



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

## 2021 Ovum Red Wine - \$60

John and Ksejnia House have carved a unique niche for themselves, under their Ovum label, as the pre-eminent winery to produce Riesling in Oregon. (I would argue the entire US, but I am also biased.) I have a long friendship with John and when he is readying his new releases, he sends me a box of wines to consider for our clubs. To my surprise, the October shipment also included two red wines, this was a special treat since all of Ovum's previous releases have been white wines.

Speaking with John about the change, he told me that him and Ksejnia have a reputation for wanting to buy grapes from very distinctive terroirs across Oregon. This wine, for example, started a few years ago with a phone call from the octogenarian owner of the vines. Like many growers in the region, he had a longterm contract with Chateau St. Michelle that they declined to renew and he needed to find a buyer for his grapes. When he shared the vineyard location with John, bordering Washington state in the Columbia River Gorge AVA, his curiosity was piqued. John was delighted to learn a significant amount of the plantings are Cabernet Sauvignon vines planted in the 1970's! Conventional wisdom says this region is too cold for Cabernet to ripen, but this is not always true. This answer was proven by 50 years of dumb luck.

It is important to understand that in the 1970s, there was scant research on which grape vines would thrive in Oregon and Washington. David Lett, the founder of Eyrie Vineyards was the first to plant Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley, and that was after years of research. Growers in Washington enjoy a warmer climate, most of the time, so there was a lot of experimentation with grapes and sites. In this instance, the grower offered to plant vines for Chateau St. Michelle (CSM) and they gave him a mix of vines. The combination was mostly Cabernet Sauvignon but also Merlot, Syrah and a few other varieties including Pinot Noir. Once the vines matured, he found that most years, he was able to ripen the fruit albeit later than most other areas. With Cabernet, however, he rarely achieved more than 13.5% potential alcohol and that was often picking in late October. For CSM, they blended the small amount of wine away in their 400,000 cases and it was really nothing more than filler. Once the contract was terminated by CSM, something they have done to more than 40% of their growers, he was stuck with the fruit from his five acres. On a whim he called John, who relished the idea of producing a Cabernet from fully ripe grapes that did not reach 14% alcohol.

When John started researching how this fruit miraculously ripens each year, he did a comparison with other wine regions around the world. He found that the Columbia River Gorge AVA has similar growing conditions to the Bierzo region of north-central Spain. Although the winters are quite cold, the summers can be blazing hot and there is not a lot of rainfall. The 50+ year old vines in this site, which are also self-rooted, have adapted by naturally producing a small crop of intensely flavored grapes that slowly achieve ripeness at less than 14% potential alcohol. The first vintage John made a basic, unwooded red wine from the grapes and bottled under the EZY TGR label as "red wine." We selected this wine for the New World Red Club last year. With the 2021 vintage, the grapes were so perfect they decided to elevate the wine with longer skin contact and aging in neutral French oak barrels of 11 months. The result is a shockingly intense wine that is not flabby.

You will want to decant this wine for half an hour before serving. In our tasting, I find a fascinating contrast of fresh red and black fruits, primarily currants and raspberries, accentuated with refreshing notes of spearmint, clove, cassia bud and black peppercorns. On the palate, this wine is fresh, uncommon for a wine that is 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, but with an intensity of fruit that persists into the long finish. One element almost missing is the tannins, which only provide a brief dusting at the finish. Drink this wine from 2023 to 2030 with grilled pork tenderloins with a soy/ginger glaze, grilled tuna steaks or porcini mushroom pasta.

## **2021 Recoltant Cabernet Sauvignon - \$56**

This wine breaks my rule about only featuring brick-and-mortar wineries for our clubs, but it was one of the most compelling of my selection tastings for this quarter. The Recoltant brand is a private label for one of my distributors, but they enlist some pretty high powered winemakers to put this wine together. The first bottlings were made by Julien Fayard, a winemaker we also featured with the Edict Cab in 2016. The new winemaker with the 2021 release, Britt Nichols, sports an impressive resume. She has worked under Nicolas Morley at Peter Michael and Philippe Melka before manning the helm at Jordan and Keller Estate. Her focus for this wine is working with either organic growers across Napa Valley or growers using certified sustainable approaches in the vineyard. She believes this practice yields better quality, more intense grapes, and more complex wines.

While I really love the quality of this wine, I do find the name a bit misleading. “Recoltant” is a term applied to wines produced using only estate grown grapes of the winery. While the grapes for this wine were grown by *an* estate, it is not the estate of the winery. Nevertheless, they do source from some really impressive sites in the Coombsville, Rutherford, Oakville, Oak Knoll and Mount Veeder appellations. The wine is aged entirely in French oak barrels, with approximately 30% new for 11 months.

When you open this wine, I suggest decanting for up to an hour before serving. Unlike the two other features which are more restrained examples, this wine is a big boy and chilling to cellar temperature is advisable. Once you do this, the nose is a display of fresh blackberries and blueberries, caramel, pipe tobacco, vanilla pastry cream, green peppercorns, dried thyme and sage. On the palate, it has a rich texture with relatively forward and obvious tannins, with good length and balance. Drink this wine 2023-2028 with oak grilled ribeye or braised short ribs.

## **2018 DiamAndes Grande Reserve - \$50**

When I traveled to the Mendoza region in 2015, the plan was to develop a deeper understanding of the various areas of the vast valley and how they impact the flavor of the wines. In Mendoza, most of the attention is paid to Malbec, but I found the most interesting wines I tasted were either from Cabernet Sauvignon or blends. This selection shows how serious the category has become, produced by one of the most famous winemakers in the world.

DiamAndes is one of seven wineries created by a group of Bordeaux chateau owners, upon 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 they collectively purchased 2100 acres of land in 1998 and market themselves collectively as the *Clos de los Siete*. Of course, they all use the jet setting oenologist Rolland to oversee 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 perspective on 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. The high elevation, nearly 3100 feet above sea level, and very dry climate allow for a slow ripening of the grapes. The high elevation also means the grapes are bombarded with UV rays, which causes them to have thicker skins and more color. Although these vines are close to the Andes, the terrain is actually flat due to the weathering of the Andes, filling the Uco Vally at its base for millions of years. This allows for irrigation to be effective as the water does not run away from the roots and downhill.

For their 2017 bottling, they used a blend of 75% Malbec and 25% Cabernet Sauvignon, all from their estate vineyard. DiamAndes uses sustainable farming practices and green harvest to reduce the yields, creating intensely flavored grapes. Fermentation is done in stainless steel tanks using a submerged cap technique for gentle color extraction. Once dry, the wine was aged for 18 months in 50% new French oak barrels, the remainder being 2nd and 3rd pass.

It is not hard to see the potential for this region through the lens of this wine. The nose offers a brooding blend of fresh black raspberries, black currants, blood orange peel, dried dates, clove and dark chocolate. On the palate, this wine behaves more like a Bordeaux than classic New World red, with moderate concentration, polished tannins and well integrated notes of oak. Drink this wine from 2023-2033 with grilled lamb chops or grilled tri-tip steaks.