



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This quarter we examine three unique terroirs of Europe that are all very old, but suddenly up-and-coming in the wine world. Our first selection checks in on an old favorite in the southwest of France, before we head to the volcanic region of Sicily, then finish high in the mountains south of Madrid. All three of these wines offer exemplary representation of these areas and show how the universe of European production continues to expand with good reason.

## **2017 Chateau Montus Madiran - \$65**

Some of you may remember this wine as a previous selection in November of 2019. It was so popular that I decided to feature the new vintage to introduce this amazing estate to all our new members after nearly a year out of the market.

Chateau Montus is the crown jewel of the Madiran region of France, which is located in the region of Gascony. Anyone who is into food knows this region as the home of foie gras, Perigord truffles and duck confit. Less well known is the long history of winemaking in Gascony that stretches to the Roman era, revived in the 1970s by the owner of this estate, Alain Brumont.

It is hard to believe now, but in the 13th century the wines from Gascony were held in higher regard than those of Bordeaux. Being farther inland the climate is drier and warmer so vintages are less variable and the wines are higher in alcohol. While they enjoy a climatic advantage being inland of Bordeaux, in those days the cost effective way to move wine was down the rivers, in this case to the port of Bordeaux for shipping. Eager to establish themselves as the dominant producing region of France, the negotiant/merchants in Bordeaux lobbied for a series of laws called the police de vins. Among other restrictions, they prohibited wine from outside the region to be shipped out of the port until all of the Bordeaux for the year was sold. A series of taxes were also imposed for shipping wine down the rivers to Bordeaux, making them much more expensive. Over several centuries the wine business dried up in Madiran and vines were slowly replaced with fruit trees and pasture land. By the turn of the 20th century there were few vineyards left, and no serious producers.

Then in 1979 Alain Brumont left Madiran to study winemaking in Bordeaux. After school he returned to his home to assume control of his family estate, Chateau Bouscasse, but conflicted with his father who saw no reason to change. Frustrated, he left Bouscasse and purchased Chateau Montus in 1980. While long held as the best vineyard in Madiran the estate was in disrepair and only had a few acres of vines. Recognizing the potential Brumont began replanting the vineyards and renovating the cellars. Within a few years he also took over Bouscasse from his father and today runs both estates, controlling more than 1000 acres of vines in the region.

What makes Montus so special is the property sits at the base of some of the steepest hills in the region, with only four to five feet of top soil, mixed with large rocks. Due to the extreme conditions each vine only produces five to six clusters of intensely flavored grapes. The majority of this wine (80%) is Tannat, with the balance being Cabernet Sauvignon. Tannat is the indigenous grape of the region and is known for making very tannic, age-worthy wines. Many other producers in the region use micro-oxygenation to help soften the wines, a technique developed in Madiran and famously vilified in the movie *Mondovino*. Brumont feels this is cheating and robs the wine of its sense of place, which by-the-way, is the same thing said in the movie. Instead Alain uses a large percentage of new oak barrels for long aging, which naturally softens the wine and still allows the character of the site to shine through.

To enjoy Montus I recommend decanting it for up to two hours before serving. Once this wine breathes it shows a deep nose of milk chocolate, caramel, dried black cherries, clove, maduro cigar wrappers and new car leather. On the palate it shows an almost impossible level of concentration, with firm but integrated tannins and great freshness. I recommend drinking this wine between 2027 and 2037. Serve with cassoulet or beef stew.

## **2018 Giovanni Rosso Etna Rosso - \$55**

I have yet to visit the Etna wine region of Sicily, but it holds quite the siren call for terroir driven winemakers. First, Italian importer Marc de Grazia purchased land in the area two decades ago and began espousing the virtues of the area. Then a

decade ago I spent an afternoon with the South African winemaker Eben Sadie, and all he could talk about was how much he wanted to acquire land on Etna due to the unique nature of the wines. Then, our feature winemaker, Davide Rosso, felt the same pull when he added to his legendary Barolo estate by purchasing a property on the North slope of Etna in 2016. What is it about this place? This selection will answer those questions.

The aptly named Rosso family have been farming vineyards in the Serralunga d'Alba region of Barolo since 1890, although they did not begin bottling wine until 1995. This is when Giovanni Rosso's son, Davide, assumed control of the estate after studies in Burgundy. Learning from his experiences in France, Davide works organically in the vineyard and strives to honor the terroir in which he works. His Barolos have become highly sought after and allocated, so in 2016 he turned his attention to a new challenge, a 35 acre contiguous parcel near the village of Solicchiata of Castiglione di Sicilia. This small area lies near the contrada (designated single vineyard) of Montedolce, which is a dormant crater less than a kilometer away.

What drew Davide to the region is the age of the wines and unique qualities of the growing area. At more than 2300 feet above sea level it is one of the highest elevations on the island, and in fact, much of Italy. The vineyard was already planted to the favorite local varieties; 3 acres of the white grape Carricante and 13 acres of Nerello Mascalese. Traditional plantings in the area also mix other local varieties so roughly 15% of each area is interspersed with these grapes, in the case of this wine Nerello Cappuccio. Vines are trained in the local goblet pruning technique of *alberello*, although Davide is converting the vines to a system he calls *candelabro* which focuses growth on two lateral canes. The soils are degraded volcanic sands with little organic material, so vines reach deep to find what little moisture and nutrients are available. As a result, each vine produces only small amounts of intensely flavored grapes.

In the cellar, Davide works to emphasize the amazing terroir qualities of the fruit. All of the grapes are destemmed then fermented in stainless steel for 12 days with daily pump overs. Once dry the wine is racked to large French oak casks, between 5 and 50 hectoliters, where it is aged for 18 months. You will want to decant this wine for a half hour before serving. Etna Rosso is often likened to Pinot Noir and you will quickly see the comparison as notes of bergamot, Bing cherry, leather, wet oak leaves and cinnamon dominate the nose. On the palate this wine is initially a little restricted, but shows good concentration of fruit, integrated tannins and really good length. Drink 2023-2028 with grilled sausages or smoked pork loin.

### **2018 Soto Manrique Cebberos La Cruz Verde - \$45**

A couple of years ago I started to hear a lot of buzz in the wine community around a "new" region of Spain, the Sierra de Gredos area west of Madrid. This area, which lies close to the border of Portugal, and actually lies across three different states; Castilla y Leon, La Mancha and Madrid. For this reason there is a good bit of infighting among producers as to what is the "real" Sierra de Gredos wine region, but for now the most prominent DO is Cebberos, home to this feature.

The DO of Cebberos is located in the province of Ávila, and specifically in an area called the Valle de Alberche. The Gredos are towering mountains so vineyards typically lie above 3000 feet in elevation, and often on very steep slopes. Soils in this area primarily granitic sands, but what makes Cebberos unique is the addition of fractured slate. What makes these wines stand out from an ocean of other Spanish Garnacha is the way they smell and taste, with many critics noting how Burgundian they can be. Typically Garnacha/Grenache wines are known for higher alcohol and extraction, completely opposite of Burgundy, so many of you who are not fans of this variety may find something new to love.

Our selection comes from Jesús Maria Soto, called Chuchi by his friends, who has been selling wines from the Ribera del Duero for 25 years, watching the region rise from unknown to world class in that time. His family owns 50 acres of vines in Cebberos so a decade ago he turned his attention to crafting, and promoting the wines of the area. This bottling is produced from three, small, old vine parcels of their holdings where they are influenced by the cooling effects of the Beceles River. All of the grapes are hand harvested, then fermented using indigenous yeasts in open top, concrete fermentors, with 15% whole clusters. Once dry the wine was racked to a Slovenian oak foudre for 12 months, then bottled with no filtration and little sulfur.

Decant this wine for a half hour and I would even suggest serving at cellar temperature, 55 degrees. The nose shows very unusual Garnacha qualities of crunchy, fresh black raspberries, tart cherries, rose petals, hibiscus syrup, black rhubarb and herbs de Provence. On the palate it shows very high toned fruit, with a searing mineral quality not unlike drinking liquified stones, with moderate tannins. Drink 2023-2028 with roast chicken, grilled snapper or braised pork shoulder.