



Tim's Wine Market

February 2024

By Tim Varan

For the next few months the selections for our clubs will be based on concepts that are often mentioned in the write-ups but not explained in depth. My goal is to give you a proper education on grape growing, winemaking and marketing without editorial bias toward a particular topic. This month we will discuss different approaches to the most elemental part of wine making, the actual fermentation. As this is a really big topic, our focus for this month will only examine the types of fermentation vessels used by winemakers. While certainly not the sexiest of topics it is one that is very important to the style of wine being made and one that is debated among winemakers.

When I started selling wine in 1989 one of the first things that visiting winemakers would talk about was their new, stainless steel fermentors. While they are nearly ubiquitous today at wineries, at that time most were still using old wood or concrete fermentors. Those old fermentors were problematic because it was difficult to regulate the temperature of the fermentation and sterilizing them was nearly impossible. The advent of stainless steel eliminated those issues and harkened a new era of fresher and cleaner wines.

The advantages of stainless steel are easy to understand. Not only are these vessels easy to clean, but with a little care they last forever. If they have lids then they can also double as storage containers for aging, blending, clarifying or preparing the wine for bottling. In addition, tanks can be wrapped with a jacket through which glycol is pumped, which allows the winemaker to raise or lower the temperature of the fermentation. This allows the winemaker to speed up, or slow down a fermentation to help with the development of flavor compounds and, in the case of red wines, color extraction. Finally, for wineries with space issues they can use smaller, portable fermentors that are light enough to slide out of the way after fermentation is finished.

If there is one downside to stainless steel it is that fermentations take place in an oxygen free environment. Generally this is a good thing to prevent oxidation, but some winemakers believe there is a benefit to a small amount of oxygen reaching the wine during fermentation to help stabilize color, lengthen the tannin chains and help with aromatic development. Wood barrels, which are mostly made of oak, allow for this to happen. The downside of fermenting in wood is if the vessel is designed for this use. For barrels (225-230L) it involves removing the ends, called heads, and then reassembling for aging, a costly and time consuming process. Larger sizes of oak barrels; demi-muid (500-650L), tonneaux (400-900 L), and foudre (2500-10,000L) can be used as long as there are ports for removing the skins after a red wine fermentation. Of course the problem with wood fermentors are the cleaning protocols, as the wood fibers are the perfect hiding place for bacteria and yeasts.

The most recent addition to the options for fermentors is concrete, which is what most wineries ripped out in the 1980s. Concrete has an advantage in that it is a poor conductor of heat, so fermentations stay warmer and it also prevents pockets of unfermented juice from developing. Modern versions use copper piping to move cold water around the fermentation if the winemaker needs to slow the fermentation down. There is also a very small transfer of oxygen which is helpful for the reasons previously stated. It is worth noting the inside of these vessels are polished and sealed so there is no reaction with the juice and wine. Some versions are formed in the shape of eggs, whose shape encourages constant movement of the juice during fermentation. Some winemakers are also returning to clay amphora, which are a very old vessel for fermentation. Depending on the winemakers goals these can be superb fermentors, but they are extremely fragile.

This month we feature two wines from like-minded wineries both in Argentina. However, they have very different approaches to their fermentation which results in wines with different attributes.

2018 Antucura Cabernet Sauvignon - \$25

The Antucura winery is a 225 acre vineyard located in the middle of the Uco Valley, near the town of Vista Flores. Despite the new world location this winery has old world roots, being owned by Anne-Caroline Biancheri, and the winemaking is directed by Hervé Chagneau, both French. They also employ consultant Michel Rolland, famous for crafting the Cabernets at Screaming Eagle, Quintessa, and L'Angelus to name just a few.

The soils in Vista Flores are a deep loam, heavy with limestone, which creates a low vigor environment for the plant. This means the vine focuses less energy on the growth of the canes, leaves and flowers, and more on ripening the fruit. For Cabernet Sauvignon this is important because high vigor sites can accentuate the stemmy quality in the grapes. All of the fruit is hand harvested and then destemmed before fermentation. For the fermentation, they initially put the grapes into a closed, stainless steel tank to allow the grapes to macerate for three days. They then inoculated the juice with yeast and slowly raised the temperature until fermentation began. At that point they opened the tank and did twice daily pump overs to extract color and introduce oxygen into the fermentation. After 7 days the wine was dry and they closed the tank and left the wine in contact with the skins for 15 more days for more color extraction. The wine was then racked to French oak barrels, 15% new, for 6 months.

Decant this wine for a half-hour and the bouquet jumps from the glass with notes of dried cherry, cooked red plum, dark chocolate, orange marmalade, soy sauce and fennel seeds. On the palate it shows good concentration and power, with the ample fruit framed by moderate tannins into the finish. Drink 2024-2028 with hoisin/ginger glazed pork tenderloin or cube steak chili.

2019 Viña Alicia Malbec “Paso de Piedra” - \$30

We featured a Cabernet from this winery a few years ago and it was very well received. During a recent tasting with the importer the surprise hit was their Malbec, a wine from the same single vineyard site as the Cab, and a worthy followup.

Viña Alicia is a winery that is run by Alberto Arizu, his wife Alicia Mateu and their son Gustavo. The family is very experimental, crafting wines from many non-traditional varieties such as Criolla, Carignan and Savagnin. While all are very interesting examples, the true standouts are their Bordeaux varieties. This one, from a vineyard with vines up to 150 years old, is located in the Lujan de Cuyo region. The age of the vines and their great attention to detail make this a far more interesting Malbec than most.

The Paso de Piedra vineyard overlooks the Mendoza River and the vines grow on a bed of primarily calcareous clay soils. The moderating influence of the river helps maintain acidity in the wines and prevent over-ripeness, as does the staggering elevation (over 3,500 feet above sea level). All vines are hand-pruned and undergo numerous green harvests per year to reduce yields and concentrate flavor.

All of the grapes are hand harvested and destemmed then poured into large oak foudres for fermentation, with pump overs and punchdowns to extract color and flavor. Once dry the wine is split between stainless steel and oak barrels for malolactic conversion. Once complete the wine is aged in older French oak barrels for 8 months.

Decant this wine for up to an hour and then strap yourself in for a ride. The nose is an explosive combination of blackberry and blueberry preserves, black licorice, cold black tea, candied orange peel and caramel. On the palate this wine has teeth staining concentration, but it is less about the fruit and more earth and structure. Good now this wine will improve for years. Drink 2025-2030 with smoked prime rib or blue cheese stuffed hamburgers.

Fromage Fort

Space is limited this month for a big recipe so I am going to share a personal favorite that works with just about any wine, including our features. This recipe comes from Jacques Pépin and is a stripped down version his father made when he was growing up. The idea is to use up pieces of cheese you have laying around. For me this is particularly useful way to use up the leftovers from my daughters who love to make cheese boards

8 oz of semi-firm cheese; Jarlsberg, cheddar, Manchego, mixed or the same.

1 clove garlic. chopped

1/4 cup white wine

Kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Cut the cheese into one inch cubes and place in a food processor. Process one minute until finely ground. Add the garlic, wine, salt and pepper to taste. Process another minute until it forms a thick paste. Add more wine if you like a looser texture. Serve immediately or chill for later. This is amazing spread on bread, broiled for a snack, or stuffed inside hamburgers before cooking.