



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Looking back at many of our themes, over the years I cannot believe that I have never made all the selections for a quarter from a single vintage. This quarter we will examine the 2018 harvest on the West Coast of the US, through the lens of two different regions and varieties. It also helps that the wines are now five harvests old so they are also starting to shed their youthful character and give us some complexity as well.

## **2018 B Wise Cabernet Sauvignon “Wisdom” - \$50**

The growing season in the North Coast of California (Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino Counties) was unusual as to what has become the norm over the past decade. Following the tumultuous 2017 vintage where fires and smoke taint were big problems, 2018 was a welcome relief to growers and winemakers. February rains delayed bud break by a week or so and the spring and summer were quite mild with no major heat spikes. What most winemakers have told me is that the harvest was very long, as the grapes took a long time to achieve full ripeness. Thanks to the long hang time without hot, dry weather the skins developed excellent color and they also retained good acidity. The harvest also broke the string of drought years so yields were 20-30% higher than the previous four vintages. Overall it was an excellent year, especially for varieties that need a lot of time on the vine like Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

The wines from B Wise have been on my short list to select for this club for many years. In fact, I was pretty sure we featured another wine from them, Trios, a few years ago but it is not in my archive. The wines at B Wise are the passion of Brion Wise, who came to Sonoma in 1993 after building a successful oil business. He also had a successful restaurant in Boulder, CO, called Trios, so wine is not his only passion. Unlike a lot of successful people who buy wineries to “return to their agrarian roots,” but really only want bragging rights at the country club, Brion really did grow up on a farm in Washington State. Being an engineer he wanted the challenge of building a vineyard and winery from the ground up, so he selected a former cattle ranch on what is now Moon Mountain and went to work. For almost a decade he drilled a well, planted the vineyards with the help of John Cauldwell and built a winery, culminating with his first release in 2002.

Today Brion is the proprietor of several brands, making wine in California and Oregon. The head of winemaking is Mario Monticelli, who came on in 2002 from Silver Oak, with assistance from the legendary Mark Herrold, formerly of Meerus. To craft this wine 75% of the grapes are from vineyards in the Coombsville, Yountville and Rutherford. The remaining 25% are from the Sonoma side, with estate grown grapes from the Moon Mountain property and nearby Arrowhead Mountain vineyard. As a statement to how long the harvest in 2018 was drawn out, the picking dates for the grapes for this wine was from Sept ember 23rd to October 28th. The wine is aged in French oak barrels for 20 months, with 25% being new. Their dedication to consistency is so high that they employ Master Cooper, Ramiro Herrera to assist with their barrel program to make sure they have only the best barrels available. This wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon

When you open this wine you will want to decant it for a half hour or more before serving as it has been in the bottle for three and a half years and needs to open up. It shows the classic California Cab notes of cooked blackberries and black currants, caramel, cigar box, espresso crema and a subtle undertone of tamari. I chose this over a couple of other options because it also reveals a trademark note of wet cement that is a marker of Napa Cabs that are not over ripe. The tannins are nicely integrated and smooth, but still there, telling me it has years to go. Drink 2024 to 2033.

## **2018 Andrew Will Cabernet Sauvignon “Champoux Vineyard” - \$59**

This is not our first feature from winemaker Chris Camarda, I also selected a red blend from the Two Blondes Vineyard a couple of years ago. Candidly, I have been losing interest in Washington State Cabs as the arms race of heavy oak use and over extraction is reaching the point that most taste the same; I find hard to drink more than one glass. When one of my suppliers suggested this wine, I was intrigued because I find Chris's bottlings very consistent and non conforming. This is because his first releases were from the 1989 harvest making him a pioneer in the category. Time and again I think that the vanguard producers who blaze the path are the most resistant to chasing fads and this wine is good confirmation.

Camarda has been crafting some of Washington State's most compelling wines from his winery on Vashon Island, a 10 minute ferry ride from Seattle. Chris named his winery for his nephew, Andrew, and son, Will. Since his initial vintage in 1989 Chris has sourced grapes from many of Washington's best known sites, and is even a partner in the Champoux vineyard which is located in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA of eastern Washington.

When discussing great Washington state wines, it is almost impossible not to mention the legendary Champoux vineyard, which is pronounced like shampoo. This site is, in part, the origin of the great wines from Quilceda Creek, Woodward Canyon and of course Andrew Will. Champoux is in what is now the Horse Heaven Hills AVA, originally planted in 1972 by Don Mercer. The initial seven acres were part of his sprawling 6,600 acres of field crops, planted in the areas with deep loam soils. Coincidentally, the determining factor for the location of the original vines was that they were out of range of an overhead sprinkler system. The quality of the grapes inspired him to continue planting vines, growing to more than 130 acres by the time he established Mercer Vineyards in the early 1980s. At that time, he hired Paul Champoux to manage the vineyard. Originally a hop farmer, Champoux switched to grape vines and managed the first 2,300 acres of vines for Columbia Crest. In 1989, Mercer closed his winery, so Paul and his wife, Judy, began leasing the vineyard and selling the fruit to many of the elite names previously mentioned. By 1992, they formed a partnership with these wineries and purchased the vineyard outright. In 2014, Paul retired, suffering from West Nile Virus, and now the vineyard is managed by Dan Nickolaus. It is worth noting that Champoux was a strong believer in organic farming, radical at the time, and man made chemicals have never been used.

By comparison to the 2018 growing season in northern California, it was a more volatile year in Washington state. April was cool, delaying bud break slightly. Then May was one of the warmest on record, advancing bloom. This was followed by a cooler-than-average June. Bloom was notably fast and even, contributing to a larger crop size that required extensive thinning. July and August temperatures were quite warm, so much so that 2018 was shaping up to be among the warmest vintages on record. However, temperatures cooled considerably in September, creating ideal conditions for ripening and harvest. The result was a long harvest with higher than expected yields and good quality.

The 2018 Champoux is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon that was aged for 19 months in 25% new French oak, the remaining 75% is first pass barrels. It shows classic Washington State notes of fresh blueberries and blackberries, graphite, milk chocolate and claro cigar wrapper. On the palate this wine shows impressive power and texture, with obvious tannins that are not yet resolved framing the fruit into a firm finish. There were just under 500 cases of this wine produced and you will want to drink it from 2026-2035.

### **2018 Terminim Syrah - \$65**

I was very impressed with this wine a few months ago and was working on an all-Rhone variety collection but never found exactly what I was looking for as complements to this dynamite Syrah. Recognizing the 2018 theme it makes this the perfect wine to include as it shows why we should all be drinking more Syrah as it gives up nothing in power and concentration that Cab drinkers desire.

Terminim is the collaboration of two celebrated winemakers, Donald Patz and François Villard. Donald is well-known as one half of Patz & Hall, a very important producer of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from California for the past two decades. Villard is a rock star in the Rhône wine circle, a chef-turned-winemaker who is legendary for producing beautifully intense wines that levitate above the category known for clunky examples. Their Venn diagram intersects in the hills of Mendocino County at the famed Alder Springs Vineyard from which Donald has sourced grapes for decades.

Alder Springs is a legendary vineyard site with 141 acres of vines planted at over 2500 feet of elevation, on steep hillsides, only 12 miles from the Pacific Ocean. They employ a full time vineyard crew who pass over all 315,000 vines many times each year, working meticulously to ensure that each grape harvested displays uncommon intensity. They proudly proclaim that while most vines in California produce up to 50 pounds of grapes each year, theirs average only 2.5, which is only enough for one bottle of wine. The long, slow harvest period of the 2018 growing season was ideal for Syrah, as Patz and Villard like to pick Syrah earlier than most California examples so acidity is still high. The protracted harvest in 2018 meant great flavor development but at lower levels of sugar, meaning a wine with greater finesse but superb intensity.

This wine is produced from two blocks within the Alder Springs vineyard, Spirit Rock, picked on September 20th, and Cahto Ridge harvested on September 27th. Half the grapes were destemmed and half added to the fermentor as whole clusters. They also add back the stems from the destemmed portion too, with the fermentation in one stainless steel tank. They employ the "Villard method" of fermentation, with small buckets of juice drained from the bottom of the tank then carefully poured over the top to keep the cap wet and gently extract color. Once dry the wine is racked straight to French oak barrels with 25% being new, aging for 16 months. There were 318 cases of this wine produced.

Decant this wine for a half hour and it reveals a complex combination of black olive, hickory wood smoke, black cherry preserves, soy sauce, dark chocolate and violets. While made with California grapes it displays an almost Cornas like savoriness, with a kiss of leather and dried rosemary on the palate, which is also framed by integrated but long tannins. Drink 2024-2033.