



Tim's Wine Market

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By J.P. Donnelly-Davis

After a great deal of internal discussion it is time to announce that starting in January 2023, we will be taking our first price increase for membership in the Explorers Club. The price is increasing to \$39 per month, from the current \$29, excluding sales tax. While it is easy to blame inflation for this increase, the reality is it has been overdue for a few years. We launched this club in June 2005 and have never increased the price but frankly the quality we can offer at this current price is becoming increasingly limited. Rather than select one virtual wine after another we feel that we can offer much better quality, from family owned wineries, by breaking through to another level. We hope you understand and encourage you to try it for a few months. We strongly believe the difference will be obvious and you will not be disappointed.

The response to the paragraph above has been very supportive from the customers I have spoken to, with a lot of positive comments about the new wines I will bring you in 2023. In these times we are sympathetic to the increasing cost of everything and appreciate the support. To emphasize why the price increase is necessary I want to diverge a bit from our normal write up this month and explain what is happening in the wine business and why jumping \$10 per month is important to avoid frequent, incremental increases in the coming years. When you read the write-up hopefully this will give a clearer picture of the dynamics of the business, more than just the current high inflation.

One of my soft rules for club selections is that the wines must come from a brick and mortar winery. I use the term “soft rule” because in years past I would occasionally select a wine from a “virtual” winery, one that is not brick and mortar, if it was a particularly good value or it fit a theme. The problem is that virtual wineries rarely have a story to tell, which as you know by now is the DNA of TWM. Unfortunately the cost of wine production is going up so fast that few wineries produce wine that fits within the budget of selections mandated by this club. The price increases taken over the past three years by producers are a combination of macro market forces, the skyrocketing cost of making wine and consolidation at the winery level.

For the past few years weather has been a problem for producers around the world. In addition to the impact of smaller harvests, wineries also have to deal with the high cost of inputs as well. Farming costs have more than tripled in the past ten years due to labor shortages, the high cost of fuel, fertilizer and other chemicals. At the winery inflation has had a huge impact on the cost of barrels, bottles, corks, capsules, labels and cardboard boxes for shipping. While it is possible to absorb these price increases for wines that cost \$100+ per bottle, they are a significant increase for wineries charging less than \$30 a bottle. Some wineries have told me their cost of packaging is more than the cost of wine if the value is under \$15. All this means that to support family wineries we have to lift our budget to meet the price range where they can survive. - **Tim Varan**

Stift Klosterneuberg Grüner Veltliner Brut - \$18

The Abbey of Klosterneuberg, located just outside Vienna, has played an important role in Austrian history and culture for almost one thousand years. Founded by Leopold III, later canonized as Saint Leopold of Austria, the abbey has endured for almost a thousand years, surviving Ottoman sieges, Napoleon's invasion of Austria, and centuries of political and social change. Today, Stift Klosterneuberg maintains an active monastic order as well as cellars for producing high-end brandy, cider, and wine. However, the two entities are kept separate: the Order maintain their spiritual and charity work, while the winery is overseen by Wolfgang Hamm and his team of highly dedicated winemakers.

Winemaking in the cellar is conducted in a carbon-neutral manner, with minimal intervention in the cellar apart from temperature control. Winemaker Wolfgang Hamm chooses to utilize the “traditional method,” also known as the Champagne method, creating a fuller-bodied, aromatically complex wine. The base wine ferments in stainless steel tanks, then the secondary fermentation takes place in the bottle and lasts for 9 months.

When you open this wine, you will want to make sure it is served well chilled (and preferably in the company of good friends). On the palate, classic notes of Grüner Veltliner are on display, with notes of green apple, lemongrass, and white pepper, along with toasted brioche notes from its secondary fermentation. This is a wonderful sparkling wine on its own, served as an aperitif, although it pairs well with, cheese fondue, tuna poke or Niçoise salad!

2021 Bonfanti Malbec - \$13

At close to 3,000 feet above sea level, the Bonfanti family have built their “micro-winery” in the Andes Mountains, enjoying cooler temperatures while maximizing sun exposure. Winemaker Sebastian Bonfanti works with the same vines his Italian grandfather planted in 1915, as well as newer plantings. The family oversee two separate wine estates, this one, located in the Perdriel sub-zone, which is planted exclusively to Malbec, and one in the northern department of Maipu that focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Sebastian prefers to work with Malbec in Luján de Cuyo because of its unique micro-climate and stony soils, which he feels produce a more complex, terroir-driven wine.

To make this wine, all fruit is harvested by hand, with preliminary green harvest taking place to reduce yields in the younger vines. After partial de-stemming and cold soak, fermentation begins in stainless steel tanks with regular punching down. After fermentation is complete, the wine then completes malolactic conversion in stainless steel. As a “Joven” or “young wine,” no oak is used in maturation, instead this wine rests in stainless steel for roughly 6 months before light filtration and bottling. Only 3,000 cases are produced each year, the majority of which are destined for the export market.

When you open this wine, I strongly suggest decanting for at least half an hour. In addition, its youthful characteristics mean that this is a Malbec you can serve slightly chilled, around 50-55 degrees, should you choose. To achieve this effect simply place the bottle in your refrigerator for around 20 minutes. On the palate, this wine displays notes of fresh blackberries, blueberries, dried red plum, clove and cardamom. On the palate it shows good concentration, and polish for this price. Drink now through 2024 with cheese fondue, beef Burgundy, or marinated skirt steak tacos.

Cheese Fondue

My family always made fondue when I was growing up, particularly on cold nights. When I moved to Florida in 1985 I discovered The Melting Pot in Maitland, which became a go-to place for me to take dates when I wanted to appear more sophisticated than I certainly was. After watching a fair number of pots being made table side I picked up the technique and eventually perfected my own version. This one is great for parties and works really well with both wines. If you prefer cheddar cheese you can substitute for the Gruyere, but do not use extra sharp as it does not melt well. *If you do not own a fondue pot this recipe can be made stove top in a 2 quart sauce pan. Serve table side and when it starts to harden simply heat it back up and serve again.*

1 garlic clove, halved

1 pound Gruyère cheese, grated

1/2 pound Emmentaler cheese or other Swiss cheese, grated

1 cup dry white wine

2 dashes Worcestershire sauce

1 tablespoon cornstarch

1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice

Freshly ground pepper

Freshly grated nutmeg

Toss the cheeses with the cornstarch in a bowl and set aside.

Rub the inside of your fondue pot, or saucepan, with the garlic clove then add the wine and Worcestershire sauce. (I toss in the garlic clove too.) Heat until it simmers, then remove the garlic clove if you used it.

Begin adding the cheese/cornstarch a half cup at a time and whisk with each addition until smooth. Continue until all the cheese has melted into the wine, 2-3 minutes. Add the lemon juice, a generous pinch each of pepper and nutmeg and cook, stirring gently, until creamy and smooth, about 3 minutes; don't overcook the fondue or it will break and become oily. Serve at once with pieces of rustic bread (cut a few hours before so slightly stale) boiled potatoes, carrot or celery sticks, or chunks of sausage.