



Tim's Wine Market

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As consumers we tend to look at the appellations listed on the bottle as statements of prestige and quality. For example, Napa is better than Sonoma. Sonoma is better than Mendocino or Paso Robles. Paso Robles is better than Lodi. But is this true? I think it is dangerous to speak in absolutes, especially when there are so many factors that contribute to what ends up inside a bottle of wine. However, as the old saying goes, "stereotypes exist for a reason."

For our April selections I have chosen one Cabernet from Napa Valley, and one that is exactly half the price, from the Lodi AVA in the Sacramento River delta. One is produced by a family winery, from 50 year old vines, hand-harvested and vineyards they have owned since the gold rush. The other is made from purchased grapes of unknown origin, with no pedigree, yet it sells for double the price. We will see which better suits your palate and discuss some of the reasons why each of these wines commands the price they sell for. There is no winner or loser, just simply an exercise in determining if price and place truly matter to you when it comes to quality Cabernet Sauvignon.

Peirano Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 - \$15

Like many settlers of California's Bay Area in the 19th century, Giacomo Peirano left his native Italy for the Golden State in the hopes of striking it rich. Unfortunately for Giacomo, he arrived in 1879, 30 years after the peak of the Gold Rush, and was unable to strike it rich in the manner he had hoped. Taking what was left of his 50 dollar fortune, he moved away from San Francisco, heading to the mining town of Lodi in the Central Valley. There he opened a general store, catering to the other busted miners and their families. Within a few years he had struck gold of a different kind, in the mercantile business. He then returned to Italy, married his sweetheart, and brought her to California with a suitcase full of cuttings, eager to return to his winemaking roots.

With the profits from his stores Giacomo purchased 300 acres of land, and he and his sons worked the vines while Maria kept track of the "original" family business. Throughout two World Wars, Prohibition, and the Great Depression, 4 generations of the Peirano family have maintained the original vineyards in California. Over the generations the Peirano family also purchased additional vineyard land, enabling them to grow newly-popular Cabernet Sauvignon and many other varieties. Current owner Lance Randolph (Giacomo's great-great-grandson) espouses the philosophy that, with the family's ample vineyard holdings, he is more than happy to cultivate a little bit of everything, and produces a staggering array of wines for all palates. They also sell a substantial amount of their grapes to other wineries, who often sell their "old vine" Zinfandel for twice as much as the Peirano "Immortal" Zinfandel.

A good case in point is the Heritage Cabernet Sauvignon. To make this wine, Lance sources all of the fruit from the family's Cabernet Sauvignon vines, most of which are at least 50 years old. Hand pruning and manual green harvest are employed to reduce yields and concentrate flavor, both expensive processes. After an extended skin maceration in stainless steel, the wine is fermented completely dry before racking to gently-used French and American oak, with 15% being new. After a year in barrel the wine is filtered and bottled.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant for 15-20 minutes. Once it has a little time to open up, this wine delivers notes of black cherry, boysenberry preserve, tart blackberry, star anise, and baking chocolate. Drink now through 2024 with skirt steak, brisket tacos, or eggplant parmigiana.

Matias Cabernet Sauvignon 2019 - \$30

As a rule I do not buy "virtual" wines for our clubs, which are those for which there is not a brick-and-mortar winery. There are exceptions of course, but to me the wines I select have to have, or at least tell a story, which is the case for this next wine. Do not go looking for Matias Winery when you visit Napa, it's not there. In spite of this the wine does a good job of showing exactly what makes Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon so distinctive and contrasts nicely with the Peirano bottling.

According to the technical information the grapes to make this wine were sourced from opposite ends of the Napa Valley, the warmer Yountville AVA on the valley floor, and vineyards in the northern AVA of Calistoga, also at much higher elevation. For a wine of this price that is really good pedigree, as most sub-\$30 Napa bottlings are from grapes farmed in the lesser areas of the valley. In those areas it is cooler so the sites are not considered prime, but the grapes sell for a lot less money. According to Wine Business Monthly, the average price for a ton of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes grown peaked in 2018 at a little more than \$8200 a ton. For reference the price dipped a little in 2019, to just below \$8000 a ton, went off the cliff in 2020 due to the fires then, rebounded in 2021 to \$8012. This is important to know because the quick math for how to determine the final price of the bottle is to take the cost per ton and divide by 100. So at \$8000 a ton you can expect that the wine will likely cost \$80 per bottle.

Remember that the cost per ton is only an average paid. Buying fruit from a famous single vineyard site, like Beckstoffer To-Kalon can cost as much as \$50,000 a ton. By the same token, a winery or label can also buy fruit from growers who focus on growing grapes destined for less expensive bottlings. Often the yield in those vineyards is twice as high as the average of Napa, and much of the work is done by machine, not farm workers. This greatly reduces the cost so in recent years it has been possible to buy Napa Valley Cabernet for as little as \$5000 a ton. Also, some prestigious vineyards sell the grapes that come from their young vines, which are not deemed worthy of their top wine, at a discount. Finally, remember that a wine listed as Napa Valley only has to contain 75% Napa Valley grapes. Many producers buy grapes from other areas and blend them into their Napa bottlings to help lower costs. How much does this effect the quality, we will never know.

To get back to our feature, which in my opinion is a heck of a bottle of Napa Cab for the price, the Matias is made basically the same way. The grapes are hand harvested, destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks using native yeasts. The big difference is this wine was aged in 60% new French oak barrels, in comparison to Peirano's 15% mixed oaks, and aged for a year before bottling.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant for at least half an hour. At that point the higher use of new oak is more obvious as the nose shows overt notes of caramel and toasted bread crumbs before giving way to heady aromas of blackberry preserves, black plum, Kalamata olive, clove and allspice. On the palate this wine is less fruit driven than the Peirano, showing slightly more obvious tannins and a more savory finish. Drink now through 2027 with ribeye steaks, grilled Portobello mushrooms, or beef carpaccio.

Lamb Spezzatino With Saffron and Mint

With Easter around the corner I thought it might be nice to suggest a lamb dish for this month. Lamb and Cabernet have an affinity for one another and this is an easy recipe from David Tanis' column in the New York Times. I am a huge fan of David's cookbooks, [**The Heart of the Artichoke**](#) and [**A Platter of Figs**](#), as well as his latest, [**Market Cooking**](#). For almost 20 years David was also the co-chef at Chez Panisse, the seminal Berkeley, CA restaurant that launched the farm-to-table movement. His cooking is rarely complex but if you buy good ingredients then the results are stunning.

**4 pounds lamb shoulder chops,
each cut 2 inches thick**
Salt and pepper
1/4 cup olive oil
2 cups diced red onion
4 cloves garlic, minced
Pinch of saffron
2 tablespoon tomato paste
1 cup dry white wine or vermouth
1 cup coarsely chopped fresh mint

Season chops generously with salt and pepper. Put olive oil in a wide deep skillet over medium-high heat. Lightly brown lamb on both sides, then remove and set aside. Lower heat to medium, add onion to pan and season with salt. Cook, stirring, until softened and lightly colored, about 5 minutes.

Stir garlic, saffron and tomato paste into onions and cook 1 minute. Add wine and simmer for 2 minutes, then return lamb to skillet. Add 4 cups water, just to cover meat, and bring to a boil. Put on lid, turn heat to low and simmer gently for about 45 minutes, until quite tender.

Remove lid and raise heat to a rapid simmer. Simmer until juices have reduced by nearly half and sauce has thickened somewhat (may be prepared ahead to this point). Taste and adjust seasoning. Just before serving, reheat and stir in chopped mint.