



Tim's Wine Market

September 2024

By Tim Varan

After the powerhouse selections last month I thought for September it would be nice to offer a couple of lighter wines with a study of cool climate Pinot Noir. I found both of these selections at the same time during a tasting with a vendor in June. At that time I was preparing for a trip to the Willamette Valley of Oregon so Pinot Noir was also on my mind. Both selections show a clarity that is increasingly uncommon for examples of this variety so my goal is to demonstrate what Pinot Noir should taste like, contrary to the current fad of dark and sweet.

2022 Bennett Valley Pinot Noir “Bin 6410” - \$32

The Zanin family have been producing Pinot Noir since the 2008 vintage in the Bennett Valley sub-appellation in Sonoma County. Founder Emilio Zanin was born in Italy, where his family had been wine producers since the early 1900's. It was his fond memories of working with his father and grandfather that inspired him to purchase a Pinot Noir vineyard in 2006 that he named for his wife, Mariana. He has since been joined by his son, Luca and Luca's wife Elizabeth, who purchased the nearby Simpatico Ranch, and it is from these two estate vineyards that they produce their wines.

It has been a long time since a wine from Bennett Valley was featured in this club, mostly because there are not many of them. Bennett Valley is one of the smallest sub-appellation in Sonoma County with 900 acres of vineyards, on land that encompasses three mountain peaks; Sonoma Mountain, Taylor Mountain, and Bennett Peak, for which it is named. The defining quality of Bennett Valley is a cooler climate, created as Pacific breezes and fog channel through the Crane Canyon directly into the area. Morning temperatures are cold and foggy even in summer, then mid-day they rise quite a bit before cooling back off by late afternoon. This gives the vineyards in Bennett Valley a long growing season that is especially well suited to Merlot, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Due to climate changes many of the traditional areas of California that were once thought perfect for Pinot Noir are starting to become too warm. A good example is the Russian River AVA, which lies west and north of the Bennett Valley AVA. The Sonoma County Gazette reported in May, 2024, that temperatures in the Russian River are now 2 degrees higher than they were at the start of the 20th century. This may not sound like a lot but for Pinot Noir it puts the region at a tipping point. Because Pinot Noir bud breaks early the warmer temperatures mean the vines are now more susceptible to frost. Then the added heat during the warmer summer months means the grapes accumulate sugar faster at the cost of flavor development. The result is Pinot Noir that ends up being alcoholic and flabby and without much complexity. While it is not so extreme that producers are tearing up vineyards and planting heat tolerant varieties it is something they are watching.

For our featured wine, the Zanin family use fruit from both of their vineyards, Mariana and Simpatico Ranch for this wine. One of the reasons this wine jumps out to me is that they use 30% whole clusters of grapes in the fermentation, which means stems. Prior to the 1960's virtually all red wines were fermented using whole clusters but for most varieties the practice has fallen out of favor. However, for some thin skinned grape varieties like Pinot Noir the addition can add an interesting aromatic and textural element to the final wine.

Decant this wine for a half hour before serving and chill to cellar temperature, roughly 55 degrees. The nose is a complex blend of cherry preserves, dried cranberries, cinnamon stick, green cardamom, toasted pecans and rosemary. On the palate the whole cluster fermentation also gives this wine a roundness, with plump fruit framed by relatively obvious oak notes with caramel and baking spice on the finish. Drink 2024 to 2026 with grilled swordfish with orange and rosemary or pork cutlets sautéed with apples and thyme.

2018 Handpicked Collection Pinot Noir “Willamette Valley” - \$28

During the same tasting in which I found the Bennett Valley I was also impressed with this wine from the Willamette Valley. The story of this winery is very interesting, and I like that this wine has a few years in bottle as well as coming from a cool climate, so let's dive in.

Handpicked Collection is a winery in the Mornington Peninsula of Australia, which is a cool climate ideally suited for varieties like Pinot Noir. After early success with Pinot Noir produced from their estate vineyard, Capella, they soon expanded to other parts of Australia including Coonawarra, Barossa and Tasmania. This allowed them to expand their lineup to include Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and sparkling wines, but they were not finished. As far as I can tell they produced only one example of Pinot Noir from the Willamette Valley of Oregon, our selection. I am sure this looked like a great idea on paper but the logistical challenge of producing wine on another continent probably hastened the end of this program. It is a pity because this is a very nice example and shows some gorgeous dimension thanks to a few years in bottle.

The grapes for this wine were farmed in three sites on the eastern side of the Willamette Valley, which means the soils are volcanic in nature. While the Willamette is a cool climate the eastern side is the warmer edge, with less influence from the Pacific Ocean. It also helps that most of the vineyards have a western orientation, allowing for maximum sun exposure later in the day. It is for these reasons that typically I find that Pinot Noirs from this area are richer and darker than those grown on the western side of the Willamette.

Like the Bennett Valley this wine is also fermented with a significant portion of whole clusters of grapes, in this case 50%. This makes a lot of sense to me because the fruit is probably quite powerful so the extra structure provided by the stems gives this wine added aging potential. The wine was then aged for 14 months in French oak barrels, with 20% being new.

You will want to decant this wine for 30 minutes and cool it to cellar temperature before serving. For this wine the higher percentage of stem inclusion is obvious in the nose with a pronounced oolong tea and black peppercorn note that wraps around the red currant and pomegranate fruit components. On the palate this wine shows surprisingly obvious tannins for a 6 year old wine, with the ample fruit drying out a bit on the finish. While good now I think this wine still has a couple of years before it hits the prime window. Drink 2024-2030 with grilled pork tenderloin or salmon.

Garlic and Honey Pork Tenderloin

This is a great recipe for either feature this month and it's easy too! Make sure to get a good sear on the tenderloins before building the sauce. This recipe produces pork with a slightly pink center but you can cook a minute or two longer if you want yours more well done.

2 pork tenderloins - 1lb each

1 1/2 tbsp olive oil

1/2 tsp garlic powder

1/2 tsp paprika

1/2 tsp salt

1/2 tsp black pepper

3 garlic cloves , very finely chopped

3 tbsp cider vinegar

1 1/2 tbsp soy sauce, light

1/2 cup honey or maple syrup

Preheat oven to 350F. Mix garlic powder, paprika, salt and pepper together and sprinkle on the tenderloins on all sides.

Heat oil in a large oven proof skillet over high heat. Add pork and sear until golden all over. When pork is almost seared, push to the side, add garlic and cook until golden. Add vinegar, soy sauce and honey (or maple syrup) and cook for one minute.

Move the skillet to the oven and roast 15 - 18 minutes or until the internal temperature is 155F.

Remove pork onto plate, cover loosely with foil and rest 5 minutes. Place skillet with sauce on stove over medium high heat, simmer rapidly for 3 minutes until liquid reduces down to thin syrup. Remove from stove, put pork in and turn to coat in sauce. Cut pork into thick slices and serve with sauce!