



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

I selected the first wine for this quarter way back in February, but had to wait a few months for enough inventory to arrive to fulfill our needs. During this time one of the books I read was **Eating to Extinction** by Dan Saladino. In this compelling story he examines how the modern food industry has dramatically narrowed the number of crops farmed, selecting specific cultivars based purely on economic decisions such as farming cost and yield. Each chapter gives examples of the danger in a lack of biodiversity in our food supply, and how landrace, or heirloom varieties are disappearing. Later, while researching my master class on Rioja that I taught in August, I came across the wines of Juan Carlos Sancha. He is a professor in Rioja who is experimenting with 30 different grape varieties that are no longer in commercial production, but were previously used extensively before the Spanish Civil War. His argument is that the region has become overdependent on Tempranillo, as it is relatively easy to farm and produces a consistent, large crop. Unfortunately, this comes at the expense of complexity in the wines and biodiversity. Thinking about the first selection for this quarter I decided to focus on landrace and indigenous grape varieties and their importance in modern winemaking.

## **2021 Arnaud Baillet Savagnin - \$69**

It is hard to find a better example of a landrace variety than the grape Savagnin, which is found in the Jura region of France. A landrace variety is one that is pure from genetic mutation and indigenous to a region. According to **Wine Grapes** by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz, there is some speculation, although no supporting DNA evidence, that the name of the Savagnin grape is derived from the French word, *sauvage* suggesting the vine was domesticated from the wild vines of northeast France and southwest Germany in the first millennia. We do know from DNA evidence that Savagnin is either a parent of Pinot Noir, or an offspring, potentially with an unidentified or extinct variety. Since Pinot is one of the oldest grape varieties we know either a parent or offspring, such as Savagnin, is quite old.

In addition to just being old, it is also a prodigious variety that is directly related to many of the most popular grapes today. At least 500 years ago it crossed with another unknown variety to produce Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc, which makes it a grandparent to Cabernet Sauvignon. In addition it is a parent of Petit Manseng, and grandparent to Gros Manseng, grapes from a previous EBR selection. It is also a parent of Gruner Veltliner in Austria, Silvaner in Germany and the variety of Verdelho that is cultivated on the island of Madeira.

It is surprising to taste a Jura wine produced by a Burgundy winemaker, but Baillet has a friend who farms this vineyard and he was intrigued to make a wine from the exceptional terroir. The grapes were grown in the commune of Rotalier, a small hamlet of steep hillsides with soils of marl and limestone, just like Burgundy. Jura wines are enjoying a moment right now with consumers, particularly those who like low intervention wines, as the region has a history of producing intentionally oxidized wines called Vin Jaune. However, Arnaud played this one straight, hand picking the grapes, destemming and fermenting in stainless steel. Once dry the wine was aged in barrel, with 10% of them being new. Like all of Arnaud's wines this was also bottled without filtration.

You will want to serve this wine at cellar temperature, roughly 55 degrees, because it will be muted if too cold. The nose is a subtle mix of fresh cut Fuji apple, fleur de sel, magnolia blossom, coriander seed and a hint of something green, like crushed ferns under foot while walking through a dewy forest. On the palate it is bone dry, with moderate concentration but intense clarity of fruit, which intermingles with the minerality into a moderate finish. Drink young or hold for up to 5 years, and drink with roast chicken, grilled salmon or a grilled cheese sandwich made with a baguette, funky cheese like Morbier and mushrooms sautéed in butter and garlic.

## **2020 Villa Sparina Gavi Monterotondo - \$59**

This is the first Gavi to be featured in this club, as rarely do I find "reserve" level quality in this appellation. Then, while tasting with one of my strategic partners for Italian wines I was compelled by this version from Villa Sparina, a single "cru" bottling with extended lees contact and bottle age. The grape used to make Gavi is Cortese, which fits our theme as DNA study has revealed no known parents.

Again, **Wine Grapes** by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz notes that the first mention of Cortese occurred in 1614 with an inventory of the cellars of Casale Monferrato. Although this variety is grown in pockets across the southern part of the Piedmont most of the wines are benign, offering little more than acidity to wash down the local seafood. There is however one commune, Gavi, where this variety shines above all others and there is a long history of high quality production.

The village of Gavi sits in the Piedmont, on the border with Liguria in the coastal mountains that are part of the Apennine Mountains. There are 11 communes within the Gavi DOCG and wineries can use the Cortese grape to produce still and sparkling wines. For years almost all of the wines from this area were marketed as Gavi di Gavi, but in the early 2000s the rules changed. Today, only wines that come from the commune of Gavi, roughly 4000 acres directly around the town, are entitled to use that name. Our feature, Villa Sparina, is located in the north of the zone with their 200+ acres of vineyards stretching across several communes. As such this wine is entitled to only the Gavi designation, but that is by no means a statement of overall quality.

For this wine the Moccagatta family use grapes only from a single vineyard site, Monterotondo, which lies on a south-southwest slope at 1100 feet above sea level. The soils of this site are very gravelly, with plenty of limestone that sits on a bed of clay. This allows the old vines of the site to have access to water in the currently dry vintages. All of the grapes for this wine are hand harvested, fermented in stainless steel then aged in oak barrels for 24 months before release.

Decant this wine for a few moments to allow the bouquet to develop. Once you do this wine shows a subtle nose of fresh Bosc pear, lemon curd, white tea and white cardamom. On the palate this wine is fairly rich, with the deep fruit framed by minerality and a subtle note of oak. Drink in 2023 through 2025 with grilled branzino with lemon/garlic butter or calamari stuffed with crab and scallops.

## **2022 Lagar de Pinto Albariño - \$39**

While prepping for this writing project I was encouraged to read Eric Asimov's article, "Is Albariño the Next Great White Wine? It Depends" in the New York Times "The Pour," August 10, 2023. This selection was made months ago, but the article is a strong affirmation of my belief that Albariño is a more serious category than many consumers give credit. The "It Depends" addresses this as many inexpensive examples are very drinkable, but not age worthy. However, I see many compelling wines made from the Albariño variety, displaying a superb sense of terroir and the capacity to improve in the cellar. The difference is these examples live at roughly twice the price of the entry level wines.

Returning to **Wine Grapes**, the first record of Albariño was not until 1843 in Galicia, Spain. However, there is parcel of 200-300 year old vines identified in 2005, so the variety is much older. There is significant genetic variance within the plantings of northern Portugal and Galicia, Spain, suggesting the vine is very old. DNA study does not point to any potential parents for Albariño, so some claim that the old vines hypothesized above may be mutations of wild vines. Another interesting point about Albariño is that for years it was mistaken in the region for Savagnin due to a labelling error decades ago. Until recently all of the plantings of Albariño were found in Galicia and Portugal, but plantings are now being made in the New World, as well as Bordeaux, as the variety is fairly drought resistant.

Our feature selection comes from the Rías Baixas region of Spain where the Pintos family has farmed in the area since the 1950s. Originally the family raised sheep and cows but added grape vines at that time. In the 1980s Pepe Pintos began to modernize the estate and began only producing wine. Today the winery is run by Pepe's daughter, Marta Castro-Pintos, who took over in the early 2000s. She was one of the first in Rías Baixas to convert the property to organic farming, recognizing the importance of sustaining the land.

Lagar de Pintos is located in the Rías Baixas sub-zone of Val do Salnés, near the town of Ribadumia. The family farms seven different vineyards to produce this wine, with all sitting very close to the ocean and only 5-25 feet above sea level. Their vineyards are trellised using the old pergola system, locally called *Emparrado*, which trains the vines 5-7 feet off the ground. This helps maintain airflow, important as this is the wettest region in Spain. The grapes are hand harvested, then destemmed and fermented in a mix of stainless steel and old wood foudre. Once the wine is dry it is then aged in the same vessels, with extended lees contact, for a year before blending and bottling.

Like the wines above, give this one a splash in the decanter before serving. Unlike the first two selections that are understated, Albariño is a dramatic variety with notes of fresh nectarine, lemon parfait, white pepper, raw white cabbage and sea foam. On the palate this wine is very intense, with amazing minerality and length that is more akin to a Grosses Gewächs Riesling than Albariño. Drink 2022-2024 with grilled octopus, seafood paella or butter braised lobster tails.