



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

The selections this month are both from Australia, a country whose wines have been ignored and maligned for far too long. While hard to imagine now, before the turn of the century the wines from Australia were all the rage. At the time those wines were not indicative of what the producers in Australia were actually doing, being crafted to the U.S. market and one particular wine critic. Eventually consumers tired of the style and imports from Australia collapsed, except for Yellow Tail which appeals to a price specific customer. After the Sydney Olympics in 2000 the rest of the world discovered what real Australian wine is and gobbled up what little was available of the best producers. Thankfully this success spawned many new, young producers to take up the call and today we have a decent supply of many top shelf producers. Like European producers these wines are indicative of their place of origin and show great varietal authenticity. This month our features celebrate two great examples of common varieties but in a distinctly Aussie style.

2022 Thistledown Gorgeous Grenache | \$20

We featured this wine in the New World Red Club a couple of years ago with great success. Our feature for this month was supposed to be the Grenache Blanc but the distributor ordered the wrong wine. There is not time to reverse the mistake so we decided to feature this bottling because it is an excellent example of the category and has a great story too.

Australian Grenache is basically an unknown category in the U.S., but prior to the late 1970s, most of the wine produced in Australia was fortified (like Port) so varietal character was not important. Producers focused on high-yielding varieties, like Grenache, which gave them plenty of wine to build their port-style wines. When Shiraz took off in the late 1980s, most wineries never planted any new Grenache vines favoring Shiraz. Today there are thousands of acres of Grenache vines older than 50 years, which is when they start producing really interesting fruit. This is why dozens of wineries now put their Grenache wines forward as their flagship production, including the dynamic duo of Thistledown, Giles Cooke and Fergal Tynan, coincidentally both Masters of Wine.

In the case of Giles and Fergal, after years of working in the trade and tasting thousands of wines each year, this led them to crave wines that were specific to varietal correctness and site specificity. Typically the red grape that defines these qualities is Pinot Noir, but that is not very common in Australia. However, there are thousands of acres of Grenache, most quite old, and it is a variety that can be made in a way that achieves the same goal. With this in mind, they launched Thistledown Wine Company, which produces wines focused on site-specific wines, or in the case of their entry-level Gorgeous Grenache, examples of varietal purity.

Like me, the importer for Thistledown, Ken Onish, is an obsessive reader and probably receives dozens of email newsletters about wine. Often he forwards interesting articles to me, and right before this wine arrived, he sent me one entitled "Grenache, the poor man's Pinot Noir." The premise, of which I completely agree, is that both varieties are thin-skinned and not known for deep color. In many parts of the world where Grenache is used, particularly the Rhône Valley of France and many parts of Spain, yields are low and winemaking involves extended skin contact to extract maximum color. However, most Australian winemakers, Thistledown included, produce lighter examples that are more articulate. To make this wine, they actually use several sites across South Australia, fermenting each batch in small lots to maintain control over extraction. They also use a fair amount of whole clusters, meaning stems, and wild yeasts. After fermentation, the wine is aged in larger, neutral oak barrels.

As with all wines bottled under screw cap, I strongly encourage you to decant this a half-hour before serving. When this wine splashes into the glass, it jumps out with notes of fresh and dried cherries, muddled black raspberries, star anise, cinnamon, thyme and bay leaf. On the palate the fruit is forward and plump, with integrated tannins and only a minor background of acidity. Drink 2022 through 2025 with roast chicken, lamb kabobs or brisket chili.

2019 Nugan Cabernet Sauvignon Alcira Vineyard | \$29

When I think about grape varieties that are well matched to their Australian terroir I relate Shiraz and Grenache to the Barossa Valley, but for Cabernet Sauvignon it has to be either Western Australia or Coonawarra, from which this wine is

made. Coonawarra is located near the southern coastline of Australia, almost midway between Adelaide and Melbourne, and has long been known for producing powerful, age worthy and distinctive Cabernet Sauvignon. This example from the Nugan family is a great example and has a few years in bottle too, so it has some lovely mature qualities as well.

What makes Coonawarra so special is its famous red soil called Terra Rossa. The iron rich, sandy soils lie on a bed of ancient limestone, which holds water during the rainy winter season until needed during the hot, dry summer. The region is also located close to the ocean so it benefits from evening breezes that come off the cold Antarctic Ocean. The combination of warm days and cold nights helps the grapes achieve full ripeness and maintain good acidity. The Nugan holding called Alcida Vineyard lies at the northern end of the region where the red clay is deepest and climate is slightly warmer. Thanks to the isolated location the vines are self rooted as this part of the country has never had phylloxera. As a result the wines show superb balance and ripeness, with a wonderful undertone of minerality that is reminiscent of Bordeaux.

It has been a few years since we featured a wine from the Nugan family, one of my favorite sources in Australia. The Nugan family settled in the region in 1940 when Alfredo Nugan emigrated from Spain and established a small fruit packing company. He was succeeded by his son, Ken, in 1965 and he launched into a rapid expansion of growing specialty fruits and processing them. Tragically, he died of cancer in 1986, at a time when consumer tastes for the family's products was changing. Undaunted, his wife Michelle steered the company into exotic juice processing, and they are now the largest of their industry in the southern hemisphere. As part of their growth, the family invested in large vineyard parcels, selling the grapes to other wineries. In 2000, they built their own winery and began producing wines under their own name. Today they have several different tiers of production with the single vineyard bottles near the top of their lineup.

Decant this wine for up to half an hour before serving. Thanks to the cooler climate this wine displays an intertwining combination of black and red currants, mulberries, cocoa powder, cedar, old leather and the classic marker of the region, eucalyptus. On the palate this wine displays superb richness, with the ample fruit framed by a subtle frame of oak and bright acidity that keeps it evolving through the whole bottle. Good now, this wine will continue to age gracefully for a few more years so drink 2025-2030. Serve with anything off the grill or stuffed, roasted pork loin.

Australian Sausage Rolls

In my research of classic Aussie dishes for this feature these little jewels kept coming up, who knew? Having all the ingredients on hand (yes I keep puff pastry and black sesame seeds on hand) I decided to give them a try. No surprise they are delicious, but when you wrap sausage in puff pastry what do you expect? No surprises here except keep the filling chilled while you work with it so the results are less greasy.

- 1 1/2 pounds ground sweet Italian sausage**
- 1 whole onion finely diced**
- 1 whole carrot peeled and grated**
- 1 cup baby spinach finely chopped**
- 1 clove garlic minced**
- 1 sprig rosemary finely chopped**
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika**
- 1 pinch salt**
- 1 pinch freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 whole eggs divided**
- 3 sheets frozen puff pastry thawed**
- black sesame seeds for sprinkling on the rolls**
- ketchup for dipping (yeah, it's traditional)**

First, prepare the filling. Combine the ground Italian sausage, onion, carrot, spinach, garlic, rosemary, smoked paprika, salt, pepper and one of the eggs in a bowl. Mix together like you are making meatballs or meatloaf. Set the bowl aside in the refrigerator for a half hour. Pre-heat the oven to 400 and line two sheet pans with silicone mats or parchment paper. Crack the other egg into a bowl and beat it to make an egg wash. Take the puff pastry sheets and lay them out on a clean work surface. Cut them each in half lengthwise to have 6 strips total of puff pastry.

Divide the chilled sausage filling into 6 equal portions. Mold one of the portions into a log down the length of one of the puff pastry strips and repeat with the remaining 5 portions to fill each sausage roll. Roll each puff pastry sheet tightly to surround the sausage log. Then brush each roll with egg wash and sprinkle them with the black sesame seeds.

Cut each roll into 6 equal pieces to have 36 pieces total. Line 18 pieces up onto each sheet tray and bake the sausage rolls for 20 minutes. Then reduce the heat to 350 and bake them for another 10 minutes.