



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

As I sit down to write this the early reports are coming in from California about the 2022 harvest. The good news is quality again looks superb. The bad news is the drought, now in its 5th year, has decreased the quantity of grapes again. It will take a few weeks to know the exact size of the harvest but the drought is pervasive across the state so I imagine yields will be down 15-20% again. It does not take a crystal ball to see price increases in the future.

This quarter I present three unusual selections in that for two of them I broke my requirement that the wines come from a brick and mortar establishment. There is plenty to say about them so that is why I made the exception. But before we get to those, the first selection is a chance to taste the Best Cabernet Sauvignon in the World for 2022 according to the prestigious 2022 Concours International de Cabernet. The surprise is it comes from South Africa, but from the capable hands of David Finlayson. All three are in the style that you most likely love, but with some interesting backgrounds that might not receive attention otherwise.

2019 David Finlayson Cabernet Sauvignon "GS" - \$59

If you belong to either of our monthly clubs then you have likely received a wine from David Finlayson before, as I am a huge fan of his and have selected several wines over the years for clubs. Luckily I am in constant contact with his US importer and he clued me into the accolades this wine was going to receive before anyone else. There was not a lot available but they locked down enough for our club feature and a few extra bottles for anyone who wants to cellar a little more.

David Finlayson is a South African winemaker who works exclusively with older, high-elevation vineyards. The Finlayson family immigrated to the Western Cape from Scotland where David's grandfather, Dr. Maurice Finlayson, was a well-respected microbiologist. After turning his talents to winemaking and vineyard management in the Stellenbosch region, Maurice was joined by his sons, their wives, and eventually a slew of grandchildren by the early 1990s. Feeling a little bit cramped on the family estate, Walter Finlayson left the farm and worked for several other producers before purchasing the old Glen Carlou winery in Paarl, known for its old ungrafted vines. His son, David, joined him in the vineyard shortly after.

After a brief yet prestigious post-graduate stint working for Chateau Margaux, David returned to Glen Carlou to accept a position as head winemaker. Together, he and his father Walter revitalized the farm's older vineyards, specializing in French varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and of course, Cabernet Sauvignon. Then in 2004 they sold Glen Carlou to Donald Hess, of the Hess Collection, and purchased a new farm on the Simonsberg Mountain. He named the estate Edgebaston, for the town in England where David's mother grew up. This area is one of the warmer areas in the region, perfect for ripening varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

The GS designation for this wine is in honor of George Spies, who ran the Stellenbosch Farmers Winery in the 1960s. At that time most of the grapes grown in the region went into fortified wines, like port, but Spies experimented with table wine production as well. From 1965 to 1967 he produced and bottled a pure Cabernet Sauvignon which was very uncommon at the time as the grape was typically blended with Syrah or Cinsault to soften it. The wines were brutally tannic and when the cooperative came under new management in 1968 the project was abandoned. However, bottles of those wines continue to pop up at auction in South Africa and are now reported to be remarkable. In fact, they are so highly regarded that they command astronomical prices.

For his GS Cabernet Sauvignon, David farms a small, 4 acre parcel of clone 46A vines planted in 2000. He only uses the free run juice for this wine and it is barreled down in 100% new, 300 liter French oak barrels for 22-24 months. The reason I selected this wine is because David works to retain some of the herbal quality of Cabernet Sauvignon that is often lost in modern techniques. Being a small parcel the grapes are picked at the ideal time and are not overripe, which degrades the pyrazine compounds that create the aroma of peppers and herbs. After an hour of decanting you will see this as the wine reveals a complex combination of cooked blackberries and blueberries, milk chocolate, grains of paradise,

dried sage and a hint of menthol. On the palate it shows vivid acidity, obvious tannins and a lot of oak, but there is more than enough fruit to compensate. Drink 2024-2039.

2016 Square Nail Red Table Wine - \$55

When I tasted this wine a few weeks ago with the exclusive supplier for the US it struck me that this wine, while very good, is important because it reflects what will likely be a more common style for Napa Valley in a couple of decades. Many experts believe that with the rapid increase in temperatures across the globe it will be too warm to grow Cabernet Sauvignon in much of California by the middle of this century. While few vineyard owners admit it, many are experimenting with an extensive array of varieties that can handle drought and days, if not weeks, of temperatures above 100 degrees. This wine utilizes two varieties, Malbec and Petit Verdot, that are increasing in popularity in Napa for both their heat resistance and drought tolerance.

While the ancestral home of Malbec is the southwest of France, its center of gravity shifted to Argentina in the late 20th century. The variety has always been problematic in the cool, wet regions of the Southwest and acreage has declined steadily since the 1960s. However, Malbec's issues with mildew and frost are mitigated in warm, dry climates, hence its appeal in Mendoza and now Napa. In fact, dry conditions actually help de-vigor the vines to create wines with greater concentration. As for Petit Verdot, it is a variety that has been gaining popularity in climates too warm to sustain Merlot because it ripens after Cabernet Sauvignon. The only downside of the grape is it does not perform well in drought.

The vines used to make this wine come from blocks of the Napa Wine Company that do not go into their iconic label, Ghost Block. Winemaker Peter del Bondio used 56% Malbec and 44% Petit Verdot in the blend, and the wine was aged in mostly new oak for 24 months. (If his name sounds familiar, longtime wine drinkers may know Peter's name by his father, Brian del Bondio, who guided the Markham winery for decades.)

If the David Finlayson GS needs serious time to evolve, this one is wide open and ready to drink! (The second reason I selected it.) The nose is a dynamic combination of sassafras, dried figs, dark chocolate, violets, molasses and Luxardo cherries. On the palate it is extremely concentrated and dense, with obvious but well integrated oak and polished tannins. Drink 2022-2026.

2020 Torchbearer Cabernet Sauvignon - \$44

I cannot seem to get through any of the quarterly offerings without at least one wine not showing up as planned. I originally selected a different Napa Cab for this slot but alas, it is MIA and likely will never be seen. Luckily the same broker who works with Square Nail showed me this wine and had enough inventory for this club.

Torchbearer is assembled by Elliot Stern, who has been a fixture in the wine industry for years. I first learned of Elliot when he was one of the founders of The Sorting Table, an import company that made a big splash twenty years ago when they pried Zind-Humbrecht away from Kermit Lynch. After his stint at TST he settled down in Napa Valley where he farms a vineyard adjacent to Dalla Valle's Maya site, where he produces Oakville East. Several years ago I met Elliot at his house, along with my franchisees at the time, where we tasted his Oakville East wines. Today he also produces a series of wines under several labels that he sources from sites across the North Coast. This wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, primarily from vineyards in Oakville but includes a couple of parcels closer to Calistoga.

It was interesting standing in Elliot's vineyard at the top of the Vaca Mountains and observing the valley as he does. Looking west across the valley he pointed out that the vineyards on the western side of the valley lie in the shade of the Mayacamus Mountains for much of the afternoon. As a result the vineyards on the East side of the valley, particularly those in the mountains, enjoy up to four hours more sun each day during the growing season. He showed me statistics that grapes harvested on the East side are a full degree higher in potential alcohol than those on the West side. With regard to the last wine, I wonder how that plays out for him now?

To produce this wine the grapes are cold soaked for four days before fermentation. Once dry the wine is aged in first and second pass French oak barrels for 16 months, then bottled. Decant this wine for a half hour before serving and the nose offers up a rich combination of kirsch, black currant preserves, allspice, cardamom, dried dates and buttercream frosting. On the palate this wine shows impressive concentration with obvious oak creating a tannic frame that persists well into the finish. Drink 2022-2030.