



Tim's Wine Market

August 2023

By Tim Varan

It has been four years since we last featured a NWR selection from the lovely Isenhower family so it seems time to check in with them. My annual tasting with Denise Isenhower was fabulous, as always, and I think these are some of the most thoughtful and intelligent wines produced in Washington State. While their Bordeaux variety wines are always dynamite, this year I decided to feature a couple of their “other” wines, which both showed exceptionally well in our tasting.

Brett and Denise Isenhower like to describe their 1997 entrance into the wine business as “diving head first into a shallow pool.” Both were working as pharmacists in Colorado when Brett caught the wine bug and they moved to Walla Walla, Washington. While they both maintained day jobs as pharmacists, Brett picked up evenings and weekends working as a cellar rat. In 1999, they crushed 17 tons of grapes, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah, from space they borrowed at Cayuse, which they released on September 1, 2001 to great critical reviews.

Ironically their biggest break came at the beginning of the recession in 2009. The New York Times ran a story about how they were coping with a drop in sales. What was newsworthy was their decision to cut production by 50% and stop selling their wines through the distribution chain. In effect, their goal was to become more successful by being small. At the time they were selling to over 20 distributors but they decided to keep only one, located here in Orlando, and focused all their attention on selling from their tasting rooms. Even though they were making less wine, the demand meant they could raise prices, or at least keep them the same, and retain more of the profits by cutting out middlemen. For us in Orlando, as very loyal customers, it meant less wine but the quality was, and is, better than ever.

Before the economic meltdown of 2008-10, the Isenhowers produced two tiers of wines. Their flagship wines, which bear the images of indigenous flowers of the Columbia Valley, and a series of “second” wines, bottled under the Paintbrush labels. These had great packaging, including hand dipped wax capsules, which must have been a huge pain to do. The Paintbrush labels disappeared with the recession, but when things started to improve they launched the “I” Series, which have become staple products for us. Categorically the main difference is the flagship wines are sourced from top vineyards across the Columbia Valley, while the I series blends from multiple sites. However, digging into the tasting notes on their trade portal I found that many of the I series wines come from some pretty spiffy sites as well. After that I think the only difference between the tiers is that Brett uses native yeast for the flagship wines, and commercial yeast for the I series. Big whoop....

2021 Isenhower The Last Straw - \$25

In any given vintage I bet that the Isenhowers bottle at least 15-20 different wines between their various labels. Their total production is around 7500 cases but many of their bottlings are only a couple of hundred cases. While the official story of the Last Straw is that it is a “holiday blend” that shows their house style in an easy drinking red, the truth is this wine is assembled from the leftovers after all the final blends are made. Given that this wine is fantastic every year tells me that Brett obviously does some crafting of the final wine, but metaphorically this is the “soup of the day” of the winery.

For the I Series each variety is farmed and harvested separately, then the grapes are destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks. Once dry each variety is racked to neutral (older) French oak barrels where they are aged for roughly 11 months. At this point Brett creates his blends and bottles each wine, never fining or filtering. However, because he often uses a couple of different vineyards for each variety, he may find that the final wine is not perfect using all of the production. This is how he would end up with small amounts of several varieties. It is also the reason why this blend changes quite a bit from vintage to vintage. For the 2021 bottling the blend is 47% Barbera, 29% Merlot, 12% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Sangiovese, 5% Malbec and 1% Syrah and they produced 168 cases.

Because this wine is under screw cap it is imperative to decant it for at least a half hour before serving, and I recommend chilling to 55 degrees. Once you do this it offers a complex melange of dried cherries and cranberries, cherry liqueur,

orange zest, dried bouquet garni and graphite. On the palate it shows really good concentration, with well integrated tannins and good complexity as each variety pops out. Over time the components of this wine will harmonize and become indistinguishable, just one, complex array of flavors. Drink 2023-2028.

2020 Isenhower Syrah I Series - \$32

Most consumers do follow with great detail the harvest reports for each region, that is what you pay us to do. When Denise presented this wine I raised an eyebrow, as 2020 is a vintage (much like Napa) where the stigma of smoke taint lies on every wine in Washington State. This problem arises from wild fires, in the case in eastern Oregon and California, who's smoke drifted into the Columbia Valley of Washington and settled for nearly 2 weeks. The problem is that compounds in the smoke settle on the vines, including the grapes, and can impart off putting flavors (think cold campfire or ashtray) in the wine. The biggest problem is that these flavors may not appear right way, often times evolving after months in the barrel or even after bottling. Many properties in eastern Washington did not bottle Cabernet Sauvignon based wines in 2020 for this reason. However, some varieties including Syrah seemed to fare better. Brett did extensive testing of his grapes for the compounds that appear in smoke tainted wines and only bottled those that he was confident did not have the issue.

This Syrah is an example of how the Isenhawers consistently over-deliver with each and every wine they produce. There is a lot of great Syrah produced in Washington State, I would even argue that it is the second best variety for the region next to Merlot (that's right, Merlot, not Cab...) but neither pay the bills. Nevertheless, like all of his wines Brett takes nothing for granted with this, as this wine is produced from two fairly famous vineyards, Carrousel and Francisca's. 83% is from Carrousel, which are old vines growing high in the Yakima AVA. Francisca's vineyard is close to the winery in Walla Walla, providing fruit with great concentration and texture. The combination yields a stunning example of this under appreciated variety and a wine that I hope you take the time to properly enjoy.

Decant this one for at least a half hour, an hour is even better, and you are rewarded with rich nose of cooked dark cherries, oil cured olives, violets, caramel, graphite and a subtle note of bacon. On the palate this wine shows impressive concentration, with the powerful sense of fruit framed by polished and integrated tannins. Drink 2023-2028 with lamb shish kabobs, smoked beef ribs or a rich lentil dish like the one below.

Sausage and Lentils

I am always impressed with how lentils work so well with big red wines, especially those with more fruit than oak like Rhone or Italian varieties. When I started working on recipes for this month I remembered this dish from Cook's Illustrated, which is an elevated version of classic European country fare. Feel free to substitute spicy sausage or those made with other meats, such as lamb, as this is incredibly versatile. Also, buy the pancetta as one piece, not sliced like deli meat. That makes it easier to chop into cubes that will render easier than thin slices.

2 ounces pancetta, cut into 1/2-inch pieces

1 small onion, chopped fine

2 carrots, peeled and chopped fine

3 garlic cloves, sliced thin

1 tablespoon minced fresh rosemary

1 tablespoon tomato paste

3 cups chicken broth

1 cup dried brown lentils, picked over and rinsed

1 bay leaf

1 pound sweet Italian sausage

1/2 cup fresh parsley leaves

Cook pancetta in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until fat is rendered and pancetta is crispy, about 6 minutes. Add onion, carrots, garlic, and rosemary and continue to cook until vegetables have softened, about 4 minutes longer. Stir in tomato paste and cook for 30 seconds.

Stir in broth, lentils, and bay leaf, scraping up any browned bits. Nestle sausage into lentils and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until lentils are tender and sausage registers at least 160 degrees, about 35 minutes.

Remove skillet from heat. Transfer sausage to carving board. Discard bay leaf. Stir parsley into lentils and season with salt and pepper to taste. Slice sausage on bias 1 inch thick and place on top of lentils. Serve.