



Tim's Wine Market

October, 2023
By Tim Varan

This quarter is what I like to call a Dallas Cowboys collection, which as a born and bred Pittsburgh Steelers fan is a hard thing to swallow, but the metaphor is appropriate. I use the “America’s team” in reference to the draft theory of their hall of fame coach Tom Landry. Landry’s philosophy was to draft the best athlete available regardless of position. This quarter the selections have no real theme, they were just some of the most interesting wines I tasted in the past few months and they make a really compelling offering. I hope you enjoy the wines as much as I did watching the Steelers trump Landry’s philosophy in Super Bowls X and XIII.

Wit Cellars Petit Verdot 2019 - \$59

Wit Cellars, which is an acronym for Whatever It Takes, started after the near implosion of the Kestrel Winery in 2015. Kestrel’s longtime winemaker, Flynt Nelson, along with the assistant winemaker Cat Warwick and tasting room manager Gina Adams-Royer decided they had enough of working for others and launched their own project just in time for the 2016 harvest. We were big fans of Flynt’s work during his years at Kestrel, and he also worked at Hogue Cellars, Columbia Winery and Apex Cellars before taking that. Thanks to his history with growers in Yakima and the Columbia River Valley, they were able to buy some amazing fruit which launched them quickly as a Washington brand to watch. I was excited when a broker suggested the wines to me and while all the wines they sent were dynamite, the standout is this Petit Verdot.

It is rare to find a 100% pure example of Petit Verdot, in fact this is a first for the Reserve Club in 16 years. The Petit Verdot grape variety is thought to have originated in Bordeaux with its first mention dating back to the early 18th century. When I first started buying Bordeaux in the 1980’s it was a legal variety but rarely used, as it ripens up to two weeks later than Cabernet Sauvignon. In the marginal climate of Bordeaux it rarely ripened, but the great vintages were marked by the use of Petit Verdot when available. Today it is much more common, especially in the Haut Medoc, where it is replacing Merlot that is now often too ripe.

It has also gained popularity in the US, and particularly in Washington, where the hot, dry climate and extreme sunlight hours each season allow it to ripen perfectly and add structure to their Cabernet Sauvignons. The bottling from Wit Cellars comes from the Olsen Ranch, a source for several other club selections over the years and one of the most famous vineyards in the Yakima Valley of Washington State. This 1100 acre vineyard sits at 880-1350 feet above sea level, which is high for Washington. Thanks to this elevation the cooler climate is ideal for many European varieties, including Petit Verdot.

When you are ready to serve this wine I strongly recommend decanting for up to an hour and give it a slight chill. This baby weighs in at 14.9% alcohol and has a pH of 3.94, so it is a big, lush monster. There were only 380 cases of this wine produced, or roughly 14 barrels, of which half were new French oak. The nose of this wine is dramatic, with rich notes of cooked blueberries, blackberries, violets, caramel, cedar, pipe tobacco and pain grille. On the palate this wine is incredibly rich and concentrated, with powerful fruit that is framed by obvious, but nicely polished tannins. Drink 2023-2029.

Isenhower Wild Thyme Red Wine 2019 - \$55

It has been five years since we last featured a Reserve Club 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.

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.

While they have always produced great wines 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 made their story newsworthy was the decision to cut production of their less expensive wines and only focus on their top cuvees. Like many Washington wineries, Brett and Denise do not own much vineyard land so all of their wines are primarily purchased fruit. Their reasoning was not to buy grapes just make inexpensive wine that took more effort to sell when their tier bottlings sell out each year. The formula worked and they graced through the great recession far easier than many wineries their size. Today they have reintroduced a less expensive I series and are worth pursuing for everyday drinking.

Our feature comes from their flagship line, which all bear the names of native flowers to the Columbia Valley. Again, they buy almost all their fruit but that allows them to pursue grapes from the elite growers in the region to craft the best possible wines. Most of their bottlings are single varietal but this one is a Bordeaux inspired blend source from the Wallula Vineyard in the Horse Heaven Hills sub AVA of Columbia Valley. This site is relatively high elevation and in 2019 the growing season was cool so ripening was slower than normal. Merlot benefits from these conditions for producing powerful but balanced wines, so it makes up the largest component. All of the grapes were hand harvested and fermented with native yeast. Once dry each component was aged individually for eight months in French oak, then the blend was made and aged an additional 14 months in barrel. The final blend is 57% Merlot, 34% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Petit Verdot and 4% Cabernet Franc. 17% of the barrels were new and 312 cases were produced.

Decant this wine for up to an hour before serving. Unlike many Washington State wines which lean into the “fruit bomb” category, this wine is far more savory, with a complex nose of dried black cherries, lingonberry preserves, pipe tobacco, dried thyme, parsley and black pepper. On the palate this wine has very nice weight but also surprising freshness and tension, with an obvious sense of tannins that frame the long finish. Drink 2023-2029.

Venge Family Scout's Honor Red Wine 2021 - \$55

It is impressive to see how Kirk Venge has pushed out of the shadow of his father, Nils, who was the first American winemaker to earn a perfect 100 point score from wine critic Robert Parker with the 1985 Groth Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve. Rather than ride on the family coat tails and work with dad, Kirk split off to create his own legacy, becoming one of the most heralded winemakers in Napa Valley from his own property, Venge Family Farms. However, his impressive stature today all started in 1996 with the first bottling of this wine produced in honor of his favorite dog, Scout.

I have visited Venge Family Vineyards twice over the years, first at their original location near St. Helena and later at the new winery on Silverado Trail. Kirk produces a staggering number of wines under his own label, mostly from single vineyard sites of his longtime friends in the valley. He also is the winemaker of several cult projects which are produced in the same facility, including a former club pick, Trespass Vineyard. Kirk has a definite style, producing full throttle, extracted, high alcohol wines typically framed by copious amounts of oak. Personally, I find some bottlings a little too much, but during a recent tasting of his Florida offerings I was impressed with several wines including their most famous bottling, Scout's Honor.

Since that first vintage this wine has always had the soul of old Napa, with a Zinfandel base. This year the blend is 76% Zinfandel, 14% Charbono, 8% Petite Sirah and 2% Syrah. The Zinfandel was picked from two, old-vine (60 to 100+ years old), dry-farmed vineyard sources: Venge's Signal Fire Vineyard estate, and the Frediani Ranch, both located in the heart of Calistoga. The Charbono is from old, dry-farmed vines (60 to 100+ years old) also planted in the Frediani Vineyard. Robbie Mondavi's Howell Mountain Oso Vineyard is the source of the Petite Sirah. Then he rounds out the blend with a dollop of Syrah from Stagecoach Vineyard, high in the mountains of the Atlas Peak AVA. 50% of the wine was aged in new American oak barrels and the remainder in second pass French barrels for 14 months.

You will definitely want to decant this wine for up to an hour before serving, and I strongly suggest giving it a light chill as it weighs in over 15% alcohol. The nose is a rich combination of milk chocolate, caramel, dried black figs, Luxardo cherries, boysenberry preserves, cinnamon and clove. On the palate this wine is drier than the past few vintages, with high concentration and a powerful core of fruit framed by firm, grainy tannins. Drink 2023-2026.