



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Looking at the membership rolls for the Reserve Club I am happy to see that statistically almost all of you are still with me after my write up last quarter, a magnum opus on one of the least interesting topics in wine, root stock. This quarter all of my selections are themed around resurrection, both of people and wineries. Each of these selections have undergone radical changes, from one owner to the next, and yet their quality endures.

## **2019 Vineyard 29 Cabernet Sauvignon “Cru” - \$69**

Anyone who has ever visited Vineyard 29 can attest to how incredible the property, winery and tasting room are, even amidst the architectural oneupmanship that is Napa Valley. However, Vineyard 29 did not start out as a modern edifice surrounded by a sea of vines. The original Vineyard 29 was a much smaller affair, but after an ownership change and good fortune that all changed.

When Teresa Norton and Tom Paine first moved to Napa Valley in 1989 their plan was to enjoy a quiet retirement. They planted almost three acres of vines using cuttings from their next door neighbor, the fabled single acre estate Grace Family Vineyards. In 1992 they released their first bottling, a couple of hundred cases, and it was met with the same enthusiasm as Grace so soon they too were available only if you were on their mailing list. Then in 2000 Teresa and Tom decided to actually retire and sold Vineyard 29 to Chuck & Anne McMinn. That same year the iconic Aida Vineyard came up for sale and the McMinn's purchased that too, radically changing Vineyard 29 from a retirement project to a full blown endeavor.

Located 2 miles north of the original vineyard, and also on Highway 29, the Aida vineyard was a commercial vineyard since the 1920s and home to one of the most iconic blocks of old vine Zinfandel in the valley. The McMinn's set out replanting 8.75 acres primarily to Bordeaux varieties while maintaining the legendary old vine Zinfandel block. Today they produce the estate wines from these vineyards.

Additionally Vineyard 29 produces the Cru bottlings which are meant to show the style of the winery but in a more approachable style suitable to drink young. Roughly 60% of the grapes for this Cabernet were farmed from vineyards neighboring the Aida estate. Then Winemaker Keith Emerson uses grapes from 14 other vineyards, a combination of valley floor and mountain sites, to craft a wine that is balanced and indicative of the Vineyard 29 style. For the 2018 the final blend is 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Merlot, 4% Petite Verdot, 3% Cabernet Franc and 2% Malbec. The wine was aged in French oak barrels for 18 months, with half the barrels being new.

I have been lucky enough to taste many vintages of Vineyard 29 Cabernet but I often even more impressed with the Cru bottling, which is roughly a third of the price. It is not hard to make an impressive bottle of Napa Cab for \$200, but each time I taste the Cru I am blown away at what they deliver for this price. Decant this wine for a half hour and the nose practically explodes from the glass with aromas of cooked blackberries, black currants, milk chocolate, ponzu and espresso crema. On the palate this wine delivers a massive wave of fruit that is framed by soft, integrated tannins. Drink 2022-2028.

## **2017 Basel Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon “Double River” - \$59**

I typically do not feature the same winery in a club as often as this, with a Basel feature in January as well, but given my theme for the quarter this wine fits so nicely. Also, the 2017 is dynamite and given this is the last time I will be able to buy the Basel wines the decision was pretty easy.

As I mentioned in my last write up, Basel Cellars is no longer. The last owners sold the winery in December, 2020 to a hospitality group based in Walla Walla who have now converted the property to Yellowhawk, an event venue that also makes sparkling wines. All of the wine that was not already bottled was sold off in bulk but a few hundred cases still remain under the Basel Cellars label. Their national sales manager, Leo Kirk, has been selling it off piece by piece to long time supporters like us. The final vintage of their estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Double River, is quite a swan song.

What we knew as Basel Cellars was not actually built as a winery when the property was originally developed. The first owners planted the vineyards and built their residence on the property, that they christened the "Estate House" in 1997. The original estate was quite a showpiece, with commanding views of the Walla Walla wine region and the two rivers for which the estate vineyard is named. Following a divorce the property and vineyard were purchased by Greg Basel, a local grape grower. In addition to the palace that is the Estate House, Basel also converted the 9600 square feet underground garage, which held the car collection, into the winery. In 2004 Basel invited Steve and Jo Marie Hansen to become investors in Basel Cellars, then in 2011 they assumed full control. No word was given to why the Hansen's sold the property but it is likely that 18 years was simply enough.

What makes the Double Vineyard so unique is it lies at the junction of the Walla Walla River and one of its tributaries. This is because much of the Columbia River AVA is nearly devoid of topsoil due to the Missoula floods. These were a series of massive floods which washed across the Pacific Northwest at the end of the ice age. The effect was impressive, carving out the Columbia River gorge and depositing the top soil of eastern Washington in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. However these floods frequently missed the Walla Walla growing area so the soils are deeper, which produce denser, more concentrated wines than the norm.

When you open this wine you only need to decant this wine for about an hour for the bouquet to fully develop. Then it explodes from the glass with a red centered nose of cooked red cherries and plums, along with a hint of menthol, Szechwan peppercorns and milk chocolate. On the palate it delivers nicely balanced acidity and smooth, soft tannins. Drink with grilled pork tenderloin, mushroom pasta or slow braised short ribs. Drink 2021-2026.

### **2018 Taaibosch Crescendo - \$49**

I do not hide my enthusiasm for the wines of South Africa and preach the gospel of their quality every chance I get. After visiting their wine lands in 2016 I returned convinced it is the most exciting of all the evolving New World areas of production. The reason for my enthusiasm is the range of wine produced by the geographically diverse wine regions. Even their most famous region, Stellenbosch, has many different mesoclimates that allow for specialized production of many grape varieties and styles of wine. This quarter I present one example, inspired by the great wines of the Right Bank of Bordeaux.

The Taaibosch winery is a boutique estate on the slopes of Helderberg Mountain in Stellenbosch. Taaibosch is a new winery, built on the remains of the Cordoba winery which last bottled wine with the 2003 vintage. Cordoba, under the guidance of winemaker Chris Keet, was the first South Africa winery to produce a predominantly Cabernet Franc wine in 1995. Although the wines enjoyed a cult status they folded and the property sat on the market for a decade before being purchased by the Oddo family from France. The Oddo family have vast resources, owning a financial services company, and wineries and vineyards across the globe. According to their new winemaker, Schalk-Willem Joubert this is the crown jewel of their holdings. They have built a new, state-of-the-art winery and are replanting several vineyards that have suffered from a decade of apathetic farming.

According to both Chris Keet and Schalk-Willem, the Taaibosch winery is the perfect place to produce wines made from the Cabernet Franc grape. Their vineyards lie on the east side of the Heldeberg Mountain, on steep slopes that overlook False Bay to the south. The elevation of the site is between 1000-1200 feet so the area has warm days but cool nights, helped by cooling winds off the nearby Indian Ocean. Under these conditions the vines slowly ripen the grapes while they retain great natural acidity. Also contributing to the complexity of the wine is the unique soil of this vineyard. Most of the vineyards of Stellenbosch are planted in decomposed Table Mountain sandstone atop a granite bedrock. At Taaibosch the vines sit on a thin veil of Malmesbury shale which accentuates the minerality and freshness of their wines.

Since acquiring Taaibosch in 2016 the Oddo family has began the conversion to organic farming. All of the grapes are hand harvested into small lug buckets, then meticulously sorted by hand at the winery to ensure only the best grapes go into the fermentor. Each component is fermented separately and aged for 13 months in 30% new French oak. The wine was then assembled, 65% Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot and 5% Cabernet Sauvignon, and aged for an additional year in concrete tanks before bottling.

Decant this wine for a half hour before serving. The nose will blossom to reveal a heady combination of fresh black cherries, dried cranberries, graphite, thai basil, fennel seed and leather. On the palate this wine has superb concentration, with a savory, mineral, fruit interplay that reminds me more of St. Emilion than any wine from Stellenbosch. Drink 2022-2032.