



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Understanding European wine labels is tricky, and frankly I do not think that the logic applied by producers and government officials favors casual consumers. The label is supposed to demonstrate a reasonable expectation of style and quality, expressed in the origin or variety from which the wine is made. Too often it is confusing and obscure to all but the most dedicated fans. I can think of dozens of examples of confusing, or overly complicated wine labels from regions across Europe, but to show you that they occasionally get it right, this month I have selected two wines from Italy. When both of these wines were originally created in the early 2000's they fell outside of the rules for their respective regions. Thanks to some logic applied by their governing bodies they now fall within the rules and still demonstrate authentic, modern winemaking from ancient regions.

2019 Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona Toscana Rosso - \$18

I discovered this estate with the release of their 1990 Brunello di Montalcino, a wine that changed my perception of the category. Where many of the Brunello I tasted in those days were rustic, and even a little funky, theirs was polished and refined, leading the way for so many estates today. In fact, the longest running vertical I have in my cellar is their Brunello, and their single vineyard, Pianrosso, of which I have over ten vintages each aging away. Of course at more than \$80 for their current vintage Brunello, and \$100 for the Pianrosso, I do not break those out very often. Thankfully, the Bianchini family makes this wine which is an everyday wine that still shows their sophisticated style.

The Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona estate dates back to the 17th century when the palace was built by Fabivs de' Vecchis, Bishop of Montalcino and Abbot of Sant'Antimo Abbey. It passed through the hands of several royal family members until in 1985 the countess Elda Ciacci died with no heirs and bequeathed the entire property to Giuseppe Bianchini, her longtime caretaker. Recognizing the incredible potential of the neglected estate, Giuseppe, along with his children, Paolo and Lucia, they set out to produce world class wine. Their first step was to build a modern cellar in the early 1990s, and then to expand their vineyards where the soil and exposition were most favorable. Today they are seen as one of the great crown jewels of the Montalcino region, due in large part to their extensive holdings in the cru of Castelnuovo dell'Abate.

Today this estate is more than 480 acres, with roughly 120 acres of vines and another hundred of olive trees. Like almost all the producers in the region they craft several tiers of wine, not just expensive Brunello di Montalcino. In fact, producers in the region are required to produce a portion of their wines in other categories, the logic being that not all parts of the vineyard, or even every barrel of wine, are exceptional. By producing less expensive wines it allows the producers to use the grapes or wines that may not be flagship quality without having to dump it out or sell it to a bulk producer for pennies on the dollar. A good case in point is this wine from Ciacci, which is made entirely from estate grapes but sells for less than a quarter of their flagship Brunello.

To produce this wine the family uses the young vines destined for Brunello di Montalcino and Rosso di Montalcino production, as well as older vines in soils with heavier clays. In the case of both, the vines are more prodigious and produce a higher yield of grapes than the Bianchini family feels represents the quality of their top wines. To help build body into the wine they blend this wine with 15% of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. What I like about this wine is that the Sangiovese character still shines, but it has enough texture to still work nicely on the table with hearty fare. To make an even more complex wine they age the Sangiovese in large, chestnut *botti* (large Slovenian ovals up to 5000L), while the Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot components are aged in small, French barriques and glass lined tanks. After the wine is blended it is returned to tank for a few months before bottling.

When you are ready to open this wine, make sure to decant it for a few minutes to open up the bouquet. Then on the nose it rewards you with an enticing combination of ripe, sweet cherries, dried red plums, black tea leaves, dried orange peel, and a very subtle note of blackberry. On the palate it is plump but quickly shows tannin restraint, which you do not expect for this price and category. Good now, this wine will drink nicely until 2024. Serve with pasta Bolognese, pizza with plenty of pepperoni or lamb shish kabobs marinated with oregano, garlic and lemon.

2018 Zenato Rosso Veronese “Alenera” - \$18

The origin of the Zenato estate outside of Verona is considerably younger, founded in 1960, but their contribution to the modernization of the region is no less significant than that of Ciacci Piccolomini in Tuscany. When established, founders Sergio and Carla Zenato focused on making the traditional white wine of their region, Trebbiano di Lugana. They quickly expanded into the neighboring region and began producing Valpolicella, the local red wine, as well. When Sergio and Carla’s kids, Carla and Alberto began to take over the winery in the 1990s they saw how well the “super Tuscan” wines were selling in the US, their most important market. Always a family focused on innovation, they began experimenting with fermentation and aging techniques, as well as blending with international varieties, as a way to bolster their own wines. One of their first successes is this wine, a take on Valpolicella that offers so much more.

For those unfamiliar with Valpolicella, it is produced with Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara grapes. Classically it is light and fruity, less than 13% alcohol, and similar to basic Chianti or French Beaujolais. In the 1930s some producers began air drying the grapes after harvest, dehydrating them, which gave them a richer, more concentrated wine. This style is called Amarone della Valpolicella, and most versions are nearly 16% alcohol. The Zenato family were one of the first to create a hybrid version of the two wines, called Ripasso, where they placed the Valpolicella on the skins of the Amarone and re-ferment the wine, adding another degree of alcohol to the Valpolicella. This version is called a Valpolicella Ripasso, because the wine is “re-passed” over the Amarone. Our feature is not made in this way but I want you to understand the difference between traditional wines of the region and the Alenera.

For Alenera the family begins with the classic Valpolicella local varieties, a mix of 55% Corvina, 25% Rondinella and 10% Corvinone. The last one is a distinct variety from Corvina that is similar enough that for decades the two were thought to be the same. To build body they pick the grapes later than for typical Valpolicella, but also blend 5% Merlot and 5% Cabernet Sauvignon into the wine. This small amount permits the classic flavors of the region to shine but adds a little extra color and body.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for a half hour for the nose to open and the wine to soften. Immediately the complex notes of rose petals, fresh strawberries, dried red cherries, leather, and dried hibiscus flowers jumps from the glass. On the palate the wine is forward and plump, with a soft, round finish. Serve with pizza, linguine with clam sauce or chicken parmigiano.

Linguine with Clam Sauce

Although this is a seafood dish it works really well with both red wines this month. It is a New York Times recipe I discovered a few years ago that makes a great weeknight meal. Yes, it does use canned clams, but frankly I find it almost as good as using whole clams and considerably less work.

1 pound linguine or other long pasta, such as linguine fini or spaghetti
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
5 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
½ to 1 teaspoon red-pepper flakes
½ teaspoon dried oregano
½ cup dry vermouth or dry white wine
2 (10-ounce) cans whole baby clams with their juices
Black pepper
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 teaspoons lemon zest (from 1 to 2 lemons)
½ cup chopped Italian parsley
Lemon wedges, for serving (optional)

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the pasta and cook according to package instructions until 2 minutes short of al dente (it will finish cooking in the sauce). Reserve 1/2 cup pasta water, then drain pasta.

While the pasta cooks, make your sauce: Heat the oil in a deep-sided 12-inch skillet over medium. Add the garlic, red-pepper flakes and oregano and cook until the garlic is pale golden, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the vermouth and simmer until reduced by half, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in the clams with their juices and cook until just warmed through, 1 to 2 minutes more. Taste and season with salt and pepper as needed.

Add the cooked pasta directly to the skillet along with the butter and lemon zest and toss until the butter has melted and the pasta is glossy with sauce. If needed, add 1/4 cup reserved pasta water. Stir in half the parsley.

Serve pasta topped with a drizzle of olive oil, if desired, and the remaining parsley. Serve lemon wedges alongside if you like.