



Tim's Wine Market

September 2021
By Tim Varan

I had several visions for how to steer the selections for this quarter, only to find impediments with each path. Mind you, all of the impediments were interesting, which is how I ended up with this selection. Rather than take too much space in the intro, I will explain with each selection. That said, these are three incredible wines and I am extremely excited to launch the new offering. Let us begin with my *Adventure in Hundred Year Old Vines ...*

2016 Gini Soave Salvarenza - \$54

When I made this selection in July, my plan was to bring you three wines produced from grapes grown in vineyards established before phylloxera wiped out Europe in the late 1800s. Designated as “pre-phylloxera,” the wines produced from these old vines display unique qualities that younger vines simply cannot deliver. This is not just due to their age, but also that the vines are not grafted onto American rootstock. It is far too complicated of a topic to tackle here as to why the wines are different simply because of the grafting, but suffice to say that wines made from vines at least 100 years old are uniquely interesting (the same could be said for most 100 year old people).

Many years ago, 1998 or 1999, I attended a warehouse show where producers of the Marc de Grazia portfolio were tasting their latest releases. The star of this particular show was the chance to taste the 1994 Barolo releases, which were exceptional and highly sought after. When I entered the rather cavernous warehouse, there was one very long line, cutting right through the middle of the room. I assumed it was Elio Altare, Luciano Sandrone or Paolo Scavino, and was surprised to learn it was the Gini family. They were causing quite the ruckus with their bottle-conditioned sparkling wine, which even today is an oddity in the Soave region.

Taking advantage of the lull at the tables of the Barolo boys, I made my rounds then worked back to the Gini family to see what all the fuss was about. While the bubbles were good, the standout on the table was their “grand cru” bottling of Soave, called Salvarenza.

The origin of the Salvarenza name supposedly dates back to the 1600's when a young maiden, Renza, was threatened by a group of bandits near this site. Lucky for her a knight came to her rescue and his act of valor is remembered today as the name of this site, the “salvation of Renza.” It is hard to dispute their claim because the Gini family traces their history in Soave back to the 1500's, making them one of the oldest wineries in the region. Today their top bottling comes exclusively from the 13 acres of vines called Salvarenza.

While this is often called their “ungrafted” vineyard, the fact is only about a third of the plantings are over 100 years old. However, at nearly 450 feet above sea level, it is one of the highest sites on Monte Foscario. The elevation allows the Garganega grapes to ripen slowly, reaching optimal ripeness while retaining great natural acidity. Vines this old also produce fewer grapes than younger vines, so the flavors are extremely concentrated. To further reduce yields, the Gini family farms this site using certified organic techniques, and the vines are trained in a pergola system to protect them from frost. All the grapes are hand-harvested, and fermentation is done using wild yeasts in a mix of large wooden vats and small barrels. Surprisingly, the Gini family also does not use any sulfur in this wine until a small amount is added at bottling for stability.

When you are ready to open this wine, take a few minutes to let it open in a decanter and warm to 50 degrees. Then, when you pour a glass, the nose virtually explodes from the glass with notes of ripe apricot, musk melon, pomelo, fresh Anjou pear and white pepper. On the palate, this wine shows impressive concentration, bordering on oily, but with an intriguing freshness and acidity that prevents it from being clumsy. You will want to drink this wine over the next three to five years with grilled octopus or whole roasted branzino stuffed with lemon and herbs.

2019 Coneria d'Scala Brugueres - \$45

It may surprise you, but it is hard to find really old vines in most famous wine regions of the world. The reason is that as a vine matures, it produces less fruit. Over time, the vines are not economically feasible any longer, and growers take them out. Also, since the 1970s the genetic material used to plant vineyards has been improved and is now mostly virus-free. Generations before then had no remedy for this problem, and were forced to replant as the vine inevitably died. This is especially true in the world's most popular wine regions where production costs are often high and the vine yield is

important to remain profitable. Nevertheless, you can find really old vines in places where the wines historically did not sell for much, making the expensive process of replanting unnecessary. Such is the case of the Priorat region of Spain, which is where we find the 110-year-old vines used to make this wine.

Although the Priorat is one of the two Denominación de Origen (DOQ) regions of Spain, the other being Rioja, it was virtually unknown until the late 1980s. It is an area high in the Montsant mountains, southwest of Barcelona and relatively isolated from the rest of Spain. The region was originally settled in the 12th century by Carthusian monks who brought viticulture to the foreboding region to produce sacramental wine. For almost a thousand years, nine small villages grew vines on terraced hillsides in soils of fractured slate, called *licorella*, primarily for sacramental wine. Then, in the 1980s a few energetic winemakers recognized the potential of this great climate and began developing the vineyards for commercial production. Today, the region is dotted with modern plantings of international varieties, as well as really old plantings of local favorites. For red wine, this means Grenache and Carignan; for white, the grape of choice is Grenache Blanc.

In most warm climates of Europe, Grenache Blanc is a preferred variety. It ripens earlier than many other white varieties, is relatively disease-resistant and can crop enormous yields if not reined in. The result is frequently wines that are high in alcohol, and thanks to a lack of natural acidity, somewhat oxidized. With this bottling, we find a completely different example, one that shows the fantastic texture of the variety as well as plenty of natural acidity and minerality.

Coneria si Scala Dei was founded in 1997 by Jordi Vidal and two friends. They farm almost 70 acres of vines and produce several wines. Like most Priorat estates, the majority of their production is red wine, however they also produce two white wines. Their flagship bottling is this, produced from a single parcel of Grenache Blanc vines that are at least 110 years old. Production for this wine is simple; the grapes are hand-harvested, destemmed and gently pressed into stainless steel tanks. After two days of maceration on the skins, the juice is drained to another stainless tank and fermented using native yeast. Once dry, the wine is left on the lees for six months, without much stirring, to be bottled.

I have tasted this wine several times over the years and consider it the finest example of Priorat Blanco. The nose is an inviting combination of toasted sesame seeds, white peach skin, fresh pear, ginger and fresh greengage plums. On the palate it is dry, with a lovely glycerine feel that is somewhere between medium- and full-bodied, with nice length as well as balanced alcohol. You can serve this rather robust wine with grilled swordfish, slow roasted pork shoulder or even duck.

and then this happened...

2019 Inama Sauvignon Blanc Vulcaia - \$53

While working through a series of very old vine white wines, looking for the third selection, one of my distributors dropped off a sample of this wine. Like a cliché Hallmark movie plot where love is found when not even looking, this one swooped in and stole the show. Yes, it was also a selection in March 2020, but the wine is too good to ignore. It also happens to grow in the same soils as our first pick, the limestone and tufo of Monte Foscario. It even shares a little of the tropical qualities of that spectacular Garganega, but this time stretched taut with the tom-tom tension of Sauvignon Blanc. The good news is that unlike that offering, where we bought the remaining inventory and barely covered our club membership needs, let alone any to sell, this time we are catching the new release so there is plenty available.

The first vineyards of the family were purchased by Giuseppe Inama in the 1960s, when the attention of the growers was on the flat lands below the walled city of Soave. At the time, the market demanded cheap, simple white wines and the old hillside vineyards were too expensive and difficult to farm profitably. Giuseppe spent more than 20 years piecing together a collection of old vineyards in the classico, or heart, of the zone. By the time his son Stefano joined him in 1991, they had come to own more acres of vines than any other winery in the best cru of the region on Mount Foscario. At that point, they stopped selling to the local cooperative and began bottling their own wines. Where most estates would have created an inaugural bottling of Soave Classico Superiore, the ever inventive Inama family started with the Vulcaia Fumè. Today, Stefano's sons Matteo, Alessio, and Luca have joined him at the winery and they continue to expand, now with a project in the Abruzzo as well. If you follow Alessio on Instagram, you will quickly see this is his favorite wine, as it appears in at least 30% of his posts.

For this wine, the Sauvignon Blanc grapes are allowed to ripen later, then are hand-harvested and sorted to ensure only healthy fruit goes into the press. The juice is fermented in small, 225-liter French oak barrels, of which 30% are new and the remainder are well used. The result is a wine with exotic aromas of gooseberry marmalade, pomelo, passionfruit, lemon zest and espresso crema. On the palate, this wine has superb concentration, with the prickly acidity of Sauvignon Blanc framed by rich oak notes and deep fruit. Drink this wine over the next two years with pan seared salmon or roasted chicken with lemon and rosemary.