



Tim's Wine Market

February 2022

By Tim Varan & J.P. Donnelly-Davis

When I traveled to Argentina in 2013 my goal was to develop a better understanding of Malbec and how it changes in the various sub-climates of Mendoza. It turns out I was almost a decade early, as I think only in the past year or two have a new generation of winemakers started to truly explore this topic. At the time Malbec was a red hot category and producers and consumers were both happy enough with "Mendoza" on the label, never mind how incredibly big and diverse the area actually is. Now, eight years later the forward thinking producers in the region are just scratching the surface, and we will look deeper ourselves later this year. However, during that trip I developed a much deeper appreciation of Mendoza Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, two varieties that appear custom built for the region's hot, dry growing season.

2019 Fabre Montmayou Cabernet Franc Reserva - \$19

I have selected a Cabernet Franc three times over the past year for a NWR selection, including one from Argentina and another made by Basel Cellars, both showing different attributes of the variety. The selection this month is from a warmer, lower elevation vineyard than the Antucura feature in September, giving the wine a different texture and aromatic profile. Those of you who were members then may also remember that was a 2014 vintage, with the emphasis on the maturity of the wine and less about the varietal character. The feature this month is far more consistent with what I tasted back in 2013 across Mendoza as young wines.

It has been a few years since I have selected a wine specifically from the Lujon de Cuyo sub-zone of Mendoza. For travelers to the region it is typically the place most visited as the region lies just south of the city of Mendoza. It was the first officially recognized sub-zone of Mendoza, in 1993, and is home to many of the regions most spectacular estates including Catena Zapata and Cheval los Andes. What makes all of the vineyards of Mendoza so interesting is their high elevation, in the case of Lujon de Cuyo, the average is 3300 feet above sea level. By comparison, our last feature from Antucura was grown in the Valle de Uco, three hours south, at an elevation of nearly 4000 feet. At these elevations the ultraviolet light is more intense, producing thicker skins and deeper color in the wines. The intensity of flavor is also aided by the high daytime temperatures during the growing season, and almost complete lack of rain.

This example from Fabre Montmayou is a great place to start discovering this variety, especially from South America. This estate was created in the early 1990s by Hervé Joyaux Fabre, who is from France and the scion of an old, negotiant family. When he started looking for vineyards in Argentina he was struck by the nearly perfect growing conditions and the potential quality of the wines. He started with the purchase of an old Malbec vineyard, planted in 1908, and has since expanded the estate in Mendoza to 217 acres. Always a visionary, Fabre is also one of the leaders looking even farther south, purchasing 177 acres in the Patagonia wine region of Rio Negro.

For this wine the grapes are harvested only from vineyards in Lujon de Cuyo. Due to their proximity to the Mendoza River, the sandy soils with a mixture of limestone are ideal for this variety. To help minimize the green aromas of the variety the vines are leaf stripped two months before harvest to allow sunlight on the clusters. The bell pepper aromas of Cabernet Franc are from a family of compounds called pyrazines, which degrade in sunlight. The higher level of ultraviolet light helps even more in this process. Once harvested the grapes are destemmed and fermented for 20 days for maximum extraction, then 60% of the wine is racked to French oak barrels for a year of aging.

When you are ready to serve this wine you will want to splash it into a decanter for a few minutes before serving. Once you do this it quickly shows the varietal signature of Cabernet Franc with notes of oolong tea, complemented with richer tones of espresso roast coffee, fresh black cherries and raspberry preserves. I find Cabernet Franc to be so interesting on the palate because despite higher alcohol the texture is higher toned than similar sized Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. Cabernet Franc also has longer tannins than Cabernet Sauvignon, so they are less jarring when you drink wines made from this grape. You will want to drink this example between 2022-2027 with roast sausage and lentils or wine braised pork ribs.

Basel Cellars Petit Verdot 2019 - \$39

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. However, until recently, our focus has been largely directed towards the “Noble Grapes” of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot. It was a pleasant surprise indeed when we were introduced to this single-vineyard Petit Verdot, located in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA, a growing region which is well suited for this variety, although it is rarely seen by itself.

Petit Verdot is thought to have originated in Bordeaux with its first mention dating back to the early 18th century. In the wines of that region it contributes additional tannin structure, body, and ripeness. Petit Verdot produces small, thick-skinned berries that ripen late in the season and as such does better in warm vintages where it receives ample sunshine. In the United States, where warm vintages and long growing seasons have increasingly become the norm, plantings of this variety have increased greatly, with many producers using it as a component in Bordeaux-style blends. However, on the West Coast, high temperatures and demand for full-bodied, tannic reds have led several producers to bottle it as a single varietal.

The McKinley Springs vineyard in the Horse Heaven Hills is the source of many of Basel Cellars’ more robust wines. Long-time club members will recall their Malbec is sourced from the same vineyard and was featured in October 2021. Four generations of farmers have transformed an initially small-scale operation into over 2800 acres of vines, one of Washington’s largest vineyards, producing over 20 varieties including Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, and Petit Verdot. Due to the increased sun exposure from this vineyard site and warm temperatures of the region, the Basel Cellars winemaking team sources Petit Verdot exclusively from this location.

Despite the large vineyard area, all fruit was carefully hand-harvested at optimal ripeness. All of the fruit was sorted by hand as well, and gentle crushing occurred after destemming. The wine fermented in barrel at controlled temperatures over a period of 28 days, and fermented in 2nd and 3rd use French oak barrels. During this time, the wine was kept on its lees to increase body and aromatic complexity. A mere 200 cases were produced for the 2019 vintage, making this an incredibly small-production wine even by Basel Cellars standards.

When you open this wine, it will certainly benefit from decanting for up to an hour. Petit Verdot is certainly a tannic variety and needs a bit of time to breathe before showing at its best. Once this wine has been decanted, however, it delivers rich notes of cooked blueberry, blackberry preserve, lavender, dried violets, and beef tallow. Drink now through 2026 with marinated short ribs, chimichurri skirt steak, or burgers with blue cheese.

Wine Braised Pork Ribs

It may be heresy to say this in the South, but not all pork ribs need to be smoked. Growing up near Pittsburgh, PA I fondly remember a version made by my Italian grandmother that were slow roasted in the oven, seasoned with herbs from her

½ cup fresh rosemary leaves, chopped coarse

⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil

10 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled

1 tablespoon table salt

1 tablespoon fennel seeds

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1 teaspoon pepper

2 (2½- to 3-pound) racks St. Louis—style spareribs, trimmed

1 cup dry white wine

garden. A few years ago I found this version in Cooks Country that brought back my memory of this style, and it has been a favorite ever since. Please note this recipe is best prepared a day in advance before cooking.

Combine rosemary, oil, garlic, salt, fennel seeds, pepper flakes, and pepper in food processor. Pulse mixture until finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as necessary.

Rub ribs evenly with paste and place meat side down in rimmed baking sheet. Cover sheet with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 24 hours.

Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Add wine to sheet with ribs. Cover sheet tightly with aluminum foil. Roast for 45 minutes. Remove foil and flip ribs meat side up. Continue to roast, uncovered, until meat is tender and well browned, about 1¾ hours longer.

Let ribs rest for 20 minutes. Transfer ribs to cutting board and slice racks between ribs. Serve.