



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Myth Busting: TWM Style

Clau de Nell Anjou Cabernet Franc 2018 - \$59

Many consumers see Cabernet Franc as the weaker, less interesting parent to its more acclaimed progeny, Cabernet Sauvignon. It ripens earlier at slightly lower potential alcohol and produces wines that are generally less concentrated in color, weight and tannin. Oh yes, and then there is the issue of pyrazines, the compound that imbues most examples with a slightly peppery, or worse, 'green' aroma. However, currently wines produced from Cabernet Franc, especially those from the Loire Valley of France, are enjoying a moment. This is because the current trend is for wines with lower alcohol and those that better represent their place of origin. It is hard to find a better example than this wine produced by the husband and daughter of the late Anne-Claude Leflaive.

The Leflaive name is practically ubiquitous in Burgundy, as Anne-Claude's grandfather Joseph established Domaine Leflaive in 1905. Joseph built his domain in the early 1900s while much of the region was reeling from phylloxera and many growers were selling their land cheap. As a result, he built up an impressive holding of 62 acres, including substantial parcels of Grand Cru and Premier Cru vineyards. The successive generations have continued to add to the estate, and today rank near the top of the Burgundy hierarchy for both quality and price. In 1990, Anne-Claude and her cousin Olivier, who in 1994 left to establish Olivier Leflaive wines, assumed control of the estate.

Shortly after taking control, Anne began converting the family vineyards over to biodynamic farming, one of the first in the region to do so. In the decades that followed WWII, the growers used excessive levels of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, effectively killing the soil. In fact, one famous soils scientist of the time is even quoted as saying, "the sands of the Sahara are more fertile than those of Burgundy." Thanks to Anne's resources, commitment and stature, she convinced many estates in Burgundy to move away from conventional farming, and we reap the benefits today.

In the early 2000s, she and her husband, Christian Jacques, established a company to help vignerons convert their farming over to biodynamics. That was when they met the owners of Clau de Nell, a spectacular site in the Loire Valley. Undercapitalized, they were unable to produce wine, but the quality of their grapes was outstanding. In 2008, the couple purchased this estate and immediately began to overhaul the vineyards and winery.

What makes this 30-acre estate unique is that it sits on the crown of a hill, with the vineyards facing due south, which is the perfect exposure. At the top of the hill, the soils are thin and sandy, close to the bedrock tuffeau, which is clay/limestone. This soil is ideal for naturally restricting the yield of the semi-vigorous Cabernet Franc vines, so yields are naturally about three tons per acre (that is less than Grand Cru Burgundy). The location and old vines, 45-55 years, gives this wine a level of concentration that few of their neighbors can boast, as well as an underlying core of minerality that is accentuated by the certified biodynamic farming practice.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for half an hour and give it a slight chill. The nose is an effusive combination of fresh tart cherries, Luxardo syrup, green peppercorns, hops and tobacco. On the palate it is quite concentrated, with deep veins of stoney minerality streaking through the wine, with firm tannins and lively acidity. Drink 2022 through 2030.

Queiron Rioja Mi Lugar Rioja de Autor 2018 - \$55

When it comes to Rioja, there is a popular misconception that the best wines come from the sub-zone of Rioja Alta. This selection dispels that idea, particularly through the lens of one of the region's most acclaimed and hottest producers.

Although the wines of Rioja can trace their history back to at least Roman times, the modern history of Rioja functionally begins in the late 1800s, as French winemakers flocked to the area escaping phylloxera. They brought better viticulture and winemaking processes to the wines, including the practice of blending. In Rioja the dominant grape is Tempranillo, sometimes supported by other varieties such as Garnacha (Grenache) for weight and Graciano for color and complexity. However, the Rioja region is actually a very geologically diverse area, and producers find that each sub-zone produces

wines with distinct qualities. Both Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa sit at higher elevations and produce wines that are powerful and long-lived. By contrast, the lower elevation vineyards of Rioja Oriental (formerly Rioja Baja) were used for blending and producing cheaper, bulk bottlings, because the dominant variety is actually Garnacha, not Tempranillo. The French, turned Spanish, producers used grapes grown in all three regions to craft blends that until a few years ago were considered the archetype Rioja.

Then in the 1980s, producers from all three sub-zones began to recognize that what makes their wines unique is actually a benefit, not an attribute to be blended away. It took a few decades of battling between traditionalists and modernists, but in 2017 the Rioja Consejo (who regulate winemaking in the region) finally allowed for official single vineyard labeling as well as the category of Vinos de Pueblo, or village wines. These new expressions are championed by winemakers in all three regions who feel theirs are distinctive expressions of Rioja.

My selection this quarter is produced by the Queiron winery, which is a single village project produced by the Cuevas family. Now in their fifth generation, the family farms an expansive estate located in the Rioja Oriental with their winery located in the village of Quel. Like most producers in the Oriental, the family grew grapes and sold them to larger firms until the 1980s, when Gabriel Pérez Cuevas began producing and bottling under his own label. They farm almost 800 acres, all in the Rioja Oriental, with many of their sites at lower elevation near the Ebro River, where the clay soils produce Garnacha- and Tempranillo-based bulk wines. Where they feel their wines elevate above the rest is with this wine, produced from their most acclaimed vineyard, the 240-acre La Montesa. This site reaches as high as 2,100 feet above sea level, where the cooler temperatures produce wines of impressive structure and finesse.

The blend for this wine is 90% Tempranillo and 10% Garnacha. All of the grapes are hand-harvested and sorted three times to ensure only the perfect grapes make it to the fermentor. Then, the gentle process of maceration begins with five days of cold soaking followed by a cool fermentation with minimal punch downs and no pump overs. Once dry, the wine is racked to a mix of 80% French and 20% American oak, all new, where it ages for 18 months. The wine is then assembled and aged an additional six months in tanks before bottling.

Decant this wine for at least half an hour before serving, longer is even better. Then it delivers classic Rioja aromas of new leather, wet red clay, cigar box, muddled black raspberries, oolong tea and blood orange. On the palate this wine is relatively firm, with oak tannins providing significant frame to the moderate finish. Drink 2022 through 2035.

Fontanabianca Barbaresco 2018 - \$46

We sell a lot of Barolo, but for some reason the wines from the nearby commune of Barbaresco are not as popular. In fact, many times customers remark that they find Barbaresco too “feminine,” which I find humorous, as to me there is very little difference between top examples from either commune. This selection sets the record straight and shows that good Barbaresco can be just as complex, powerful and age-worthy as Barolo.

Barbaresco, like Barolo, is produced using only the Nebbiolo grape, and the regions share similar soil types. The three communes of Barbaresco (Barbaresco, Nieve and Treiso) all lie along the Tanaro River while the 11 villages of Barolo create a bowl between the northern and southernmost sites. Most of the vineyards of Barbaresco are around 1,000 feet above sea level, while those of Barolo start about that height and go up to 1,600. There is also a slight difference in exposition, as most of the vineyard sites of Barolo face south, southwest and southeast. In Barbaresco the best sites face east or west, allowing the vines to capture more of the sun all day. For these reasons, the vineyards in Barbaresco are typically harvested a couple of weeks earlier than Barolo, but that is the only major difference.

Our feature selection comes from the Fontanabianca, a family-owned winery established in 1969 by Franco Pola. Today, the estate is managed by his son, Aldo, and his wife, Luisella, along with their two boys, Matteo and Francesco. Their goal is to typify not just the character of Barbaresco in their wines, but specifically those of the commune of Nieve. They produce this regular Barbaresco as well as two cru bottlings, Seraboella and Bordini, along with Dolcetto, Barbera and a few other wines.

For this wine, they farm a single 14-acre parcel where the vines are 30+ years old. Fontanabianca is part of a movement called ‘The Green Experience’ that promotes sustainable farming methods. After the grapes are hand-harvested, they are fermented in temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks, then aged in large oak foudre and a few older barriques.

After this wine has been decanted for half an hour, it shows a complex nose of fresh cherries, red licorice, dried orange peel and pipe tobacco. On the palate it shows superb concentration, with vivid acidity and tannins that soften a bit into the finish. Drink 2023 through 2030.