



Tim's Wine Market

November 2024

By Tim Varan

With the reboot of the television show *Frasier*, my wife and I started watching the older series which ran from 1993 to 2004. For those too young to remember, Kelsey Grammer reprised his character from *Cheers*, a show from my high school days, moving back to his hometown of Seattle to take up residence as a radio psychiatrist. For 11 seasons the show meandered through his life with one laughable coincidence after the next. To me the funniest episodes involved his brother Niles and their erudite passions for food and particularly wine. Scenes of their wine club meetings are the epitome of the dichotomy of wine drinking; arguments over inane facts about wine while others just want to get sloshed. It is memories of these episodes that I use to ground myself, particularly with friends and family who are not wine drinkers. During the holidays I try to remember that in the end wine is nothing more than a beverage to make each moment better. So this month I have selected two wonderful wines that will keep you interested by their character, while others around you can simply enjoy them because they are good.

2021 Vinum Cabernet Sauvignon “The Insider” - \$25

Vinum Cellars is one of my favorite wineries in California because of their passion for out-of-fashion varieties and dedication to producing wines of great value. Their story begins at UC Davis when Chris Condros and Richard Bruno met while were earning their degrees in oenology. They became good friends who share, among other things, a dedication to the Chenin Blanc variety. After graduation they each entered the wine business, Chris working at Pine Ridge and Richard at Bonny Doon. Shortly after, they made their first wine together, a Chenin Blanc called Pointe Blanc, which became the genesis of Vinum Cellars. Since that time they both have become big time consultants who are well known in California. Chris now oversees production at Kathryn Kennedy Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains as well as the one he shares with his wife Suzanne called Horse and Plow. Richard spent a couple of years at Opus One, then started consulting for clients such as Michael Pozzan and Niebaum-Coppola.

Although Vinum started as a “moonlighting” job for both, today they produce nearly 100,000 cases, although most is for private label clients. These are wines they make but are labeled for other wineries. This business is a big part of why the wines of Vinum Cellars are so stunning because they have a great network of growers, from Napa to Paso Robles, and as far east as El Dorado County in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They use these vineyards like a painter’s palette, with each location adding subtle nuance to a wine. The Insider is the perfect example of their knowledge of an area, where they utilize four different vineyards each from a unique sub-AVA of Paso Robles. This combination of warm climate and cooler climate sites allows them to craft a Paso Robles Cabernet that is not excessively alcoholic or overripe.

When you open this wine you will want to decant it for a half hour to further soften the tannins. When ready this wine reveals an inviting nose of red currant jam, milk chocolate, dried orange peel and fresh black cherries. On the palate it has a deep sense of mass, with tannins that are obvious but not hard and a very long finish. Drink this wine over the next five years with braised beef ribs, a ribeye steak or mushroom and cheese stuffed chicken breasts.

2020 Araucano Clos de Lolol - \$34

Bodegas Araucano is owned by the Lurton family of Bordeaux. The family is well-established in Bordeaux, where they began making wine in 1897. Francois Lurton, who is the fifth generation to continue the business, realized in the late 1980’s that their growth could not be limited to just France. To that end, he began to search the world for other opportunities and purchased this estate in 1997.

The Araucano estate is located in a sub-appellation of the Colchagua Valley near the picturesque village of Lolol. The town is located on rolling, pre-Andes hills, close to the Pacific Ocean, where it is influenced by the cool breezes that funnel through the east-west valley. The soils are alluvial gravel, which are heated by the hot, sunny afternoons which then radiate back into the vines at night. There is a thick blanket of fog most mornings, which keeps the area from being too hot, perfect for early ripening varieties like Syrah, Pinot Noir, and Sauvignon Blanc. They also own a second vineyard site, called Chomedaue, that is located farther west in the Colchagua Valley. This is where they grow the heat-loving varieties Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Carménère to produce bigger reds. All of the vines are self-rooted, as opposed to using root stock, as this region has never experienced phylloxera, one of the last places on earth to farm grapes in this manner. Since 1998, Lurton has farmed this property using a biodynamic regime and are certified organic with the 2012 harvest.

His vision for Clos de Lolol is to produce a wine that is similar to a Bordeaux in style, but with the flavor of his Chilean vineyards. For this reason the blend for this wine is 36% Carmenere, 25% Syrah, 25% Cabernet Franc, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Malbec, and 2% Petit Verdot. All of the grapes for this wine were hand-harvested into small lug baskets, destemmed, then sorted twice before being fed into the fermentor. Each variety is vinified separately using the same technique, emphasizing fruit character over oak flavors.

Please make sure you decant this wine for an hour before serving to allow the complex bouquet to develop. Once you do, this wine reveals a deep nose of slate, black plum, dark chocolate, dried ancho chili pepper, blackberry, fresh blueberry and cloves. In the mouth it is quite dense, with big tannins that resolve with a little air and moderate acid. The structure of this wine leads me to believe it will age for up to ten years. Drink it now with pot roast or braised oxtails.

Mushroom Stew

This recipe, which I modified from a version by David Tanis, is perfect for vegetarians and meat eaters alike and works great with both features. You can serve as is, like a stew with sourdough bread, or over pasta or polenta.

1½ pounds brown mushrooms, shiitake, cremini or portobello
½ pound wild mushrooms, like chanterelle, or use King trumpet or oyster
4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 large onion, diced
Salt and pepper
1 teaspoon chopped thyme
1 teaspoon chopped sage or rosemary
Pinch of red-pepper flakes
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1 cup tomatoes, chopped
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
2 cups vegetable broth
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
3 garlic cloves, minced
3 tablespoons chopped parsley
Polenta or pasta, for serving

Clean mushrooms and slice mushrooms about ¼-inch thick.

In a wide skillet, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium-high. Add onion, season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring, until onion has softened and browned, about 10 minutes. Remove from pan and set aside.

Add 1 more tablespoon of oil and turn heat to high. Add brown mushrooms, season lightly and stir-fry until nicely colored, about 3 minutes. Lower heat to medium. Add thyme, sage, red-pepper and tomato paste. Add tomatoes, stir well, and cook for 1 minute. Season again with salt and pepper. Sprinkle with 1 tablespoon of flour, stir to incorporate and cook for 1 minute more. Stir in reserved onions.

Add 1 cup of mushroom broth and stir until thickened, about 1 minute. Gradually add another 1 cup of broth and cook for 2 minutes. Sauce should have gravy-like consistency; thin with more broth if necessary. Adjust seasoning. (May be prepared to this point several hours ahead and reheated.)

Just before serving, put butter and 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a wide skillet over medium-high heat. When butter begins to brown, add chanterelles, season with salt and pepper, and sauté for about 2 minutes, until cooked through and beginning to brown. Add garlic and parsley, stir to coat and cook for 1 minute more. Add chanterelles to brown mushroom mixture and transfer to a warm serving bowl. Accompany with polenta or pasta if you wish.