



Tim's Wine Market

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This month, we continue our tour of wines from the Southern Hemisphere with a jaunt “down under” to look at what is happening in Australia. Of course Shiraz is considered the most important variety, but of late there has been a better appreciation for old vine Grenache, so this month we examine excellent examples of both.

Tait “The Wild Ride” Shiraz Blend 2018 - \$25

Like so many winemakers before him, Giovanni Tait emigrated to Australia from Europe in 1957 to seek his fortune. Originally from Italy with Scottish roots, Giovanni was employed as a cooper and ended up working for Seppelts and Sons, one of the elite producers of the day. After a few years in the Barossa Valley, he witnessed the rise of small production estate wineries as many shifted away from fortified wine production to table wines. Once his sons, Michael and Bruno, were old enough to join him, they opened Tait Family Winery in 1997 where they continue his legacy today.

The Tait brothers focus on full-bodied red wines, so it comes as no surprise that the older-vine Shiraz plantings of the Barossa Valley make up the majority of their production. Partnerships with neighboring winegrowers enable the brothers to select their favorite parcels, as well as incorporate varieties not grown on their own property, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Mourvedre (locally known as Mataro). Although Bruno had been trying to develop a Grenache-based wine following the success of their “Ball Buster” Barossa Shiraz, the results did not meet his quality standards. Frustrated, he hopped on his motorcycle and sped off on an angry drive through the Barossa Valley to clear his head.

This proved to be a blessing in disguise, as to hear Bruno tell the story he rode down the highway passing through many of his neighbors’ vineyard holdings. He noticed several old-vine parcels of Mataro that he hadn’t seen before and it occurred to him that Australia’s traditional “GSM” blends are primarily composed of Grenache. While this worked well for some producers, Bruno wanted to try something different. Returning home, he formulated a plan for a new wine, a Shiraz with Grenache and Mataro included in smaller amounts. The name “Wild Ride” refers not only to Bruno’s love of motorcycles but to the nearly four vintages it took in order to perfect this wine.

To make this wine, each variety comes from a separate vineyard site in the Barossa Valley, with the Grenache sourced from ungrafted vines upwards of 80 years old. After fermentation and 18 months of aging, the three varietals are blended together. The finished blend is then racked back into barrels for six more months, before being bottled without fining or filtration.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant for at least half an hour. On the palate, there are classic Barossa notes of black plum, cooked blackberry and red cherry alongside hints of dried herbs, clove, vanilla and earth. Drink now through 2024 with lamb chops, cheeseburgers, chicken kebabs or anything cooked on the grill.

Thistledown Gorgeous Grenache 2021 - \$20

Australian Grenache is basically an unknown category in the US, but prior to the late 1970s, most of the wine produced in Australia was fortified (like Port) so varietal character was not important. Producers focused on high-yielding varieties, like Grenache, which gave them plenty of wine to build their port-style wines. When Shiraz took off in the late 1980s, most wineries never planted any new Grenache vines favoring Shiraz. Today there are thousands of acres of Grenache vines older than 50 years, which is when they start producing really interesting fruit. This is why dozens of wineries now put their Grenache wines forward as their flagship production, including the dynamic duo of Thistledown, Giles Cooke and Fergal Tynan, coincidentally both Masters of Wine.

In the case of Giles and Fergal, after years of working in the trade and tasting thousands of wines each year, this led them to crave wines that were specific to varietal correctness and site specificity. Typically the red grape that defines these qualities is Pinot Noir, but that is not very common in Australia. However, there are thousands of acres of Grenache, most quite old, and it is a variety that can be made in a way that achieves the same goal. With this in mind, they launched Thistledown Wine Company, which produces wines focused on site-specific wines, or in the case of their entry-level Gorgeous Grenache, examples of varietal purity.

Like me, the importer for Thistledown, Ken Onish, is an obsessive reader and probably receives dozens of email newsletters about wine. Often he forwards interesting articles to me, and right before this wine arrived, he sent me one entitled “Grenache, the poor man’s Pinot Noir.” The premise, of which I completely agree, is that both varieties are thin-skinned and not known for deep color. In many parts of the world where Grenache is used, particularly the Rhone Valley of France and many parts of Spain, yields are low and winemaking involves extended skin contact to extract maximum color. However, most Australian winemakers, Thistledown included, produce lighter examples that are more articulate. To make this wine, they actually use several sites across South Australia, fermenting each batch in small lots to maintain control over extraction. They also use a fair amount of whole clusters, meaning stems, and wild yeasts. After fermentation, the wine is aged in larger, neutral oak barrels.

Some of you may remember that we featured the 2019 vintage of this wine a couple of years ago, the first feature in the US of this wine. When we tasted the new release, 2021, I decided to select it again as it is one of the best examples I have tasted and a bargain compared with so many others.

As with all wines bottled under screw cap, I strongly encourage you to decant this a half-hour before serving. When this wine splashes into the glass, it jumps out with notes of fresh and dried cherries, muddled black raspberries, star anise, cinnamon, thyme and bay leaf. On the palate the fruit is forward and plump, with integrated tannins and only a minor background of acidity. Drink 2022 through 2025 with roast chicken, lamb kabobs or brisket chili.

Lamb Shish-Kabob with Rosemary-Mint Marinade

Where I grew up in western Pennsylvania, my family frequently ate “lamb on the rod” prepared as my Dad had learned from a couple of Syrian acquaintances in the late 1970s. At a time when chicken breast meat was considered exotic, we ate lamb like it was going out of style. This version is very similar to what I remember, except for a pepper sauce I have never been able to replicate, but does not work with wine anyway. If you do not like lamb, substitute a chuck roast, and if you do not grill you can always cook under the broiler, which is just an upside down grill.

10 fresh mint leaves

1 ½ teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary

2 tablespoons lemon juice

½ tablespoon grated lemon zest

4 medium cloves garlic, peeled

½ cup olive oil

1 teaspoon table salt

⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper

Shish Kebab

2 ¼ pounds boneless lamb leg (shank end), trimmed of fat and silver skin and cut into 1-inch pieces

3 bell peppers, 1 red, 1 yellow, and 1 orange (about 1 ½ pounds), each cut into twenty-four 1-inch pieces

1 large red onion (about 12 ounces), cut into thirty-six ¾-inch pieces

lemon or lime wedges for serving (optional)

FOR THE MARINADE: Process all ingredients in work bowl of food processor fitted with steel blade until smooth, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape sides of work bowl with rubber spatula as needed.

FOR THE SHISH KEBAB: Toss marinade and lamb in gallon-sized zipper-lock plastic bag or large, nonreactive bowl; seal bag, pressing out as much air as possible, or cover bowl and refrigerate until fully seasoned, at least 2 hours and up to 24 hours.

Ignite about 6 quarts (1 large chimney, or about 6 pounds) charcoal briquettes and burn until covered with thin coating of light gray ash, 20 to 30 minutes. Spread coals evenly over grill bottom, then spread additional 6 quarts unlit briquettes over lit coals. Position grill rack over coals and heat until very hot, about 15 minutes (you can hold your hand 5 inches above grill surface no longer than 2 seconds).

Meanwhile, starting and ending with meat, thread 4 pieces meat, 3 pieces onion (three 3-layer stacks), and 6 pieces pepper in mixed order on 12 metal skewers.

Grill kebabs, uncovered, until meat is well browned all over, grill-marked, and cooked to medium-rare, about 7 minutes (or 8 minutes for medium), turning each kebab one-quarter turn every 1 ¾ minutes to brown all sides. Transfer kebabs to serving platter, squeeze lemon or lime wedges over kebabs if desired, and serve immediately.