



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

For the next few months the selections will theme around concepts that are often mentioned in the write ups but not explained in depth. My goal is to give you a proper education about grape growing, winemaking and marketing without editorial bias toward a particular topic. This month we are starting in the vineyard, with a discussion about conventional versus sustainable and/or organic farming.

The whole subject of conventional versus sustainable and organic farming techniques is far too large to cover entirely in this write up. Therefore, the focus for the features this month is on the impact that less conventional winemaking practices have on the quality of the wine. Ironically, studies show that most consumers believe that the purpose of organic farming is to produce “healthier” wines. However, if you ask almost all producers it is about the overall quality of the final product. To understand why we need to go back 100 years and look at the evolution of the modern wine industry.

Prior to the world wars, almost all wine was farmed organically, as chemical fertilizers were not invented until 1903. After the devastation of WWII, many European producers began using chemical fertilizers, later incorporating fungicides and pesticides, to boost yields. Although hard to imagine now, until the early 1980s wine was not a luxury item so bottle prices were very low. Since most wines after the war were produced by negotiants and cooperatives who purchased the grapes, growers were paid for quantity, not quality. Simultaneously, the wine schools of the new world, particularly UC Davis and Roseworthy (in Australia) taught their students that production quantity and shelf stability were the goals of winemaking, not the overall character of the wine. All of this led to the overuse of many chemicals and a fundamental degradation of soil health. The best example of this is Burgundy in the 1980's, when many experts referred to the region as “dying vines on dead soils.” Thankfully, the rise of winemakers like Bize Leroy, Nicholas Joly and Olivier Humbrecht, among others, began trumpeting the call for a shift to organic and biodynamic farming to help correct the ills of a half century of “progress.”

Today, only an estimated 5% of the wines produced in the world are farmed using non-conventional practices; sustainable, organic or biodynamic. Based on our selections you may find this surprising, as almost all of our features fall into one of these low input categories. This is not a dogmatic decision we make, rather our focus on quality inevitably leads us to these wineries. This month you will experience two wines from innovative and non-conventional producers, each offering incredible quality and value within their categories.

2020 Momo Pinot Noir - \$26

Momo is the second label of Seresin Wines in Marlborough, NZ, a brand that I have enjoyed for years but for some reason have never featured. At the heart of their quality is one single vineyard source for their grapes, and organic winemaking practices that began at the winery's inception in 1996. While this may not sound unusual, most wines produced in Marlborough are from scattered vineyards with little attention to farming for anything more than very high yields. You may not be familiar with Pinot Noir from this category, but I think it is an important and fast growing one, especially for those who like wines that are drier and more savory.

There are two great reasons to farm using minimal chemical inputs, lower costs being the obvious one. The other reason is that the vines naturally produce lower yields, which creates more intense wines. In the case of the Seresin winery, organic viticulture has been the norm since 1996. This is difficult in the climate of Marlborough where they experience high humidity and increased mildew pressure every year. Additionally, because the region is an agricultural mono-culture (only grape vines) most producers fertilize to boost production from depleted soils. This forces most producers in Marlborough to conduct a green harvest half way through the growing season to eliminate underripe bunches created by overstimulating the vine due to fertilization. Vines farmed with less input produce fewer clusters of grapes, so green harvesting is almost unnecessary. This is particularly important in Marlborough where there is a shortage of vineyard workers and also helps to lower costs. The real benefit is the grapes they harvest are healthy, fully ripe, and have superb intensity.

Decant this wine for a few minutes before serving and chill to cellar temperature for the best experience. The nose offers a restrained combination of raspberry fruit leather, cold black tea, new leather, bitter orange and dried herbs. On the palate it delivers a drier and savory mouthfeel, not unlike wines from the Willamette Valley of Oregon, with modest tannins and juicy finish. Drink 2024-2025 with grilled salmon, tuna sushi rolls or grilled vegetables with sauce Romesco.

2018 DiamAndes Malbec - \$29

DiamAndes is one of seven wineries created by a group of Bordeaux chateau owners following the advice of Michel Rolland. Rolland is the world's preeminent consultant, working with more than 475 wineries across the globe and one of the earliest advocates for vineyards in the Valle de Uco subzone of Mendoza. On his advice, the winery owners collectively purchased 2100 acres of land in 1998 and market themselves as the Clos de los Siete. Of course, jet setting oenologist Rolland oversees all the winemaking. One member of the group is Alfred-Alexandre Bonnie, who owns Château Malartic-Lagravière, a Grand Cru Classé de Graves, as well as Château Gazin Rocquencourt in Pessac-Léognan. Bonnie named the estate for his breathtaking view of Mount Aconcagua, which looks like a diamond in the reflection pond in front of the winery.

DiamAndes farms 321 acres of vineyards in total, with 303 acres dedicated to red varieties and a small piece, around 27 acres, planted with white varieties. The vineyards were all planted in the early 2000s, and the winery was opened in 2005. Thanks to the high elevation, nearly 3100 feet above sea level, and very dry climate there is very little pest or disease pressure. This means they are able to farm with very few chemicals and all of the fertilizer used in the vineyards is from compost. While they did not initially farm using strictly organic practices, they have worked sustainably since the vineyard was planted and earned organic certification in 2022.

This wine is 100% Malbec from the estate vineyard and was aged in French oak barrels, 25% being new, for 12 months. When serving you will want to decant this wine for up to an hour and try to serve around 55-60 degrees. I found this wine unique to most Malbecs as the nose is brooding and less fruity. Nonetheless, there are notes of cooked blackberries and blueberries, fresh black currants, dried black fig, charcoal, espresso roast coffee and dried brush. On the palate this wine is medium weight, with an obvious dryness thanks to obvious tannins from the fruit and oak. Good now, this wine will be best 2025-2030 and serve with a coffee rubbed ribeye or lamb steaks with mint chimichurri.

Lamb Steaks with Mint Chimichurri

A few months ago I was playing with chimichurri sauce with lamb and wondered: what if I added some fresh mint? The results are not classic but delicious and work great with the lamb and our feature wines.

8 lamb loin or rib chops
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Salt & Pepper

Combine parsley, mint, vinegar, garlic, oregano, and crushed red pepper in a food processor. Process until smooth; season with salt and pepper. Transfer sauce to a bowl and pour olive oil over mixture. Let stand for at least 20 minutes before using.

Chimichurri Sauce
1/4 cup coarsely chopped parsley
1/4 cup chopped fresh mint
3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
2 tablespoons minced garlic
tablespoons fresh oregano leaves
2 teaspoons crushed red pepper
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and pepper the lamb chops on both sides and let rest at room temperature for 1 hour. If grilling then light your grill and get hot, or heat your broiler. Brush the chops with olive oil and either grill or broil to your desired internal temperature.

Remove from the heat, cover, and let rest for ten minutes. When ready to serve drizzle with the chimichurri sauce and serve the remaining on the side. The left over sauce is great mixed into scrambled eggs and on burgers.