to negociants whose demand for quality was low. Didier also hired world-class consultants, with Hubert de Boüard overseeing things from 2007 to 2018, and this vintage the first directed by Dr. Alain Raynaud.

I do not have a long experience with tasting the wines from this estate, sampling only the 2017 and 2018 prior to this release. However, on January 19, 2021, Neal Martin published an article in *Vinous* highlighting a recent tasting of 10 vintages of Chateau Serilhan releases, 2008-2017. His notes emphasize the strides this estate has accomplished over Didier's management and how the style of the property is more pliant and approachable than many of his St. Estephe neighbors.

The 2019 is a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Merlot, which is fermented in a combination of concrete and large wood tanks. Once the wine is dry, it is moved to 1/3 new French oak barrels, where it undergoes malolactic conversion and aging for 15 months. When you are ready to serve, decant this wine for half an hour before serving. The nose offers somewhat classic St. Estephe notes of camphor, bay leaf and pipe tobacco, wrapping around richer notes of black cherry preserves and dried cranberries. On the palate, this wine is surprisingly approachable, with a rich concentration of fruit framed by well integrated tannins. Drink 2021 through 2035.