



# Tim's Wine Market

**December 2023**  
**By Tim Varan**

After a year of presenting cerebral concepts relating to the selections for this club, this quarter I decided to lean heavy on sheer drinkability. I think you will find that all three of the selections for this quarter will deliver beautiful concentration and intensity, while also working with a wide range of meals.

## **Alexandre Bonnet Champagne “Les Riceys” Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut - \$69**

For most of my career I have focused on grower Champagnes that come from the “classic” sub-zones of the region; the Montagne de Reims, Vallée de la Marne and Côte des Blancs. However, the region is quite a bit bigger encompassing other areas farther south called the Aube which includes the Côte de Sézanne and the Côte des Bar. My impression, based on some biased commentary, is that the wines from the “other” areas was produced from fertile soils, warmer climates and flat vineyards. In short, inferior Champagnes. Visiting the region in May my mind was quickly reset when I rented a house in the valley of the Marne and despite some pretty hard cardio training, could not easily walk the hillside vineyard next to our house due to steepness. I mentioned it to one of my hosts and they laughed, recognizing that there are exceptional terroirs all over Champagne if one is discriminating.

That brings us to the village of Les Riceys, which lies two hours south of Reims on the border with the Burgundy region. In fact, this small town is only a thirty minute drive to Dijon. The region has been bounced back and forth between Champagne and Burgundy for six hundred years depending on who was in power. Finally, in 1927 the wines of the Aube were declared a part of Champagne although in some ways the producers of the village continue to buck tradition by producing Champagne and still table wines too. In fact, my first exposure to the wines of Alexandre Bonnet was their excellent still Rosé. A few weeks later the supplier sampled me on their entire lineup and this wine stood out as the perfect December EBR selection.

The region of Les Riceys has a long history of winemaking, starting with vineyard propagation by occupying Roman soldiers. Later, winemaking was a serious endeavor for the various religious orders of the dark ages, with extensive documentation of the surrounding vineyards dating to the 11th century AD. The region lies on the border of two historic duchy's, so at various times the region was administered by the dukes of Burgundy or the royal court which controlled what is now the Champagne region. On the website for Alexandre Bonnet there is even a comment that the cellars of Riceys “have two doors, one for Burgundy and another for Champagne.”

In my research I also found something interesting that makes Riceys unique to both Champagne and Burgundy. In Champagne a vineyard with unique exposition, or *terroir*, is referred to as *lieu-dits*. The same area in Burgundy is called a *climat*. In Riceys the same unique circumstances are referred to as a *contrée*. The estate of Alexandre Bonnet owns 23 different contrées, which are used to produce wine under three different appellations. This wine is produced from one contrée, known as La Forêt, which has soil similar to the slope of Grand Cru vineyards in Chablis. However, unlike those wines which are 100% Chardonnay, this wine is made entirely from Pinot Noir.

All of the Champagnes at Alexandre Bonnet are aged for a minimum of 36 months on the cork before disgorgement. This is apparent to us bubble heads by the immediate notes of toasted brioche and caramel on the nose, that wafts around scents of strawberry, golden raspberry and fresh green apple. On the palate this wine is gorgeously textured and round, with a subtle frame of acidity that holds focus into the long finish. Drink this wine in 2023 or 2024 with a smoked salmon pâté or crab cakes.

## **2022 Thistledown “Walking With Kings” - \$65**

My original plan was to use this wine in the summer for the “all Rhone varieties” lineup but alas it arrived very late. Nevertheless, it is one of the best white wines I have tasted this year and still deserves attention.

Thistledown is a winery owned by two Masters of Wine, Giles Cooke and Fergal Tynan. They have become the critical darlings of the Australian wine industry for their efforts rescuing old vineyards of Grenache, bottling single site examples that have shined a new light on the category. In their search for these old vineyards they have also discovered many unique sites in the Barossa and McLaren Vale regions where they feel other exceptional wines, mostly from old vines, can be made. One example is this stunning blend of old vine Roussanne and Grenache Blanc, which is one of the standout white wines I have tasted this year.

When describing white wines it is rare to use the descriptors “rich” or “lavish” and “high tension” at the same time, but that is exactly how to describe this wine. The Roussanne grapes come from the Sellicks Hills, vineyard which is very close to St. Vincent’s Gulf in the McLaren Vale region of Southeast Australia. Due to the proximity to the water the climate is cold, allowing the grapes to ripen very slowly. They then whole cluster press the grapes to slowly extract the juice, then ferment using native yeast in French oak barrels. This treatment accentuates the richness of the wine while developing some aromatic dimension.

The Grenache Blanc is grown a little farther north, in Kangarilla, closer to the city of Adelaide. This area lies on a plateau at higher elevation than much of the McLaren Vale, so despite being farther from the water the climate is still quite cool. For years this region has been one of the most sought after for Shiraz, as it ripens very slowly. Leave it to Cooke and Tynan to find a small parcel of Grenache Blanc in the area too. Unlike the Roussanne, the Grenache is destemmed and pressed directly to barrel then fermented with native yeast. After 10 months the two wines are blended and bottled without filtration.

We strongly suggest decanting this wine for a few minutes before serving and aim for cellar temperature, not cooler. The nose shows exotic notes of fresh apricots, candied orange peel, gardenia, wet sea shells, magnolia blossoms and pea shoots. On the palate it shows incredible richness to start, but then a surprising sense of acidity creeps up in the middle and frames this wine into a long finish. Drink 2023-2026 with broiled lobster tails or fettuccine Alfredo.

### **2020 Anselmi Capitel Croce - \$35**

My earliest memory of selling the wines from Roberto Anselmi go back to the late 1980s when Italian white wine, even Pinot Grigio, was relatively rare. Fast forward almost 4 decades and Italy is now one of the most incredible sources of white wine in the world, and Roberto’s are some of the most sought after. It is a delight to bring you one with a couple of years in the bottle because these are white wines to age so this one is still quite young.

Roberto Anselmi began making wine in 1976 when he purchased his first vineyard in the Soave Classico region. At that time Soave was very popular in the US, but those wines were made from Trebbiano grapes that were grown on the flat lands south of the village. Anselmi was part of a handful of producers championing the return to the steep hillsides north of the village, the historic area known as Soave Classico. In addition, he pushed for the near exclusive use of Garganega grapes, a superior variety that was preferred before the war. Today it is thanks to his efforts that Soave Classico is seen as one of Italy’s great wines, but you will not see the name on his labels. In 2000 he left the consortium, unwilling to compromise quality and feeling his wines transcend the category. Today, I think there are many great producers in this but I will say this wine was a real standout in my tastings for the selections this quarter.

The grapes for this wine come from a single, 11 acre parcel in the cru of Monteforte, at the very top of the Zoppega hill that looks down on the village of Soave. Thanks to the cooler temperatures found at high elevation, his old vines and very low crop yield, this is an example with few equals. Unlike our other selections, for this wine Roberto macerates the grapes in the juice for a day before pressing to build complexity. The juice is then fermented in oak barrels, then aged in the same wood for nine months. Anselmi also champions the use of lees stirring, which builds even more texture and dimension into the wine. Although I cannot find evidence on his website my notes also read “unfiltered.”

You will want to decant this wine for a few minutes before serving. The first time I tasted it in the spring it was showing a little reduction, or matchsticks, but that is mostly gone now. If you can wait a few minutes you are quickly greeted by a nose of orange blossom honey, ripe Anjou pears, tangerine peel, lemon curd and apples baked under pastry. On the palate it shows impressive concentration and tremendous length. Drink 2023-2030 (Roberto says 15 years but that seems improbable after shipping) with calamari stuffed with crab, seafood risotto or shrimp scampi.