



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

At times I have to remind myself that “exploring” wine does not just mean unique regions and grape varieties of Europe. There is an exciting world of wine outside of the Old World and these wines also deserve a spotlight. This struck home a few months ago when I was tasting with one of our import partners who represents the Zuccardi winery. We are already big fans of the family and sell several of their wines but this meeting was to get reacquainted with a few of the old faves. Two standouts were from their reserve “Q” level from varieties we touch on frequently in the Explorers Club, Tempranillo and Cabernet Franc. The difference is the approach that winemaker Sebastien Zuccardi takes as the growing conditions are quite different from those of their European homelands. I thought it would be a great exercise to see this and give you a couple of “bigger” wines for the fall.

2018 Zuccardi Tempranillo “Q” - \$25

2020 Zuccardi Cabernet Franc “Q” - \$25

The Zuccardi estate was founded in 1963 by Jose “Tito” Zuccardi, an engineer who purchased vineyards in the Maipu province of Mendoza. This purchase was not a passion project for him to return to his agrarian roots, but rather to demonstrate a new process he had developed for vineyard irrigation. At the time most farmers irrigated their vines using a centuries old process of diverting spring snow melt into their vineyards using a series of dirt berms to flood the area. While effective and cheap, flood irrigation also spreads vine diseases, pests and weeds, often creating more problems than it solves. Zuccardi’s process uses concrete pipes to direct the water onto the vines which is considerably more effective. Tito was very successful in selling his service but also fell in love with the actual farming of grape vines and began to expand his holdings.

In 1990 his son Jose Alberto joined the family winery and began to rapidly expand their holdings. They divested the concrete manufacturing company, to Tito’s sister, and launched their first winery, Santa Julia. In 2005 Jose Alberto’s son Sebastian joined the company after studying winemaking and working in California. At Sebastian’s urging they undertook a research effort on the evolving region of Valle de Uco, a vast area three hours south of the city of Mendoza. Then in 2013 they made a major purchase in the region and launched a new winery which opened in 2016. Today the Zuccardi family farms over 2000 acres of land, with most certified as using organic vineyard practices. Their holdings spread across five different wine regions in Mendoza. In addition to the winery the family has restaurants, run by Julia, and a large olive oil company managed by Sebastian’s brother. A visit to their holdings is an amazing experience, filled with amazing wines and great food.

For our first feature, **Tempranillo “Q”**, the grapes come from some of their oldest holdings in the Santa Rosa district of Mendoza, southeast of the city. This area has desert-like conditions, with very little rain and wide temperature swings between afternoon and night. To compensate for these extreme conditions the vines are trained in the parral system, which is similar to the pergolas of northeast Italy and Rías Baixas Spain. Vines trained in this way look almost like trees, with the cordons trained across guide wires, often five or six feet off the ground. (In Italy the pickers use ladders to harvest the grape clusters.) This gives the vine, grape clusters and surrounding ground shade during the hottest part of the day, which cuts down on evaporation from the leaves and soil. This type of vine training also keeps the buds and flowers high off the ground, reducing the risk of early season frost damage.

It is no accident that they are growing Tempranillo in this region as the variety is well suited to arid conditions. There are wineries all over California, Washington, Chile and Argentina who are planting this grape as growing conditions are changing rapidly in all regions. The Bordeaux varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot require more water and have relatively short windows for picking fruit at optimal ripeness. Other varieties like Tempranillo and Touriga Nacional thrive in drier conditions and ripen slower, allowing for a longer window for picking. While the world loves Cabernet Sauvignon many new world producers feel the climate may no longer be conducive in less than 50 years.

For their Q series Tempranillo the vines are fifty years old and, due to the parral trellising, hand harvested. The fruit is fermented in open-top stainless steel tanks, with daily punchdowns and pump-overs to extract color and tannin. They let this wine sit on the skins for up to ten days after the wine is dry to soften the tannins, then rack the wine to barrels. They age the wine in a combination of new and second pass oak barrels, both French and American, with the wine staying in barrel for twelve months. The wine is not filtered before bottling and is held at the winery for an additional year before release.

When you open this wine, make sure you decant it for a half hour before serving. When you do the nose becomes a deep melange of toasted coconut, dried red cherries, dark chocolate, cigar box, pink peppercorns and a subtle note of dried thyme. In the mouth this wine has big mass, with a deep sense of fruit framed by very big, firm tannins that are slightly drying into the finish. Good now, this wine will improve for three to five years. Drink with lamb chops, grilled pork tenderloin or braised ox tails.

Their **Cabernet Franc “Q”** grapes come from one of their holdings in the Valle de Uco and their first vineyard they planted in the region in a sub-zone called Altamira. They are hand harvested and destemmed, then dropped into the concrete fermentors using gravity. In order to gently extract color and texture, Sebastian uses a technique called delestage during fermentation. This involves completely emptying the tank of wine, then pouring it back over the cap of skins. After the fermentation is complete the wine is left on the skins for twenty additional days, then moved to 2500 liter barrels, called foudres, for ten months of aging.

When you open this wine make sure you decant it for at least a half-hour before serving. Then it shows a subtle nose of dried black cherries, black currants, cold black tea, fennel seed and dried parsley. On the palate this wine is nicely intense, showing some oak that frames the restrained fruit. What makes Cabernet Franc different from Cabernet Sauvignon is not the amount of tannin, but rather the way they stretch out longer, and are less jarring on the palate. Take note of this if you drink these wines on different nights. Serve with steak with chimichurri or brisket tacos.

Maple-Bourbon Flank Steak

Both of the wine selections this month show moderate levels of tannin which to me is best to serve with fattier cuts of meat. A personal favorite is the flavorful flank steak, which due to the grain of the meat also takes well to marinades. This version works nicely for both wines and is also great in steak tacos.

1/2 cup bourbon

Place the bourbon, maple syrup, soy sauce and pepper in a large baking dish; whisk to mix. Add the skirt steaks (cut in half if needed to fit) and turn a couple times to coat. Marinate the steaks at room temperature for 15 to 20 minutes.

1/2 cup maple syrup

1/2 cup soy sauce

While the steaks marinate, light your grill and heat to high. Brush or scrape the grill grate clean. To oil your grate, fold a paper towel into a tight pad. Dip it in a small bowl of oil, and, holding it at the end of your grill tongs, draw it over the bars of the grate.

1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 1/2 to 2 pounds skirt steaks

Drain the skirt steaks well. Blot steaks dry with paper towels, then lightly drizzle them with oil on both sides.

Neutral oil, as needed

Arrange the steaks diagonally on the grill grates. Grill for 1 1/2 minutes, then rotate each skirt steak a quarter turn and grill for another 1 1/2 to 2 minutes. (This gives the steaks a handsome crosshatch of grill marks and helps them cook more evenly.) If any flare-ups occur, move the steaks to a cooler section of the grill.

When the steaks are browned underneath and blood starts to bead on top, invert the steaks and grill the other side the same way. The total cooking time will be 3 minutes or so per side for medium-rare. (Insert the thermometer probe through the side of the steak; 135 degrees is ideal for medium-rare, 145 for medium and 155 for medium-well.) Transfer the steaks to a platter or plates and let rest for 1 minute. Divide into 4 portions and serve at once.