



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

As I sit down to write this on July 23rd, there are heat waves across the Southwest US, as well as most of Europe, where temperatures are well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. While there is plenty of debate as to why every summer in Europe feels hotter than the last, the fact remains that it has an impact on the people and farming. In the end wine is an agricultural product and every farmer I have met with for a decade talks about how they are having to change their approach to grape growing. This quarter we will examine three wines from areas that have either been impacted by climate change and show how grape growers and winemakers are adjusting.

2017 Arnaud Baillot Volnay - \$89

This is not our first selection from Arnaud Baillot, three years ago I picked his Beaune 1er Cru Montrevenots, the first of many great wines we have found at this cellar. As Burgundy estates go this one is quite new, with Arnaud and his wife Laure van Canneyt starting production with the 2014 harvest. Arnaud comes to the wine business from the passion side, falling in love with the wines of Burgundy and attending school at the university in the region. His wife is the granddaughter of the owners of Domaine Hudelot-Noëllat, a historic estate in Chambolle-Musigny. Despite this relationship they did not inherit any vineyards, so they primarily function as a micro-negotiant, purchasing grapes from exceptional terroirs and crafting the wine under their own label. In 1997 they bought their first vineyard, this parcel in the village of Volnay, this being their inaugural bottling. The land they purchased is already producing so it is unlikely that they will change anything soon, but due to climate change there are a number of options producers are beginning to discuss.

The topic of climate change is prominent with winemakers in every wine region in Europe, but in the industry leading regions of Bordeaux and Burgundy the conversation is particularly dire. These are the world leaders in their respective categories, with centuries of market relevance. Grape growers and winemakers in both regions feel it is imperative to find ways to combat hotter and drier growing seasons, which are more the norm than the exception since the early 2000s. In both regions the governing bodies have begun to allow some changes to their long established rules, recognizing that this is not a short term phenomenon. In Burgundy, winemakers are also experimenting with different clones of Pinot Noir, which ripen slower, later and with less alcohol. This is contrary to the historical importance of setting a large crop that ripens early so growers can avoid the fall rains. Throughout much of the 2000s the rains have occurred in November, a month later and well after harvest.

In Burgundy the most common clones of Pinot Noir are from Dijon, which also happens to be the capital of the region. The most common attributes of these grapes are small berries and clusters, deep color, good tannin development and aromatics. This suits the conditions in Volnay perfectly, where most of the vineyards face south/southeast on well drained, limestone soils. These conditions create powerful examples of Pinot Noir with rich aromatics and deep structure. For this reason the wines of Volnay are often described as an "iron fist in a velvet glove" in part because of the clones of Pinot Noir used to produce them.

Opening the Arnaud Baillot Volnay should be reserved for a special occasion between 2025 and 2030. Thanks to the warm vintage, concurrently surpassed by 2019, 2020 and 2022, this is a big wine with a lot of texture. The nose is a rich combination of Damson plum preserves, very ripe strawberries and blackberries, claro cigar and old crushed velvet. On the palate the wine is quite plump and broad, with firm tannins framing the copious fruit into a long finish.

2020 Chotard Sancerre Rouge - \$36

If you are surprised to see a Rouge from the famously white-centric region of Sancerre, you are not alone. Only 15% of the appellation vineyards are dedicated to growing Pinot Noir (and 1/3 goes to Rosé), which is the only legal variety for Sancerre Rouge. I chose this wine for a couple of reasons. The first is to demonstrate that due to a warming climate many areas of France now produce exceptional Pinot Noir (cheaper than Burgundy), and to highlight how producers need to forecast their ability to grow, and sell wine with these changing norms.

Standing on the walls of the hilltop town of Sancerre you are surrounded on all sides by miles of vineyards stretching in every direction. When the appellation was created in 1926 they only permitted Sauvignon Blanc based wines to carry the designation, red was not allowed until 1962. Surprisingly, in the 19th century the region produced vast amounts of red wine, typically a mix of Pinot Noir and Gamay. The cool years of the early 20th century presented challenges in getting those varieties ripe so many producers abandoned them after WWI. Today some producers look to the warming climate as a sign to plant more Pinot Noir. Ironically, the reason plantings have not increased is the past few years have also experienced devastating late spring frosts which kill the young shoots of the vines. This greatly reduces the crop size and delays the harvest, which is a problem for Pinot Noir which buds early and ripens late. Nonetheless, many talented winemakers have begun adapting their winemaking process to accommodate riper fruit, like Daniel Chotard.

The Chotard family have been growers in the village of Reigny, one of thirteen that make up the Sancerre appellation, since 1789. They farm about 50 acres of vineyards, most planted to Sauvignon Blanc but 11 dedicated to Pinot Noir. Like most of the producers in this area their Pinot Noir is planted on deep beds of limestone/clay, similar to Burgundy. To build more structure into their Pinots as they have been harvesting riper fruit, Daniel is experimenting with adding whole clusters of grapes to the fermentor for this top cuvées. This has the effect of building more tannin and freshness in the final wines. For this cuvée the fruit is destemmed and fermented in stainless steel. Once dry 30% of the wine is moved to new French 300 and 500 liter barrels. The remaining 70% is left in stainless steel, then after 15 months the two parts are assembled.

When you open this wine decant it for a half hour then dive in! The nose is an engaging blend of dried cherries, cooked cranberries, red currant preserves, pipe tobacco and hickory smoke. On the palate it has superb concentration for Sancerre Rouge, with a beautifully defined sense of fruit and nice length. Drink 2023-2028.

2018 Bodegas Breca “Brega” - \$45

The first two selections focus on how regions dedicated to one variety (for red anyway) are adjusting to the change in climate. This last pick looks at the glass from a different angle, finding places that have no historical relevance to wine that may be important in the future. This wine comes from the Calatayud area of Spain, best known as an area for cheap, simple wines sold primarily in Spain as they are not traditionally export quality. However, Bodegas Breca is the baby of Jorge Ordonez, arguably the most important importer of Spanish wines in the 1990s and 2000s. Jorge came on to the scene at a time when very little Spanish wine was being sold in the US outside of a couple large Rioja brands, and first shined the spotlight on new, innovative growers. Unlike many importers who build relationships with growers then market the wines in the US, Jorge actually took ownership stakes in many brands and provided advice in the vineyard, cellar and packaging. It is no exaggeration to say that Jorge almost single handedly created the Spanish wine category in the US three decades ago.

Today, Jorge is taking a more active role in the production of a few pet projects in Spain, including this estate which he established in 2010. Despite not being located in a denominated region, Jorge saw the significance of this vineyard and the potential for the wines. Located near the village of Munébrega, high on the great plateau of Aragon, this area is home to what is believed to be the original clone of Garnacha. It is from this point of origin that the grape was carried by the powerful armies of the Kingdom of Aragon across southern Europe in the 14th century. In the ensuing 7 centuries this variety has evolved to become a grape well suited to hot, dry conditions, with examples in Sardinia and along the Mediterranean rim into France. Unlike almost all the areas mentioned above which lie close to the sea, this particular example is grown at high elevation, where it has adapted to the unique and challenging conditions. With vineyards at nearly 2500 feet above sea level the climate is cooler and the growing season is shorter. To adapt this landrace clone buds late and ripens quickly, allowing for wines that are both ripe and show great freshness. For those of you who find Garnacha/Grenache based wines too “clunky,” like modern Châteauneuf-du-Pape, this one may be a revelation.

One of the things that has typically been a hallmark of Ordonez selections is prolific use of new oak. When the vendor suggested I taste this wine I had concerns, but in the end they were unnecessary. Decant it for at least a half hour, longer is fine, and you are greeted with a dense nose of caramel, Luxardo cherries, blackberry preserves, molasses, vanilla wafers and dried thyme. On the palate this wine is very concentrated, with powerful tannins that are reinforced by the oak aging, with a gritty, earthy finish. The surprise is how fresh and bright it ends, giving me the confidence to believe this wine will improve for up to a decade, so drink 2023-2028.