



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This year I have started teaching a masterclass each month on one collectable category of wine. I started in January with White Burgundy as the arriving 2022's are a magnificent vintage. Coincidentally, the historic drop in sales of California wineries has prompted market visits by many winemakers eager to show their wines after several years of focusing almost exclusively on direct-to-consumer sales. To me most of these visits by Cabernet-centric producers are arduous, as they explain how important terroir in their process while pitching wines that exceed 15% alcohol. I am firm believer that high alcohol and over-extraction, two hallmarks of California Cab, homogenize wines and trounce terroir. However, to my surprise I have been very impressed with many Chardonnays. This spurred a thesis that domestic Chardonnays could be better values than White Burgundy. After all, there are many really good examples for around \$50, but in Burgundy the most that buys you is good Bourgogne, certainly not elite level Puligny, Chassagne or Meursault. So I dug through my notes and have selected three excellent examples of domestic Chardonnay reminiscent of the appellations mentioned above. I hope you enjoy this exercise and these selections are as eye opening as I have found them to be.

Irvine & Roberts Estate Chardonnay 2021 - \$56

It seems appropriate to start the offering with this wine, as it was tasting with Irvine & Roberts winemaker, Brian Gruber sparked my idea for this quarter. Perhaps the most surprising thing about this wine and one reason for inclusion in this offering is that the winery and vineyards sit in the Rogue Valley of Oregon. Less well known than the Willamette Valley, which lies between the city of Portland and the town of Salem, the Rogue is another four hours south by car and sits close to the California border. It is an area that has a very diverse landscape and microclimates, so wineries can produce a wide range of white and red wines from many different varieties.

This winery begins with Doug and Dionne Irvine, who grew up in the Rogue Valley, and after successful careers moved back home to raise their family. They purchased an 80 acre ranch and then, after a trip to Italy, fell in love with the idea of growing grapes and making wine. Inspired by their unique terroir and an equal passion for wine, they were joined by Dionne's sister Kelly and her husband Duane Roberts to create the Irvine and Roberts winery.

What drew both couples to the idea of planting grape vines on this estate is the unique soil and location of the property. The vineyards sit at the convergence of the Siskiyou and Cascade Mountain ranges, at over 2000 feet elevation, on soils that are 30 million year old degraded granite and sandstone. At this elevation the climate is very cool but sunny, so the vines ripen slowly through the long growing season. They also receive, on average, a mere 20 inches of rain per year so the vines naturally self regulate their yield and produce small quantities of intensely flavored grapes. After experimenting with other varieties, the two couples settled on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and today farm 48 acres of vines.

For this wine they use vineyard blocks planted from 2009 to 2018, comprised of 7 different clones of Chardonnay. Space does not allow me to go too far down the rabbit hole of clonal differences between Chardonnay, but think of them as the vine equivalent of maternal twins. While they are genetically very similar there are subtle differences in their growing habits, yield and flavor profile. For a mono-varietal wine like this the mix of different clones is a way to build complexity because each contributes unique attributes to the final product.

Their goal with the estate Chardonnay is to show off the finesse of this amazing site without the winemaking being too obvious. All of their grapes are hand harvested and whole cluster pressed directly into barrels for fermentation. This wine was fermented with a selection of organic yeast strains but starting in 2022 they are working with native ferments. Once dry the wine is racked to a mix of 34% new barrels, 16% second pass and the rest neutral, where the wines age for 14 months. 420 cases were produced in 2021.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant it for a few minutes before serving. Of the three wines this is the most restrained, showing notes of lemon curd, fresh cut Fuji apple, white cardamom, bees wax candles and wet sea shells. While not as dramatic as the others, there is no mistaking the potential as on the palate it shows an intense good core of fruit with an obvious frame of acidity and relatively transparent oak. To me this wine is reminiscent of the aromatic restraint of Meursault and will reward you with a little patience, preferably drinking in 2026-2030.

Eden Rift Estate Chardonnay 2018 - \$55

Even if you are California Chardonnay fanatic you have probably never heard of Eden Rift, despite being the oldest continuously operating winery in the state founded in 1848. Part of the reason for their obscurity is the property is in the Gavilan Mountain range of the Monterey Valley, far from any well established wine routes. Their appellation is Cienega Valley and what makes this location special is relatively high elevation, and more important, the presence of limestone in the soils. While Eden Rift may not be a household name their nearby neighbors, the Chalona and Calera wineries, certainly are. Both were established by winemakers Dick Graff and Josh Jensen, who specifically sought out limestone soils in order to grow Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to rival Burgundy. Understand that while limestone is almost ubiquitous to the great vineyards of France it is rare in California. It exists in this region because the vineyards are planted on the San Andreas fault, where hundreds of millions of years of plate tectonics have exposed soils rarely found in the rest of the Golden State.

Another reason for the obscurity of this estate is that in the last 170 years the property has only had 4 owners, the third allowing the property to fall into disrepair. Then in 2016 it was purchased by Christian Pillsbury, a former wine retailer mentored by the legendary importer Martine Saunier. Recognizing the amazing potential of this property, Christian's first move was to hire Cory Waller as winemaker, a native son of the Cienega Valley who also happened to be the assistant winemaker at Calera. They then set about replanting and revitalizing 125 acres of vineyards, roughly half of which are in production today. The site is a mix of heirloom and French clones of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, as well as a tiny block of Zinfandel planted in 1906 and 3 acres of Pinot Gris.

Working under the late Josh Jensen of Calera, Brian learned to be a very non-interventionist winemaker who understands that great wine is made in the vineyard. The long cool summers of the Cienega Valley are ideal for slow ripening, which allows Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to develop more complexity. For their Estate Chardonnay the grapes are hand harvested and whole cluster pressed to tank. After allowing the solids to settle out the clear juice is racked to French oak barrels, 18% new, for alcoholic fermentation using native yeast. The wine stays in barrel through complete malolactic conversion and then is aged sur lie for 10 months with stirring every week until spring. 1651 cases were produced in 2017.

It is a delight to present this wine that has 6 years of development. In my Burgundy comparison this is the Chassagne-Montrachet equivalent showing enticing aromas of drawn butter, fresh Gala apple, crushed coriander seed, fennel pollen and fleur de sel. The Chassagne-ness shows on the palate, with high concentration and intensity of fruit framed by obvious oak that is nicely integrated. While 6 years old this wine still has years to go, so drink 2024-2027.

Matthiasson Chardonnay 2022 - \$55

It seems appropriate to finish with Steve Matthiasson's amazing Napa Valley Chardonnay from a vineyard behind his house named Linda Vista. This is a historic area with grapes from an adjacent vineyard once used by Chateau Montelena to craft the 1973 Chardonnay that won the Judgment of Paris. Located on the western edge of the Oak Knoll AVA, for years this area was the source for many of the iconic 1980's Chardonnays because the belief was the area was too cold to grow red grapes. Improved farming practices and a warming climate have motivated many growers to replant to Cabernet Sauvignon in the past two decades, so today very few Chardonnays are produced in the area. Thankfully this vineyard survives, with the vines being 35 years old.

Matthiasson is one of the leaders of the non-interventionist movement in Napa Valley, preaching a less-is-more gospel that is starting to catch on. To craft his Chardonnay he lets nature do the work, harvesting this site at several different stages to build complexity into the wine using various ripeness levels of the grapes. The grapes are whole cluster pressed and barrel fermented but only in older, neutral French oak barrels. Unlike the other two wines in this feature, only 40% of the wine was allowed to undergo malolactic conversion and there was little lees stirring. Matthiasson strives for the wine to have freshness and structure so it can drink equally well young or with some age. 2355 cases were produced in 2022.

I selected this wine because of the Puligny-Montrachet-like intensity and lifted palate, which is rare in Napa Chardonnay. It has an exotic nose of shaved celery root, candied lemon peel, raw quince, tangerine, ground ginger and musk melon. On the palate it has beautiful intensity and focus, with an almost lean edge that rounds out a bit at the finish. This wine is still a baby and will evolve nicely for up to a decade. Drink 2024-2034.