



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Long time customers of TWM will recognize the name Kestrel although the labels of our features are relatively new additions to the brand. Before 2010 we sold a lot of Kestrel Cellars, and the wines were very popular, particularly their Lady In Red table wine. Then the owner of the winery, John Walker, passed away and this caused a change in personnel, which unfortunately for us, included a change in distribution that took the wines out of the market. After shuffling people for a few years it appears that they are once again on a forward trajectory, at least if the wines I tasted recently are any indicator.

When I made these selections the intended theme was going to be, "Kestrel from the ashes." While the new wines are very much an example of redemption from examples I tasted a few years ago, my research has led me to a far more compelling story. Today the winery is led by John and Helen's daughter, Cindy Crowley, who with the help of a gifted winemaker is reinventing itself with wines far beyond what they produced in the past. Our story starts with the simplest of differences, the rebranding from Kestrel Cellars to Kestrel Vintners, which speaks volumes of their intention for the future.

When John and Helen Walker purchased the 162 acre Kestrel View vineyard in 1995, it was already one of the oldest in Washington State. The original blocks of Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon were planted by Mike Wallace in 1972, and he sold those grapes to the early wineries in the region. By the time the Walker's purchased the vineyard it consisted of two, 80+ acre blocks, both lying on Rattlesnake Slope at nearly 1200 feet of elevation. The South block is home to the original plantings, including what are the oldest Chardonnay vines in Washington. In total across both blocks they grow Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Sangiovese, Syrah, Cabernet Franc, Viognier, Pinot Gris and of course, Chardonnay.

The reason for the longevity of what is now called the Kestrel View vineyard is the ideal growing conditions found in the Yakima Valley for wine grapes. When planted in 1972 there were no American Viticultural Areas (AVA) in the Pacific Northwest, but thanks to the hard work of those early grape growing pioneers the Yakima Valley was the first. Today the Yakima Valley is a sub-zone of the much larger Columbia Valley AVA. Located in the eastern edge of the appellation, the Kestrel View vineyard receives only 8 inches of rainfall per year on average, and only 155 days without frost. Sandwiched between the spring and fall are summer are days that are very hot, but with cold nights. This combination produces grapes that are fully ripe, but retain amazing acidity, a rarity in many parts of Washington State. In addition, the soils of this vineyard contribute greatly to the wines structure. Like all of Washington the bedrock is basalt, covered with remnants of the Missoula floods, yes even at 1200 feet, with patches of wind blown loess soils as well. This combination of growing conditions allows for the diverse plantings on the property.

While the Walker's recognized the great potential of this vineyard, the biggest change in the quality of the wines occurred in 2017 with the hiring of Dr. Letizia Rocchi, a third generation winemaker from the University of Milan. Rocchi recognizes the low disease pressure of this site and instituted an organic farming regime. Walking the vineyard every day she is able to detect issues early and deal with them without the use of manmade chemicals. I should note that the current features were made by her predecessors, Flint Nelson and Justin Michaud. The white wines I tasted, made by Rocchi, show less oak than those of the previous winemakers so I cannot wait to see how she handles the reds with coming releases.

2016 Kestrel Vintners Merlot - \$25

As I have stated many times before, wines made from the Merlot grape get a bad rap thanks to so many terrible examples produced in California. Unlike Cabernet Sauvignon, which produces a large, high quality crop in a wide range of conditions, Merlot is far more finicky. In climates where the growing season is short, like Washington State and Bordeaux, Merlot is favored over Cabernet Sauvignon because of the power it contributes to blends. That's right, *power*, because unless Cabernet gets more than 100 days of optimal conditions it produces thin, weedy tasting wines. On the other hand

Merlot will ripen fully, often at up to 15% alcohol, and contribute body to any blend. That is why in Washington State most producers find their Merlot to be more powerful than their Cabs.

This wine was made by Justin Michaud, who was at the helm for only 2 vintages at Kestrel. As a 100% Merlot bottling this is an extraordinary example of the wines this variety produces, and should be a wakeup call for all who think it is a wimpy variety. Decant for a few minutes and the nose offers a rich combination of damson plum preserves, mocha, cedar, dried straw, and anise seed. On the palate this wine shows more good concentration with obvious tannins and minerality that frame the finish. Even though this wine is almost 6 years old it will age longer, drink 2023-2028. Serve with braised pork shoulder or the carne asada recipe below.

2014 Kestrel Vintners Tribute Red - \$45

This wine was produced by their longtime winemaker, Flint Nelson, in honor of owner John Walker. Nelson made 12 vintages at Kestrel and left in 2016 to launch his own project, Wit Cellars. This wine is not 100% Kestrel estate grapes, as 16% of them came from the Olsen Vineyard, another high elevation Yakima site. The blend is an intriguing mix of 45% Merlot, 25% Syrah, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Petit Verdot, 5% Mourvèdre and 5% Sangiovese. The wine was aged for 22 months in new French oak barrels.

Being 9 years old I recommend that you decant this wine for up to an hour to let the bouquet develop. When I tasted this wine in January I wrote my notes 3 hours after opening the bottle, and it showed even better the next day. This is a rich wine with a robust nose of toasted marshmallows, dried figs, raspberry and blackberry preserves, milk chocolate, ponzu and maduro cigar wrapper. On the palate it has high concentration, with restrained power and fairly obvious oak notes. While hinting to maturity with notes of soy and leather, this wine still probably has several years to go, so drink 2023-2028. Serve with hearty fare like a roast leg of lamb or the carne asada recipe suggested by the Kestrel in house chef.

Carne Asada ala Kestrel

Washington State has a very interesting challenge with wine tourism, different from almost any other important American wine region. Unlike Napa and Sonoma counties, which are an hour's drive from San Francisco (shorter if traffic is not bad) and the Willamette Valley, which lies at the edge of Portland, most of the vineyards for Washington State are located 3 hours from the closest metropolitan areas, Seattle and Portland. Most wineries solve this problem by having tasting rooms in Woodinville, located just north of the city of Seattle. However, several wineries also have dining facilities at their locations in eastern Washington, which helps draw tourists for weekend trips. Kestrel has three tasting rooms and an in house chef to assist with the tasting experience. This recipe comes from their promotional materials and I think is a fantastic dish to pair with either wine feature. My own note is to reserve 1 tablespoon of the marinade before placing on the steak and drizzle over the finished, cut meat.

2 pounds skirt steak trimmed of excess fat

1 jalapeño seeded and minced

4 cloves garlic minced

1/2 cup fresh cilantro leaves chopped

Juice of 1 orange

Juice of 1 lime

Juice of 1 lemon

2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

1/3 cup olive oil

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

In a large glass baking dish whisk together the Carne Asada marinade ingredients until combined, jalapeño through black pepper. Add skirt steak in a single layer, turning to coat with marinade. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour, but no longer than 8 hours (longer will begin to break down the meat).

Preheat an outdoor grill to medium-high. Grill steaks for 6 to 7 minutes per side, turning once for medium-rare. Remove steaks and allow to rest for 5 minutes. *Tim's note: you can also accomplish the same effect using your broiler.*

Slice thinly across the grain and serve. *Tim's note, drizzle reserved marinade if using.*