



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

It has been a goal of mine for some time to produce an “all Syrah” quarter of the Reserve Club and the stars have finally aligned. While there is no shortage of Syrah, finding the right mix is a challenge. Unlike Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, which have very consistent varietal signatures, Syrah is far more diverse in the way it smells and tastes depending on growing conditions. To properly present a diverse range of examples it has taken some work but I am delighted with this mix. They show the incredible range this variety can display in color, aroma, texture and structure which is why the grape is considered a noble red variety. I hope you find these selections exciting and they encourage you to explore the category.

2021 Teusner Shiraz “Albert” - \$59

It is worth mentioning right away that Shiraz and Syrah are the same variety. Recent DNA evidence points to the Rhône Valley in France as the ancestral home of Shiraz but in the southern hemisphere producers prefer to use the name Shiraz.

Teusner started almost by accident, in 2001 when Kym Teusner and his brother-in-law Mike Page overheard a conversation in a Barossa bar room. They learned that the Riebke brothers were considering ripping out their 85 year old Grenache vineyard due to low demand. Kym was then working for Veritas, a venerable Barossa winery, and so he and Mike offered to buy the grapes to save the vineyard. After convincing Veritas owner Rolf Binder to allow them to process the three tons of Grenache they launched their brand, Teusner. Since then they have expanded significantly, but always focused on old vineyards, preferably dry farmed and self rooted vines. This bottling is from their elite level, an example of Barossa Shiraz that you could use as a benchmark moving forward.

What makes Shiraz a challenging variety is not the farming. The variety buds a little later than most red varieties making it ideal for cooler climates where frost is a possibility. It has a vigorous growing habit, meaning it can produce a big crop, and it ripens quickly after veraison so there is little threat of fall rains. Like Cabernet Sauvignon it also produces good quality at relatively high yields, making it popular with growers and winemakers alike. But once ripe the grapes can shrivel quickly and become overripe. Growers must pick quickly in order to ensure the wines will not be alcoholic.

For this wine Kym uses grapes from two vineyards, the first is an 80+ year old block in the Ebenezer sub-zone of Barossa, and the second an equally old block in the Koonunga area. Ebenezer is well known as one of the grand cru areas, sitting almost 1500 feet above sea level where the nights are cool and there is more clay in the soil. Koonunga sits west of Ebenezer at equally high elevations but with a different, black clay soil. The old vines in both areas yield very small crops of intensely flavored grapes that also retain good acidity. As a result Kym is able to craft a beautiful example of Shiraz that avoids the overripe notes so common in this variety.

The Teusner “Albert” Shiraz is named for Kym’s grandfather, Albert Alfred Teusner, “a man of strong will but quiet leadership, standing firm where others may have faltered. A fitting paragon of this Barossa Valley Shiraz.” 2021 was a superb growing season, warm but never too hot and just enough rain to keep the vines invigorated. For winemaking this wine was aged for 22 months in 50% new French oak barrels and the balance in 2nd and 3rd pass wood.

When you open this wine make sure to decant this wine for a half hour and serve at cellar temperature. As you pour the first glass the notes of boysenberry and blueberry fruits jump forward, with dried red plums, clove, cinnamon, cedar and menthol all poking out. On the palate this wine has superb richness and texture with obvious but polished tannins. Drink 2024 to 2034.

2021 Minimalist Syrah “Stars in the Dark” - \$59

When I visited South Africa in 2016 I was very impressed by so many wines but the standouts for reds across the country were the Syrah bottlings. Tasting examples from many of the different regions what struck me most was that none of the producers appeared to be emulating any other places, such as the Northern Rhône or Australia. Sure, the winemakers all said they drew inspiration from these places, particularly Côte-Rôtie in France, but all the wines were distinctively South

African. This thought came back to me a few weeks ago when I was tasting with importer Pascal Schildt via Zoom and we came to this wine, his piece de resistance for the presentation.

Minimalist is the work of Sam Lambson, a seasoned veteran of the wine industry who is only 23 years old. Yes, you read that right. Sam grew up in the Cape wine lands and worked in a wine shop in Stellenbosch while attending the university. During the harvest he also interned under three of the top winemakers in the area. Then while studying for his WSET Level 3 Award in Wines exam he discovered the wines of the Northern Rhône Valley in France and was hooked. Nearing graduation he spent his entire savings to buy some grapes and rent space at the university wine cellar. With the help of a few winemaker friends he finished his first batch and bottled it with his family on his 21st birthday. Sam suffers from depression and bottling it was the end of a dark period for him, so he named the wine Stars in the Dark. I don't typically promote scores but I want to mention that this, his second effort, just received 96 points from Neal Martin in Vinous. I don't promote the score but rather the demonstration that this young man is making big waves in the wine community.

At the core of this Syrah are three vineyard sites in the Cape Agulhas, one of the newest and coldest wine regions in South Africa. This tiny tip at the southernmost tip of South Africa, with the vines growing only 5 miles from the windswept point. In this formidable climate the vines are planted on north facing slopes for maximum sun exposure and wind protection. 2022 was a cool year with less wind than normal, which helped to slightly increase the crop size. There was a serious threat of rain during harvest which hastened the picking, but generally Sam considers it a very good year. For winemaking they foot trod the grapes before fermentation, with about 35% being left on the stems. He goes for a short skin contact, 13 days, then the wine is barreled down in older French oak barrels of various sizes.

Unlike the Teusner, this example displays more of the French qualities of Syrah with a cerebral nose of Kalamata olives, Luxardo cherries, red raspberry jam, dried figs and cooked pancetta. On the palate this wine shows a gorgeous sense of fruit with nice restraint mid-palate and moderate tannins. The surprise is this wine weighs in at only 12.8% alcohol and yet displays so much texture. This is the beauty of Syrah! Drink 2024-2030 but being only his second vintage who knows?

2022 Arnot-Roberts Syrah Sonoma Coast - \$49

When I made this the final selection for this offering my staff almost applauded. While not a household name the wines of Arnot-Roberts are true cult favorites and my team in Orlando loves all their production.

Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts grew up as childhood friends in Napa Valley, although neither came from families who directly made wine. After high school Duncan pursued becoming a winemaker and Nathan joined his father in coopering, producing barrels for the great names of Napa. In 2001 they founded Arnot-Roberts to produce site specific wines that emphasize elegance over power. Along the way they also discovered many amazing vineyards that were too small to make into single vineyard bottlings and created an appellation series, using several sites to produce each wine. This Syrah is an example, produced from 4 different vineyards in the Sonoma Coast AVA.

Personally I am no fan of the Sonoma Coast AVA because it is geographically too big and diverse for producers to claim a common thread in the wines. Thankfully there is a movement of producers who want to separate the actual "coastal" area from the rest of the sprawling appellation, and with good reason. The vineyards planted only a few miles from the ocean are significantly colder than those planted farther inland. Wines produced in these cooler conditions are lighter, higher in acidity and lower in alcohol, which makes for some very compelling Syrah.

To produce their "Sonoma Coast" bottling Arnot-Roberts buy grapes from four different vineyards; Baker Lane, Clary Ranch, Que Syrah and Solas Vineyards. All four are cooler than the norm and they farm using organic and biodynamic principals. Thanks to the harsh conditions of the coast Syrah grown in this area is naturally low yielding and ripens very slowly. To emphasize the austerity of the growing conditions this wine is fermented exclusively with whole clusters of grapes and native yeasts. Once dry the wine remains on the skins for 20 days and then is aged in a combination of concrete tank, large French foudre and older barriques.

When you open this wine you will notice the color is surprisingly light, but do not be alarmed. The nose is a savory combination of black cherry fruit leather, old leather, soy sauce, oil cured black olive and bacon. When you take a sip the fruit shows far deeper than expected, with a nice sense of freshness and structure into the finish. This is not a wine for long term aging so drink 2024-2029.