



Tim's Wine Market

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By JP Donnelly-Davis

Happy New Year! Personally I am not big on resolutions as I prefer to think of each January 1st as a new opportunity to push myself for personal growth. Is this the year I start learning French? Will I finish writing the mystery novel I started years ago? Then I remind myself that motivation is not my problem, but rather the time to invest in yet another endeavor. That is why I usually have one very attainable goal in mind each year too. This year I want to develop a taste for eggplant.

My selections for this month are by two winemakers who also look to expand their worlds. The first wine is an uncommon blend made by unconventional means to produce something really stunning. The second is a passion project taking a long overlooked variety and crafting it into something truly special. Both wines are unusual enough that hopefully they will expand your personal tastes, even if you already love eggplant.

Passionate Wines “Vino del Mono” Tinto 2020 - \$15

There is a revolution of sorts brewing in Argentina's wine industry, spearheaded (as revolutions in the industry often are) by a group of younger winemakers. These talented men and women are producing wines quite different from what we think of from Argentina, utilizing historic grape varieties, native yeast fermentation, and often practicing what many would consider “natural” winemaking. (At TWMM we prefer the more accurate term “low intervention” recognizing that “natural” is both vague and subjective.) At the center of this movement is Matias Michelini, who focuses on single-vineyard wines made with as few inputs as possible, with a heavy emphasis on terroir. His project, Passionate Wines, sources fruit from multiple vineyard sites in Mendoza, with particular attention paid to grape varieties such as Bonarda, Criolla, and Torrontes. These grapes were the foundation of Argentina's wine industry long before the recent Malbec boom. The “Vino del Mono” red is a blend of roughly equal parts Malbec and Syrah, sourced from a single site to in the up-and-coming Tupungato region.

Tupungato is located three hours south of the city of Mendoza, and is the northernmost sub-zone of the vast Valle de Uco. The vineyards are situated at the foot of a dormant volcano in the western foothills of the Andes Mountains. Altitude is everything here, with most vineyards planted at a dizzying 4,000 feet or more above sea level. As a result, the climate here is moderate with long sunlight hours and cool nighttime temperatures. These conditions prolong the growing season and facilitate slow, even ripening. Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon are the most prolific varieties planted in Tupungato, but the region's altitude and alluvial soils are ideal for the production of Syrah as well. It was this potential that led Matias to create VINO del Mono.

Sticking to his low intervention mantra, all of the fruit to make this wine is harvested by hand. Syrah and Malbec ripen at roughly similar points in the season, making co-fermentation of these grapes a breeze. Once brought to the winery, the fruit is hand-sorted but not destemmed. This practice of whole cluster fermentation increases the aromatic complexity and tannin structure of the finished wine, and is a common trait in many low intervention red wines. Being low intervention Matias ferments the must using indigenous yeast, in large concrete tanks. After a 6-month élevage (aging) in smaller concrete “eggs,” the wine is lightly filtered before bottling. 3,000 cases of VINO del Mono are produced annually, making it one of Matias's larger undertakings.

When you open this wine, I strongly suggest decanting for at least half an hour, if not more. Once it has a bit of time to open up, this wine delivers impressive quality and concentration with notes of tart black plum, blackberry leaf, black cherry, baking chocolate, and faint hints of black pepper. Drink now through 2025 with marinated skirt steak, braised short ribs, or pork chops.

Basel Cellars Horse Heaven Hills Chenin Blanc 2019 - \$20

Devotees of our New World Red and Reserve Clubs are no doubt familiar with our friends at Basel Cellars, as over the years we have featured many of their celebrated red wines. Many of you may remember our feature of the Basel Cellars Vue de Blues in September 2020. That wine was produced from the Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, a common blend in Washington State. In 2015, when Basel Cellars hired Dirk Brink as head winemaker, he wanted to make a Chenin Blanc to

add to their white wine portfolio. Originally from South Africa, Brink loves the variety and the warm, dry climate of makes it a natural winner thanks to the grapes ability to retain acidity at high levels of ripeness. Brink has worked in Washington State for years and knew right where to look, finding an old vine block of Chenin Blanc in the Horse Heaven Hills sub-AVA of the Columbia River Valley.

In the early days of the Washington State wine business, when they were trying to figure out what varieties would grow best in the region, Chenin Blanc was a natural choice. Unlike most white grapes, Chenin Blanc thrives in warm climates, achieving high levels of concentration and texture, while retaining natural acidity for freshness. Unfortunately Chenin Blanc has never been fashionable and growers shifted to Chardonnay due to its commercial appeal. However, some growers never replanted these experimental vineyards so there are small, old vine blocks dotting the Columbia River Valley. Basel Cellars uses one such block, planted in 1980, to produce 170 cases. This Chenin Blanc is rarely seen outside of the winery's own club program but now under new ownership they opened the cellar doors, which enables us to bring you this rare gem.

2019 was a difficult growing season at first in many parts of Washington, as a persistent February frost meant that many vineyard parcels ripened much later in the year. As a result, the winery's old Chenin Blanc vines were harvested in mid-October, almost a month later than usual. Consequently, this extra period of hang time further concentrated the natural sugars within the grapes, resulting in a crop that displays vivid tropical fruit characteristics alongside the typical acidity found in Chenin Blanc. With the first fall frost approaching the grapes were quickly picked by hand just as temperatures began to dip into the 30s.

When you open this wine, you will want to refrain from serving it ice cold, and in fact decanting for roughly half an hour will help the bouquet blossom even more. Once decanted, this is a stunningly rich yet dry example of Chenin Blanc with notes of ripe pineapple, stone fruits, fresh fennel, sage, and wet stones. Drink now through 2025 with seared scallops, grilled salmon with dill, or roast chicken with herbs de Provence.

Butter Chicken (Murgh Makhani)

I love Indian food, and find the complex blending of spices to be surprisingly wine friendly, especially with fruit forward wines. This recipe is perfect for either of the selections this month, or invite friends and drink both!

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces and chilled, divided
1 onion, chopped fine
5 garlic cloves, minced
4 teaspoons grated fresh ginger
1 serrano chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
1 tablespoon garam masala
1 teaspoon ground coriander
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon pepper
1 ½ cups water
½ cup tomato paste
1 tablespoon sugar
2 teaspoons table salt, divided
1 cup heavy cream
2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed (breasts are fine too)
½ cup plain Greek yogurt
3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro, divided

Melt 2 tablespoons butter in large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, garlic, ginger, and serrano and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is softened and onion begins to brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Add garam masala, coriander, cumin, and pepper and cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 3 minutes. Add water and tomato paste and whisk until no lumps of tomato paste remain. Add sugar and 1 teaspoon salt and bring to boil. Off heat, stir in cream. Using immersion blender or blender, process until smooth, 30 to 60 seconds. Return sauce to simmer over medium heat and whisk in remaining 2 tablespoons butter. Remove saucepan from heat and cover to keep warm. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 4 days; gently reheat sauce before adding hot chicken.)

Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Combine chicken, yogurt, and remaining 1 teaspoon salt in bowl and toss well to coat. (If using breast meat then cube and coat before broiling.) Using tongs, transfer chicken to wire rack set in aluminum foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Broil until chicken is evenly charred on both sides and registers 175 degrees, 16 to 20 minutes, flipping chicken halfway through broiling.

Let chicken rest for 5 minutes. While chicken rests, warm sauce over medium-low heat. Cut chicken into ¾-inch chunks and stir into sauce. Stir in 2 tablespoons cilantro and season with salt to taste. Transfer to serving dish, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon cilantro, and serve.