



Tim's Wine Market

December 2022

By Tim Varan

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 New World Red Club. The price is increasing to \$49 per month, from the current \$39, 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 December 2010 and have never increased the price, but in the 12 years since, the paradigm in California has changed considerably. There are fewer family wineries that can make wines under \$25, due to the high costs associated with their production. 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, particularly in the US, 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 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 pricing structure of domestic wines is going up so fast that few wineries in the US produce wine that fits within the budget of selections mandated by this club. The price increases taken over the past three years by domestic producers are a combination of macro market forces, the skyrocketing cost of making wine and consolidation at the winery level.

While the west coast drought is a problem for producers, those in the lower price ranges, sub-\$20 per bottle, have also had to deal with the high cost of inputs as well. Farming costs have more than tripled in the past ten years due to a labor shortage, 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. This month both features are virtual wines, good quality and value, but as you will see, not much story. Enjoy them and I look forward to bringing you some amazing new wines in 2023.

2020 Alexis Soyer Black Gold - \$20

Alexis Soyer is a label created by one of my suppliers to honor a century French chef, writer, inventor and philanthropist who lived from 1810-1858. After attracting attention in his native France as an up-and-coming culinary superstar he moved his talents to London, eventually becoming the chef de cuisine for the prestigious Reform Club. He also undertook the design of the kitchen, introducing innovations such as cooking with gas, adjustable temperature ovens and refrigeration using a system of piped cold water instead of ice.

After the death of his wife, Soyer turned his attention to helping solve dietary issues for the less fortunate. He established the first soup kitchen in London for the poor, which was so successful that he was asked by the British government to assist with the Irish potato famine. He then turned his attention on feeding the British army during the Crimean war. Learning that starvation and food poisoning were major issues with military campaigns, he helped create the precursor to the Army Catering Corps, a system that was used until the end of WWII. Sadly, after years of working in kitchens with coal fired ovens he suffered the great malady of chefs of his time, black lung, so his death was hastened by the effects of

traveling with the army in the Crimea. Although only 48 years old when he died he was one of the most famous chefs ever and a hero in both France and England.

The Alexis Soyer Black Gold is one of three wines under this label, there are also a very good Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. This wine is a blend of 80% Petite Sirah, 12% Syrah and 8% Zinfandel, with most of the grapes from vineyards in Paso Robles. Decant this wine for a half hour and it reveals deep notes of blackberries, black plums, milk chocolate, brambles, dried figs and caramel. On the palate it has good concentration, with well integrated tannins and soft acidity. Drink 2022-2025 with roasts, steaks or pasta Bolognese.

2019 Missing Spoke Cabernet Sauvignon - \$25

Like the Elliot Burt Cabernet Sauvignon from the October club, this wine is also produced by Elliot Stern, but this time from Alexander Valley grapes. This wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon and was aged for 16 months in French oak barrels, of which roughly a quarter were new.

The reason I waited to pair this wine with the Alexis Soyer Black Gold is that they share an interesting, leathery, savory quality that I found more interesting the longer the wine was in the glass. This is a quality that I often find from wines on the eastern edge of Alexander Valley, on the border with Napa County. I have never found a winemaker who could define why this is, but I have noted it consistently over the years.

I would suggest decanting this wine for at least a half hour and give it a slight chill as well. Once you do then the savory, black olive, red tamarind and leather notes push in front of the ripe cherry, cooked strawberry and milk chocolate qualities that follow up. Then on the palate this wine is quite dry, with the tertiary qualities of the nose showing into the long finish. Drink this wine from 2022-2028 with

Duck with Black Olives

Although many cooks are afraid to prepare duck, the process is not hard, especially if you start with boneless breasts. This recipe from Grow and Behold Kitchen combines many of the flavors found in both feature wines this month, and is a wonderful dish for entertaining four to six people.

4 oz thick cut bacon, cut into 1/4" pieces

5 cloves garlic, crushed

2 teaspoons fresh rosemary leaves, chopped

1 tablespoon thyme leaves, plus 1 teaspoon

1 cup chicken broth

2/3 cup Ruby Port

1 cup oil-cured black olives, to taste, pitted, halved and rinsed

4 boneless duck breasts, about 3 pounds total

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Make the sauce

Cook the bacon in a large skillet over medium-low heat, stirring often, until the fat begins to render, about 6 minutes. Add the garlic and sizzle until the garlic is golden brown, about 6 minutes more. Stir in the rosemary and thyme, pour in the stock and port, and bring to a boil. Cook for a minute, then add the olives and remove the pan from the heat

Sear the Duck Breasts

With a razor-sharp knife, score the skin of the duck breasts in a crosshatch pattern, being mindful not to cut into the flesh. Pat dry and season with salt and pepper. Heat a large dry skillet over medium-low heat. Add the breasts skin side down and sear until crisp, allowing the fat to render slowly, 10 to 15 minutes. Don't rush this—the last thing you want is a mouthful of chewy fat. Flip and sear the other side for 3 to 4 minutes.

Finish in the sauce

Meanwhile, bring the sauce back to a boil, then reduce the heat to low. Nestle breasts in the sauce, skin-side up, and cook for 4 to 6 minutes for medium rare. Transfer the duck to a cutting board and let rest for 5 minutes.

To serve

Slice the breasts on an angle, arrange on plates, and spoon the sauce and olives on top. Serve immediately