



Tim's Wine Market

July 2024
By Tim Varan

Every year I try to select one quarter where the theme of the selections is “where are they now” so I can spotlight some old friends. As it turns out this quarter I found inspiration for the writing as I was flying out of Orlando for a few days of tasting in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. One of my favorite things to do on long flights is listen to albums that I have not played in a long time and on this trip I chose R.E.M.’s *Around the Sun*.

As a huge R.E.M. fan I always felt that their last three albums were some of their best work, but many longtime fans disagree because they lacked the raw edge of their earlier music. To me the last three albums, *Around the Sun* (2004), *Accelerate* (2008) and *Collapse Into Now* (2011) show the signs of mature musicians who evolved from their angry youth phase and reflect more thoughtful lyrics and music. Whether you are an R.E.M. fan or not, the same can be said for many bands who have managed to remain relevant into their middle ages. For the members of R.E.M. their worlds changed dramatically over a 20 year period, from riding around in a broken down van playing bars across the south, to signing the richest record contract ever given to a band. To me the result is that their later albums reflect a maturity that comes from experience and broader understanding of the world.

This brings us to our selections this quarter, all from wineries who have been featured before. All three wines reflect some maturity in the winemaking and can be viewed through a different lens than our previous selections.

2021 Cenay Cabernet Sauvignon - \$59

This selection goes back the farthest with the 2010 vintage being featured way back in 2013. In those days the wine was a single vineyard bottling from the Blue Tooth vineyard in the Oak Knoll appellation of Napa. That vineyard needed to be replanted so several years ago owner/winemaker Gerry Rowland switched Cenay to a barrel selection from the other vineyards he produces wine under his Ramspeck label.

The first time I met winemaker Gerry Rowland was during a late afternoon appointment in my store in early 2011. When Gerry walked into the store he was wearing a sport coat and tie, which is uncommon in an industry where most winemakers rarely wear socks. Looking back on the tasting it occurs to me that he wears a tie to not only show respect, but also to earn it. He has a lot to say about his wines and his appearance makes sure he gets the opportunity. The funny thing is that he is so honest, sincere and talented that the wines speak for themselves. He could have worn a clown suit and I would have bought them.

Our meeting in Orlando went so well that he agreed to host our franchises in Napa Valley two weeks later. Gerry is such a nice guy that he even helped me arrange a tour of a cooper in southern Napa Valley. When that appointment fell through at the last minute, he scrambled and found us a tour of a cork manufacturer instead. Not only did he go out of his way to set up two appointments but he went with us to answer any technical questions we may have. I’m pretty sure that if you look up “nice guy” in the dictionary Gerry’s picture is there.

The older vintages of Cenay were pretty deep and powerful, fitting a wine from the Blue Tooth vineyard, which is owned by Gerry’s dentist. The newer bottlings are equally rich but more polished, befitting the three fruit sources across the Oakville, Rutherford and Oak Knoll appellations. Gerry likes the fruit from this area because of the deep color and power, but also because the vineyards fall into the afternoon shadow of the sun crossing Napa Valley.

Decant this wine for a good hour before serving because this wine is a little tight right now. Then the nose shows an explosive amount of boysenberry and blackberry preserves, kirshwasser, dried red plums, milk chocolate, dried brush and black tea. On the palate there is a nice wave of up-front fruit but then the tannins form a fairly big frame into the finish. Give this one up to a decade in the cellar.

2019 Meeker Cabernet Franc - \$55

I have featured a number Meeker Family wines in our New World Red Club but the only Reserve feature is the 2008 Four Kings red blend that was spotlighted in July, 2016. At the time I commented on the evolution of that wine and a lack of volatile acidity that the Meeker wines were known for at the time. A few weeks later Lucas Meeker, the son of owner and

former winemaker Charlie, came to the store to thank me for the feature and call me out on the mention of volatility. Lucas is quite a bit younger than me but very strong in his conviction and clear on how the Meeker wines would evolve under his watch. His Dad loved big, dark, inky wines with a lot of acidity. The extended skin contact would lead to volatility issues that Lucas sought to fix. We became friends and a few months later I spent an afternoon in his dining room in Sonoma tasting two dozen wines, all small lots, where he emphasized his dedication to the winery evolution.

A few weeks ago Lucas' mother, Molly, visited the store and we tasted through a number of their new releases, all showing the signature freshness and potential to age that mark Meeker wines. While all were very good the standout was this Cabernet Franc, which shows perfect varietal signature but also impressive aging potential. Sadly, Ed Pedroni, the grower from whom they buy the grapes has replanted the vineyard over to Cabernet Sauvignon, so this is the last bottling of this wine.

What makes this wine so impressive is the vineyard, which sits in the Dry Creek Valley but almost adjacent to the Russian River. The vines are old, 30+ years, and the combination of poor, sandy soil, cool climate from the river and vine age means the grapes take a long time to ripen. In fact, according to Lucas these are the last grapes that come in from the harvest to the winery every year. This is key for Cabernet Franc, which when not fully ripe can display a lot of bell pepper aromas from the pyrazine compounds in the skins. Many winemakers, particularly in Napa, let the fruit hang too long and the sugar spikes creating a 15%+ alcohol wine. The cool climate along the Russian River allows for full ripeness but naturally high acidity, creating the perfect varietal signature.

You will want to decant this wine for at least a half hour because the bouquet really blossoms. You really should take a second to study the nose of this wine, with exotic notes of Luxardo cherries, raspberry jam, milk chocolate, black peppercorns and menthol. On the palate there is a restrained sense of fruit but very integrated, fine tannins that run front to back. Drink 2024 -2035 and only 215 cases were produced.

2019 Isenhower Cabernet Sauvignon "Wallula Vineyard" - \$55

It has not been that long since our last Isenhower selection, October 2023, but this new bottling from them is so compelling that I selected it anyway as it does show how Brett continues to evolve as a winemaker. These are some of the most restrained yet impressive wines I taste from Washington State. Too often the wines I taste are made by winemakers who do not understand how to rein in the incredibly ripe fruit of the region and as a result produce wines that are frankly tough to drink more than one glass of. You will never be able to say that about Isenhower wines, which seem to evaporate from the bottle too quickly.

Since we feature their wines every year or so I will not spend too much time on their history. Brett and Denise Isenhower were both working as pharmacists in Colorado when Brett caught the wine bug and they moved to Walla Walla, Washington. While they both maintained day jobs as pharmacists, Brett picked up evenings and weekends working as a cellar rat for a few of the rock stars in the region. In 1999, they launched their own label and crushed 17 tons of grapes; Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah, from space they borrowed at Cayuse, which they released on September 1, 2001 to great critical reviews.

When the great recession hit in 2008 the Isenhowers made the unusual choice to stop making their lower end label and focus only on their more expensive, eponymous wines. It worked well, including a feature in the New York Times, and more important reinforced their relationship with the best growers of the region. As a result Brett and Denise enjoy the opportunity to buy from the best vineyards and blocks, farmed to their exact specifications.

This wine is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from the Wallula vineyard, located in the Horse Heaven Hills AVA of the Columbia Valley. This area is quite warm during the day but cools off rapidly at night thanks to the proximity to the Columbia River. Like the Meeker Cabernet Franc above, this lengthens the growing season without spiking the sugars or depleting the natural acidity in the grapes, leading to a better balanced wine. Brett specifically uses three clones of Cabernet, each with different attributes, to build complexity and dimension in the wine. He also ages in French oak, 30% of the barrels new, for almost two years, which helps build structure and aroma in the wine. Brett's block from Wallula is only 2.4 acres so they only produce 317 cases of this wine.

The Isenhowers fully embrace the superiority of screw caps for aging and now finish all their wines this way. As such they tend to be a bit more closed up aromatically than cork finished wines so make sure to decant for at least half an hour. Then you will experience a beautifully expansive nose of cooked blackberries and black currants, black olives, maduro cigar wrapper, dried thyme, sage and an exotic note of pink salt. On the palate the wines shows gorgeous balance, with ample fruit framed by polished tannins. Under screw cap this wine will probably last until 2040, but drinks beautifully now.