



Tim's Wine Market

December 2024

By Tim Varan

We always like to finish the year with a bang, or a pop so to speak, and this year is no different. This year the sparkling selection is a Prosecco, but in the *Col Fondo* style, which you will learn is the ancient method of producing wines in the area. For the red it is hard to skip over the incredible values coming from Bordeaux, a function of good quality and relatively large harvests coupled with declining consumption, particularly in Europe. These are both great wines to share with friends for any holiday occasion.

2018 L'Antica Quercia Prosecco "Su Alto" Colfondo - \$25

It is hard to believe now, but when I opened the store in 1995 there were a total of 10,000 cases of Prosecco shipped into the US. Of course we carried one and it was a lot of work to explain to customers what it was like because almost no one had ever had one. Obviously, the wines became very popular and in 2023 the US imported more than 3.5 million cases, one of the only categories in wine to grow that year.

The Prosecco region is a thirty five minute drive northwest of Venice, a collection of several hilltop villages that are the historical centers of production. Less than three decades ago the production was almost exclusively centered around the vineyards surrounding each town; Valdobbiadene, Conegliano and Ansolo. It is important to remember that hillside vineyards have several advantages with regard to quality wine production. The elevation alone means the ripening process for the grapes is slower, so they develop more character. Also, the vines are oriented to take advantage of sunlight, and one row does not shade the next as completely on hillsides, further enhancing ripeness. Perhaps most important is that the top soil of hillsides is less deep than those on the valley floor. Consequently the vines receive less nutrients from the soil and self regulate to produce less grapes, building flavor intensity.

Our feature comes from a L'Antica Quercia, a beautiful estate run by Claudio Francavilla. Claudio believes in the old methods so his 58 acres of land are covered not just with Glera grape vines but olive trees, pomegranates and tons of old growth woods. Glera is an ancient name for the local grape that was known as Prosecco until the popularity of the sparkling wines started to grow. At that time the name Prosecco was adopted for the style of wine and the grapes used to make it were designated as Glera, the old Roman name.

Claudio is a minimalist in the cellar, preferring to let the grapes make the wine. All of the juice is pressed to concrete tanks where it is chilled and allowed to settle overnight. It is then racked to clean tanks and the alcoholic fermentation is conducted over 8 to 9 days. Once the wine is almost dry it is bottled and finishes the second fermentation to create the sparkle. Francavilla moves the bottles to a cellar located 6000 feet above sea level where they rest for at least one year before he releases them. At that elevation the temperature is cold, so the wines evolve very slowly and develop amazing complexity.

Be prepared when you serve this wine that it is going to be cloudy, but steer into it and give the bottle a gentle roll in your hands to mix it up. The nose is a complex mix of dried straw, toasted breadcrumbs, dried pears, fresh kiwi and underripe pineapple. On first sip there is a moment of richness that is quickly framed by a wild mix of acidity, minerality and even a little tannin, that holds the wine in cheque into the finish. Serve with a charcuterie platter, wild mushroom risotto or veal and pork meatballs.

2017 Château Fort-Lignac Haut-Médoc - \$25

Right now the best values in the world for red wines are coming from Bordeaux. A combination of several good sized harvests coupled with shrinking consumption, particularly in France, has created an incredible glut that is keeping prices low. This bottling is perhaps the best example to demonstrate this phenomenon as it is produced by one of the most important estates in Bordeaux, Château Ducru-Beaucaillou, and yet sells for only \$25.

The Borie family who own Château Ducru-Beaucaillou, a 2nd Growth in the Classification of 1855, are one of the most important families in the region. Francis Borie established one of the largest negotiant houses after the WWII and also acquired Château Haut Batailley in Pauillac. In 1952 he acquired the rights to Ducru-Beaucaillou and sold his interest in the negotiant business. In 1959 his son, Jean Eugene, took over the holdings and immediately began a process of renovation and vineyard replanting at a time when Bordeaux was far less fashionable. For sixty years he has guided the estate to the highest level, in part through a severe grape selection to consolidate quality for his top wines.

While owning such a prestigious property is important to owner Jean-Eugene Borie, he also wants to show the potential of his winemaking team with a wine that is affordable for everyday drinking. After an extensive search across Bordeaux he landed on this property, which he purchased a few years ago and began a massive reinvestment to modernize the cellar and vineyards. Château Fort-Lignac lies a mile outside of the St. Julien appellation, on clay and gravelly soils. The vineyard is planted to 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot and 5% Petit Verdot. The grapes are hand picked, then fermented in stainless steel. Once dry the wine is moved to small barriques, with about 20% new each year.

Decant this wine for a half hour to allow the bouquet to develop. Once you do this wine delivers a rich nose of vanilla wafers, caramel, crushed fresh cherries and fresh terracotta. On the palate it shows impressive concentration for this price, with smooth, polished tannins. Drink 2024-2030 with beef short ribs, grilled steaks or wild mushroom risotto.

Cacio e Pepe Gougères

During my first trip to France in 1993 one of our stops in Burgundy greeted us at the cellar door with a glass of white wine and a basket of piping hot Gougères. While they sound fancy they are nothing more than cheese puffs, but amplified in a way that only the French can do. For a few years they were something I would make for company as most of the work is done in advance and you can bake as needed when guests arrived. Eventually kids and life came along and this faded away, but the memory never was forgotten. Then a couple of months ago the New York Times published this version, which is an Ina Garten interpretation that gives them an Italian flare. The recipe is amazing and while there is a little work on the front side the results are worth it.

1 cup whole milk

plus 1 teaspoon for the egg wash

½ cup butter, diced

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 cup/130 grams all-purpose flour

5 large eggs

½ cup freshly ground Parmesan

**½ cup freshly ground aged pecorino cheese,
plus 2 tablespoons for sprinkling**

Heat the oven to 425 degrees. Arrange two racks so they are evenly spaced in the oven.

In a small saucepan, heat 1 cup milk with the butter, 1 teaspoon salt and 1 teaspoon pepper over medium just until bubbles start to form around the perimeter and the milk is scalded. (Don't allow it to boil.)

Add the flour all at once and beat the mixture vigorously with a wooden spoon until it comes together. Lower the heat and cook, stirring constantly, for 2 minutes. Dump the mixture into the bowl of a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Immediately add 4 eggs, the Parmesan and pecorino, and pulse until the eggs and cheeses are completely incorporated.

Line two sheet pans with parchment paper. Working in batches, spoon the dough into a large pastry bag fitted with a 5/8-inch round pastry tip or a large, gallon-size resealable bag, snipping off a lower corner before piping.

Pipe the dough onto the sheet pans in 1¼-inch-wide, ¾-inch-high mounds, setting them each 1 inch apart. (You can also use two spoons to scoop the mixture and shape the puffs.) The mounds should be shaped like huge chocolate kisses. Using a wet finger, lightly press down the swirl on top of each puff.

Prepare the egg wash: In a small bowl, whisk the remaining egg with the remaining 1 teaspoon milk until combined. Brush the top of each puff lightly with the egg wash and sprinkle with the remaining pecorino; season with salt and pepper.

Bake the cheese puffs until browned, about 15 to 20 minutes, rotating the pans halfway through baking. Serve hot. (If preparing the cheese puffs in advance, you can bake them off, allow them to cool, then freeze them in a sealed resealable bag. Reheat them on a parchment-lined baking sheet at 375 degrees for 10 minutes.)