



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This quarter I am excited to bring you wines from three of the most celebrated winemakers in California, Donald Patz, Russell Bevan and Andy Erickson. While their names may not be as common as sports stars or even famous chefs, all three have decades of winemaking experience in California and impressive critical acclaim. The reason I made these selections is that each wine represents a divergence from what each winemaker is most famous for producing. All three are gorgeously crafted wines that show how great winemakers know how to coax something extra from every wine, even if it is outside their comfort zone.

2019 Secret Door Winery Cabernet Sauvignon JML - \$69

I have known Donald Patz for a long time and have a tremendous respect for what he and James Hall accomplished at Patz and Hall. They sold their winery to the St. Michelle Wine Group in 2016, and after satisfying his contract with them, Donald launched the Donald Patz Wine Group. He produces three labels under his umbrella with Secret Door being the brand dedicated to Cabernet Sauvignon. While it may sound strange for a Chardonnay and Pinot Noir specialist to now make Cabernet Sauvignon, Donald actually has a long history with the grape and a passion for wines that harken back to his early days in Napa Valley.

Donald Patz started in the valley in 1985 working in sales for Flora Springs, where he met James Hall. In 1988 they and their wives made the decision to launch their own brand, Patz and Hall. Their early wines were made at Honig, where James was head winemaker, with the first release being a Napa Valley Chardonnay. Over time they expanded their offerings to include many exceptional single vineyard Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs, always with the emphasis of allowing the character of the vineyard to shine through. They never purchased their own vineyards, preferring to work with the top growers in the area, including Larry Hyde in Carneros and the Dutton and Martinelli families in Sonoma County. Today Donald continues that tradition by contracting with exceptional growers in Napa Valley to produce his Secret Door wines.

Under Secret Door Donald produces two single vineyard Cabernet Sauvignons, Sage Ridge which is located in the eastern hills of Napa above Lake Hennessey, and Hironnelle, which is in the Stags' Leap district. In addition to the single vineyards he also crafts a blend of the two which is named for his wife, Jung Min Lee, or JML. Patz works with the growers in each vineyard to produce lower yields of intensely flavored grapes, then has them harvest earlier than most, looking to craft wines that are more of the style of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

When I tasted the 2019 JML in February the first thing that struck me was the nose, which along with the classic descriptors of Napa Cabernet I detected a menthol/Thai basil quality. This is due to the presence of pyrazines, a compound found in all Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as the parent grapes Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc. It is too much to go into here but recognize that almost all the producers in Napa Valley pick their Cabernet Sauvignon very late, when the grapes have begun to dry on the vine, in order to ripen out pyrazine compounds. While this does remove the faintly herbal notes it also yields wines with very high alcohol and low acidity. Donald believes that the faint herbaceous quality is integral to the variety and so he finds the sweet spot between green and overripe.

Winemaking for all of the Secret Door wines is the same, with aging in 100% new French oak barrels. As Patz wants to emphasize the savory and faintly herbal side of this wine he pulls the wine for JML out of barrel at 18 months, where the single vineyard wines spend 24 months in oak. His wines are unfiltered and unfinned and he produced about 800 cases of the 2019 JML.

I would encourage you to decant this wine for up to an hour before serving to let the nose develop and help the tannins resolve. Once you do the nose is a wonderful combination of dried red cherries, blackberries, caramel, Kenya AA coffee beans, fennel seed, dried sage and Thai basil. On the palate this wine offers moderate concentration, with firm but integrated tannins and a surprisingly nice lift at the finish. Drink 2025-2039.

2018 Elyse Cabernet Sauvignon Holbrook Mitchell Vineyard - \$69

This is the third Elyse Cabernet Sauvignon I have selected for this club, but the first to be made by the new owner of the winery, Russell Bevan. In less than two decades Russell and his partner, Victoria DeCrescenzo, have combined to create some of the most highly rated and sought after wines in California. However, their path to wine stardom was anything but ordinary. The couple met while living in Minneapolis, she a dental hygienist and he sold dental equipment. They shared a love of wine and in 1999 moved to California, to pursue their dream of making their own. Even as a self trained winemaker Bevan quickly began producing wines that garnered a lot of critical and customer attention, eventually becoming a consultant to wineries such as Chateau Boswell, Chase, Jemrose, Westerhold and Wren Hop. With his success the couple has been able to acquire some esteemed properties in Napa Valley, including the Elyse Winery in 2018.

Founded in 1983 by Ray and Nancy Coursen, the Elyse Winery has been a tremendous source of great wines for us for many years. Ray's style reflects his origins, when Napa Cabernet was less refined but showing great power. Russell Bevan brings a very different approach to winemaking, with impressive texture and polish being his hallmark. When I first tasted the new wines in April 2022 I was expecting a 180 degree change, but to my surprise the wines retain some of the "Ray-ness" with a modern sensibility. Several wines stood out that day but the star is this bottling, which also happens to come from one of my favorite areas of Napa Valley.

The Holbrook Mitchell vineyard lies on the western side of the Yountville AVA, a very unique area by Napa standards. While most of the valley vineyards are some form of either alluvial or volcanic soils, this part of Napa boasts ancient marine sedimentary soils. These are thin layers of very poor, rocky soils over granite bedrock, naturally reducing the vines capacity for production. This area is also considerably colder than sites farther north in the valley, as the fog and cooling effects of nearby San Pablo Bay slow the ripening process. The result are wines that are less overtly ripe, yet still display impressive power and dimension.

The 2018 Holbrook Mitchell Cabernet Sauvignon is a blend of 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Cabernet Franc, 9% Merlot, 4% Malbec and 2% Petit Verdot. The wine was aged in 75% new French oak for 17 months and they produced 895 cases. Decant this wine for up to an hour and the nose is a brooding combination of dark chocolate, espresso roast coffee beans, new leather, black cherry preserves, black licorice, graphite and dried rose petals. On the palate this wine is burly and dense, with well polished tannins and a frame of oak that carries into a long finish. Drink 2023-2038.

2016 Casino Mine Ranch Marcel - \$45

To round out this unique collection of wines I present a very interesting project by winemaker Andy Erickson, one of the most celebrated in California. Erickson arrived in Napa in 1994 after graduating from UC Davis with an advanced degree in oenology. He quickly made a name for himself as the winemaker for Harlan, Staglin Vineyards and Screaming Eagle. In 2000 he launched his own label, with his wife and fellow winemaker Annie Favia, and today consults for many clients including Dalla Valle Vineyards, Mayacamas, Arietta, To Kalon Vineyard Company, Ellman Family Vineyards, Cervantes, Alpha Omega and Seven Apart, and this project in the Sierra Foothills, Casino Mine.

The unique name of this estate goes back to 1939 when Simone Vanophem Shaw and her husband, Sam Shaw, Jr. Both came from wealthy families and spent their early lives traveling the world, and enjoying the privilege that afforded them in that era. They discovered this property that even today is remote, and decided it was a quiet place to raise their family, purchasing it in 1939. Since the time they purchased the estate they were assisted in its management by Marcel Tiquet, who moved to the property with his wife Lola when he was 19 years old after serving in WWII. Originally he assisted the Shaw's in building mines on the property looking for gold. (Simon's family made their wealth in gold mines in Alaska.) They never found gold and eventually the property passed through to the Shaw's nephews, while still being tended by Marcel. Today, the current owners are Jim & Rich Merryman. Rich is friends with Andy Erickson and invited him to the property to shoot skeet, and drink Bud Light. Over a few of those Bud Lights they determined the site would be great for vineyards and planted 14 acres of drought and heat tolerant varieties, including Tempranillo and Teroldego.

This is the top wine made on the estate and is named in Marcel's honor. It is a blend of 80% Tempranillo and 20% Teroldego, inspired by the wines of Elizabetta Foradori from the Dolomites region of Italy. These varieties thrive in this climate and produce powerful wines with great color and texture. Erickson ferments both varieties on the skins for 28 days then barrels down into 50% new French oak barrels for 18 months. Decant this wine for a half hour and then get ready because the nose is a powerhouse of cooked blackberries & blueberries, graphite, lardo, dried leaves and saffras. On the palate it has medium concentration and impressive polish, and a nicely long finish. Drink 2023-2030. 194 cases produced.