



Tim's Wine Market

January 2022

By Tim Varan

Before I jump in to the write up for the wines this month, let me be transparent that one of these selections was the Explorer Club selection for December. This was not planned, but in late December I found out both January Explorer Club selections would be late, and a day later that we received a double shipment of one of the December selections. Luckily one of the February selections for the Explorer Club was already at the distributor, and one of the New World Red Club selections for January paired up nicely with that wine. That left only the duplicate shipment to deal with, a new world red wine! The puzzle came together nicely and there is even a theme. If you are a member of both clubs then my apologies, you will receive a second bottle, but based on robust December sales of the wine my guess is you will not care. Hopefully all of this will square up soon, so in the meantime, thank you for your patience.

2018 Hamilton Branch Cabernet Sauvignon - \$25

Unless I missed something in my archive, it has been several years since I selected a Cabernet Sauvignon from the Alexander Valley of California for a NWR feature. It is something of a surprise because a few years ago it seemed to me like I was writing about this area every month. I know that at some point I made a personal declaration that I would take a break from Alexander Valley Cab selections for a while, which has apparently lasted several years.

For those not familiar with the Alexander Valley, it is a fairly large growing region that runs mostly from the Mayacamus Mountains, and the border of Napa County, to the west side of the Russian River. It is the largest AVA in Sonoma County with more than 15,000 acres of vineyards, and is also one of the most densely planted with more than half the potential acreage of the region covered in vines. Thanks to being bordered by mountains and hills on three sides, the region is known for very warm days during the growing season, and a significant diurnal temperature swing as it cools off rapidly at night. The western side of the AVA also experiences fog, thanks to the Russian River, which delays the heat most mornings in the summer and lengthens the growing season.

The Alexander valley is named for Cyrus Alexander, who first planted vines in the area in 1843. Thanks to the ideal growing conditions vineyards have been prominent in the area ever since, but it was not until the 1970's that high quality wines were made from the grapes. Prior to that time much of the wine production was bulk juice, produced by Italian-Swiss Colony and other jug wine makers. Then in the 1960's Simi winery came under new ownership and changed to quality wine production. Shortly after saw the creation of Chateau Souverain and Jordan wineries, who helped push the region into prominence as a quality wine area. Today the Alexander Valley is home to such prestigious wineries as Peter Michael, Silver Oak and Lancaster as well as the source for many other highly sought after Cabernet Sauvignons.

Our friend Nick Goldschmidt is one of the most ardent promoters of Alexander Valley Cabernet, stating that in every tasting he has ever conducted with sommeliers, they could not correctly identify a Cabernet as Napa Valley from one produced in the Alexander Valley. To be fair, the regions are very, very similar in both soil and climate, and traveling Highway 29 north past St. Helena you really don't know where Napa Valley ends and the Alexander Valley begins. The confusion is understandable, as Cabernet produced in Alexander Valley is big, rich, and has deep color. I can usually tell them apart by an underlying iron/rust note that I attribute to the soils, but Nick tells me I am wrong, so....

This example from Hamilton Branch is a great re-introduction to the category. It is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon that is barrel aged for two years in a combination of French and American oak. This helps to produce a wine with a deep nose of cooked black cherries, blackberries, dried black figs, maduro cigar wrapper and milk chocolate. On the palate it has good concentration, with nicely polished tannins and a decent lift of acidity on the finish. Drink this wine from 2022-2027 with fattier cuts of meat like ribeye, standing rib roast or braised short ribs.

Bethany Old Vine Grenache 2015 - \$30

Like the Alexander Valley, the Barossa Valley of Australia enjoys a very similar, hot, dry climate with a significant diurnal temperature shift. As a result the region is also world renowned for producing powerful, age worthy wines from Australia's most popular variety, Shiraz. However, the popularity of Shiraz overshadows one of the most important wines produced in the region, old vine Grenache. While only a small part of the overall vineyard land, Grenache was an important blending grape for producers of fortified wines, who dominated production until the late 1970's. While never as popular as Shiraz, growers like the consistency of Grenache and, thankfully, many never tore out their vines in favor of Shiraz. For that reason I would argue that Australia's second most important variety for red wine is Grenache, and I have a great example this month to show you why.

Originally hailing from Silesia, Johann Schrapel and his family settled in the town of Bethanien (now known as Bethany) in 1852. Like many of their fellow immigrants, the Schrapel family carried cuttings of French varieties with them, planting Syrah and Grenache on their property alongside the other crops. A wine cellar soon followed, but although Johann achieved some measure of success as a winemaker, the family relied primarily on the sale of their grapes to larger wineries in the region.

The current iteration of Bethany Wines was founded in 1981 by Robert and Geoff Schrapel, Johann's great-great-grandsons. The two brothers built a gravity-fed winery in the old limestone quarry down the road and only produced two wines during their inaugural vintage: one barrel of Shiraz and a barrel of dry Riesling. At the time, South Australia was experiencing price collapse due to a surplus of wine, and the state government encouraged the removal of old Shiraz and Grenache vines in favor of new varieties. Luckily, the Schrapel brothers chose not to listen, and persistence paid off as the family's wines gained popularity and critical acclaim. As Tania Schrapel, Geoff's daughter and sixth generation winery owner, prepares to take the reins, she works closely with her father and uncle to preserve these unique old vines, some of which date back to the 1930s.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant for around half an hour. Once decanted, this wine is an aromatic powerhouse with notes of wild mulberry, cranberry preserve, dried blackcurrant, red plum and the characteristic dried herbs and pencil shavings which develop with age. Drink now through 2023 with lamb chops, flank steak or cheeseburgers.

Pork Tenderloin with Stilton Sauce

Many years ago I watched Jeff Smith, the Frugal Gourmet, produce a cheese sauce by melting blue cheese in a saucepan, adding cream and cooking to reduce. It was like watching fire be created for the first time. When I finally got a chance to try the recipe on my then girlfriend, now wife of 31 years, I substituted blue cheese, which she hates, for cheddar. What a mess, as cheddar does not melt the same way and quickly breaks. To compensate I have learned that using mediocre blue cheese from the deli case at the grocery store, the results are pretty good and the flavor is not really strong if you remove the rind. If you have fans of blue cheese at your table, then by all means buy better cheese. Do not use crumbles or really aged examples, as they do not melt smoothly either. Serve this standout dish with either wine.

2 (1-pound) pork tenderloins, trimmed
2 teaspoons kosher salt
½ teaspoon pepper
1½ tablespoons vegetable oil
2 ounces Stilton or blue cheese, (1/2 cup)
1 cup heavy cream

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Pat pork dry with paper towels and sprinkle all over with salt and pepper.

Heat oil in 12-inch oven safe nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add pork and cook until well browned on all sides, 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer skillet to oven and continue to cook until meat registers 135 degrees, 6 to 9 minutes longer.

Transfer pork to cutting board and let rest for 10 minutes. Add Stilton to now-empty skillet and heat over medium-low heat

(skillet handle will be hot). Cook until fully melted and bubbling, about 2 minutes. Carefully whisk in cream; bring to simmer; and cook until mixture coats back of spoon, about 2 minutes.

Slice pork ½ inch thick and transfer to serving platter. Drizzle with half of the sauce. Serve, passing remaining sauce separately.