



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This quarter I have decided to spotlight one of the least talked about categories of wine production, root stock. In fact, the subject of root stock is so obscure that when I called the wineries to discuss the topic their marketing people could not answer more than my most general questions. Eventually they turned me over to their winemakers and vineyard managers, and even they were baffled by my interest, but humored me nonetheless. I hope you find this topic as interesting as I do, and if so, let me know what you think.

The first thing to know is that the root stock is the part of the plant that grows underground. If you ever look at a grape vine, or many other plants like roses and citrus trees, you will see what looks like a knot in the trunk a few inches above the ground. That is the scab that develops when the root stock is grafted to the actual plant, called a scion. In essence the scion borrows the root stock to absorb nutrients and water from the soil. There are many reasons why root stocks are now used, although the most common is for pest resistance. Each wine selected this quarter will demonstrate the need, or not, for root stock and how that effects the growth habit, farming and styles of wines produced.

To understand why root stocks are important let's look at the French wine industry in the 1850s, and how within 40 years the country's production was almost wiped out. It all started when English botanists imported grape vines from America for their cool climate gardens. Unbeknownst to them the vines they brought to England also carried on their roots an aphid called phylloxera. The vines from the US had developed resistance to phylloxera and were unaffected by its presence, but that was not the case for the vines in Europe. This is because all grape vines are the same genus, *vitis*, but there are more than 60 different species. The most common species in North America, *vitis labrusca*, *vitis rotundifolia* and *vitis riparia* have all developed resistance, but the species of Europe, *vitis vinifera* has not. Once the aphid landed in France in the 1850s the all-you-can-eat buffet was open and phylloxera came hungry.

To put the devastation into numbers, by 1878 more than 25% of all the vines in France were dead or dying of phylloxera. For many years the growers had no idea why their vines would shrivel and die, but by the 1860s the culprit was discovered. In defense the growers attempted to drown the little buggers by flooding their vineyards, others injected noxious, poisonous gas into the ground around the vines. Nothing worked until 1870 when a Missourian named Charles V. Riley theorized the solution, that the French *vinifera* vines could be grafted to resistant *rotundifolia* and *riparia* root stocks, which worked. Unfortunately the French, and other Europeans, were slow to adapt this solution fearing the wines would taste like their foxy, funky rootstock varieties. Thankfully by 1890 most regions began adopting root stocks, but not before half of all the vineyards in France were destroyed. France was not alone, by then phylloxera had devastated almost all the vineyards in Europe, except in areas where the soils were inhospitable to the louse. Today almost all vines growing in Europe are planted on root stock.

For my study I will present three different Cabernet Sauvignons; one planted on traditional root stock, one that is self-rooted, meaning no root stock, and one that is planted to a specific root stock called AxR1, which has it's own checkered history. I hope you enjoy this look into this obscure, but interesting topic.

## **2019 Andrew Will Cabernet Sauvignon Two Blondes - \$49**

The use of root stock is critical for many wine regions, but there are places in the world where climatic conditions present challenges to its use, and the soils are not conducive to the growth cycle of phylloxera. Chile and Argentina, most places in Spain all have substantial plantings of self-rooted vines. Closer to home, and more appropriate for our conversation, is Washington State, where the vast majority of vines are not planted on root stock.

This is because own rooted vines, meaning those planted without being grafted to root stock, have roots that go down farther into the soil than those on grafted root stocks, which have shallow growth habits. This is important in cold climates because if a hard freeze happens the vine is unlikely to die. When a hard freeze does occur it can kill the plant back to the ground, but the vine then shoots up new growth from the roots in the spring. These shoots are growth from the original vine, not whatever was used for the root stock. This saves the growers three years of farming with no fruit before a new plant, replanted after a hard freeze, would be productive. This is the case for the Andrew Will Cabernet Sauvignon, from their estate single vineyard in the Yakima Valley called Two Blondes.

Since 1989 winemaker Chris Camarda has been crafting some of Washington State's most compelling wines from his winery on Vashon Island, a 10 minute ferry ride from Seattle. Chris named his winery for his nephew, Andrew, and son, Will. Since his initial vintage in 1989 Chris has sourced grapes from many of Washington's best known sites, and is even a partner in the Champoux vineyard. Several years ago he assisted Sheridan vineyards in making a wine from their site near Zillah, in the Yakima Valley AVA. He was so impressed with the quality of the fruit that he and his business partner, Bill Fleckenstein, purchased the adjacent parcel, developed a vineyard and named it in honor of their two wives, Annie and Melody, who are both blonde.

Like almost all the vineyard sites in eastern Washington, the top soil that developed over billions of years was wiped off the surface during the Missoula floods that occurred during the last ice age. As a result the top soil that now exists is powdery loess, a fine, wind blown version that is not a habitat where phylloxera can grow. Also, it is the perfect medium for the roots to reach deep, protecting the vines from freeze, and it absorbs water well which is important in this semi-desert climate.

This is the third release of a Cabernet Sauvignon from the Two Blondes Vineyard, a scant 760 cases. Until 2017 grapes from this site were used to produce only a red blend, but due to the exceptional nature of the maturing vineyard Camarda decided to separate out two varietal bottlings, this and a Cabernet Franc. This wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon and is aged in 20% new French oak, the remainder neutral, for 19 months. I normally find Andrew Will wines to be a bit unyielding in youth, but this one is surprisingly approachable. Decant for a half hour and it delivers a rich combination of creme de cassis, dried black cherries and Damson plum preserves, intertwined with dark chocolate and roasted espresso beans. There is the classic Yakima dustiness that weaves around the deep fruit, with nice freshness and smooth, polished tannins. Drink now through 2030.

#### **AXR Cabernet Sauvignon 2019 - \$49**

Old timers like me remember when, in the late 1980s, phylloxera struck California and wiped out almost all the vineyards. At the time the California wine scene was not that big and there was a lot less vineyard land than today, in fact I can still remember walnut orchards and corn fields in the middle of Napa Valley. It was not the first time that the Golden State suffered from phylloxera, with the first outbreak occurring in the 1860s. Like the experience in Europe, the devastating aphid is thought to have hitched a ride west with the waves of settlers, some of whom brought cuttings from their eastern US vineyards. Also like the French, California wineries began to replant their vineyards with root stocks, and the most common eventually became AxR1, developed by Frenchman Victor Ganzin.

Like many botanists of the mid-1800s, Ganzin was eager to develop a phylloxera resistant root stock that would save the wine industry. Recognizing the hesitancy of French grape growers to use those exclusively developed from American vines, his most successful version is a crossing he developed in 1879 of the French variety Aramon Noir with an American wild vine *vitis rupestris*. He called the root stock AxR (Aramon x Rupestris), after the parents. At first the root stock was well received due to high yields and phylloxera resistance. Unfortunately, thanks to the Aramon component, by 1903 the French began to experience phylloxera issues and they stopped using the root stock. Sadly for California wineries, UC Davis continued to recommend the root stock into the 1980s, despite warnings from the French that it was not phylloxera resistant. When the first wave of North Coast wineries began to develop after the Judgement of Paris in 1976, most planted their vines on AxR1. This created a ticking time bomb for the young wineries, and by 1989 it exploded. Virtually all the vineyards of the region needed to replant except for some old vineyards grafted on a rootstock called St. George. This low vigor root stock was favored for its resistance to drought and used by farmers who wished to dry farm, which means no irrigation. Also in some small pockets of Napa Valley, where vines grow in sandy soils, those vines planted to AxR1 survived since phylloxera cannot live in those conditions. Our feature for this month is made up from vines growing in those small pockets.

The AXR winery is the creation of four wine loving friends, Don Van Laeken, Kelly Trevethan and Mark Schratz and winemaker Jean Hoefliger. I thought it odd that a winery would dedicate itself to the promotion of wines made from grapes grown on AxR1 rootstock until I did a bit of digging. It turns out that Jean Hoefliger, who is Swiss by birth, was brought to Napa Valley in 1991 to work with Newton Vineyards, who still farm some vineyards planted on AxR1. Jean's previous work was in Bordeaux, working for Lynch-Bages, and Meerlust in South Africa. Eventually Jean moved on to open Alpha Omega as their head winemaker and still consults for several wineries in the valley. He partnered with the founding partners of AXR specifically because of their estate vineyard, V. Madrone, is planted on AxR1. This 3.5 acre

vineyard located north of the town of St. Helena is a historic property with a history of winemaking that stretches back to the 1880s.

Until the release of this wine AXR focused primarily on small batches of pure Cabernet Sauvignon releases from several single vineyards. This wine is a departure in that it is a Cabernet Sauvignon dominant blend, produced from three vineyards around Napa Valley; Furtado Vineyard in Stags Leap District, Hossfeld Vineyard on Atlas Peak and Sodara Vineyard in Coombsville. Unlike their previous releases, this wine is also a blend, being 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Cabernet Franc, 4% Merlot and 1% Petit Verdot. Most of the wine was fermented in stainless steel, but 20% was actually barrel fermented, a very expensive process. The wine was then aged in French oak barrels, 40% new, for 16 months before release.

The distributor presented this wine as the winery's first "ready-to-drink" release, and while it is fairly open knit, it still needs some time. The nose is a refreshing combination of fresh black raspberries, dried black cherries, cocoa powder, soy sauce and black licorice. On the palate it shows some oak tannins, with very good depth and concentration. I think the tannins will need to resolve for a year or two, so drink between 2025-2035.

### **2011 Hestan Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon "Stephanie" - \$69**

For my final selection I want to present a Cabernet Sauvignon from vineyards planted after the phylloxera scourge of the late 1990s. This one has the added bonus of being 11 years old and at the apex of the drinking curve. Additionally, the 52 acre Hestan Vineyard is located on the eastern edge of Napa Valley, on a series of rolling hills and valleys that have a diverse selection of soil types and exposures.

While tragic in the cost to wineries in lost production and expense of replanting, the bright light of the issue is that many wineries were able to fix mistakes made in their early days, before many understood the complexities of viticulture. This is because many 1970s vineyards were planted mostly on the whim of the owner, often with blocks of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay adjacent to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. By the 1980s it was apparent that it was far too hot in most of Napa Valley to grow Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay, so they were replaced with varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, and Franc, that thrive in the heat. However, they also learned that the rich soils of Napa Valley can cause the vines to produce too much crop, producing thin wines, and one way to naturally fix the problem is with root stock.

After the failure of AxR1, vineyard owners began to look at root stock in a different way. Vineyards across California enjoy a near perfect set of growing conditions, with the exception of water, and while most would consider this a great thing, it does present some issues for those attempting to produce world class wines. Thankfully, advances in the subject of root stocks in the 20th century allowed for matching to soil type, water availability and nutrients, and scion selection, or grape variety to be grown, just to name a few factors. There is no one magic bullet for which root stock is ideal for a site, and for this reason growers frequently use a mix of root stocks in their vineyard, looking for the best possible outcome.

When Stanley and Helen Cheng purchased this former cattle ranch in 1996, they did so because of the unique microclimate and soil conditions of this sprawling estate. The entire property is 227 acres, of which 110 are planted to vines, in a non-AVA area known as Gordon Valley. At the time of purchase Stanley hired Mark Herold, formerly of Merus, as winemaker. In 2009 Thomas Rivers Brown, the original winemaker of Schrader, was brought on for their Hestan and Meyer wines, as well as Jeff Gaffner, who oversees the production of the Stephanie brand.

In all the Cheng's produce 4 different brands from their estate vineyards. Hestan is the flagship; Meyer is produced from vineyard blocks below the family residence on the property. Stephanie is a brand named for their daughter, which originally was a Bordeaux inspired red blend, but they now also produce limited quantities of the varietal components. Jeff Gaffner also produces their Vincent Christopher Pinot Noir, which they made from a vineyard they own on the Sonoma Coast.

When farming a property as big as the Hestan estate, there are many differences in exposures, soil types and overall vigor of the soil. When this estate was planted all of these factors were considered, so there is a diverse array of root stocks, varietals, trellising techniques and orientations. As a result the property is able to craft many different styles, some built for immediate pleasure, other capable of aging. Gaffner first took the helm of Stephanie in 2004 after working under Dick Arrowood at Chateau St. Jean in Sonoma. He was part of the team that created Cinq Cepage, a five varietal blend and a Wine Spectator #1 wine of the year. Originally the Stephanie label was to be a Napa version of Cinq Cepage, but after a few years the components earmarked for this wine were so good that they began to bottle some individually. As luck would

have it I found enough cases of the 2011 at a local distributor to present a wine that is in the perfect window of drinkability.

When you are ready to serve the 2011 Stephanie it is one wine that I do not recommend decanting. Pour the first glass or two, then wait about 10 minutes before starting to drink. I found this wine unwinds nicely for about 2 hours before it starts to drop off, so decanting will only hasten the evolution. This wine shows the complex combination of dried oak leaves, Luxardo cherries, milk chocolate, menthol, ponzu and soy sauce. On the palate you can see how this wine has managed to evolve so nicely, with high toned notes of fresh red fruits, moderate concentration and a persistent finish. This wine will probably evolve for another few years but it's hard to believe it will be better than now. Drink now through 2027.