



# Tim's Wine Market

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*By Tim Varan*

“A tasting from hell,” is a phrase I use to describe a lineup of wines made from either Pinotage or Carménère grapes. Then subsequent trips to Chile in 2013 and South Africa in 2016 gave me a better perspective. During both visits I tasted great examples of both grape varieties, although admittedly I also experienced many awful examples too. What I now understand is that winemakers who really focus on these more challenging varieties, who have the correct growing conditions, can make excellent examples. Those who follow the traditional “recipe” tend to make the uninspired, let's just say awful, examples. Last month I selected what I consider an excellent Pinotage from Painted Wolf, this month you receive an exceptional Carménère from Chile. Admittedly these are polarizing varieties, both high in acidity, so you may not love either but remember that education and experience are the DNA of our club selections. After this month we will get back to tasting more standard selections.

## **2021 Araucano Carménère Humo Blanco “L’Atelier” | \$24**

Bodegas Araucano is the Chilean venture of the Lurton family, long established in Bordeaux and part of the region’s winemaking fabric since 1897. François Lurton, representing the fifth generation, began to look beyond France in the late 1980s, convinced that his family’s future depended on finding new and distinctive terroirs. After exploring sites across the globe, he landed in Chile’s Colchagua Valley and purchased what would become the Araucano estate in 1997.

The estate sits near the village of Lolol, in a sub-region defined by its rolling, pre-Andean hills and proximity to the Pacific Ocean. Here, cool marine breezes and thick morning fog—known locally as Humo Blanco—sweep through the vineyards, moderating Chile’s famously sunny afternoons. The soils are mostly alluvial gravel, which absorb daytime heat and radiate it back into the vines at night, promoting steady, even ripening. This climate is ideal for early-ripening grapes like Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc, and Syrah, which maintain acidity and freshness even in a warm vintage.

In addition to the main estate, the Lurtons also farm a second vineyard called Chomedahue, located farther west. With a slightly warmer, drier climate, this site is better suited for heat-loving red varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Carménère. One of the most remarkable aspects of both sites is that they are planted entirely on their own roots. Phylloxera has never reached this part of Chile, making it one of the last places in the world where vines can be grown without grafting. Since 1998, the estate has been farmed biodynamically, and the wines have been certified organic since the 2012 vintage.

L’Atelier is part of the winery’s Humo Blanco line, but goes a step further—this bottling is made without any added sulfur. While that’s a risky move for most reds, Carménère’s naturally high acidity makes it the perfect candidate. The result is a wine that’s vivid, textured, and fully expressive, without any masking or dulling from sulfur additions.

Decant for up to an hour and serve slightly below room temperature. Aromas of blueberry preserves, blackcurrant, green peppercorn, and rosemary lead into a structured, powerful palate that softens with air. Drink now through 2026 with grilled steaks, lamb shoulder, or anything herby and flame-kissed.

## **2023 Venge Family Scout’s Honor Red Wine | \$55**

This wine has absolutely nothing to do with the current club theme—except to signal that Napa Valley is sitting on too much wine, and producers are finally ready to deal. You’ll notice this bottle is well above the usual NWR price range, which just shows how motivated wineries have become. Stay tuned—we expect more great values like this in the coming months.

It's been impressive to watch Kirk Venge step out from behind the long shadow of his father, Nils Venge, one of Napa’s most iconic winemakers. Nils earned the first 100-point score from Robert Parker for the 1985 Groth Cabernet Sauvignon

Reserve. Instead of coasting on that legacy, Kirk struck out on his own, launching Venge Family Reserve in 1996. One of his first bottlings was Scout's Honor, named after his beloved dog—and that wine laid the groundwork for the reputation he enjoys today as one of Napa's most respected winemakers.

I've visited Venge Family Vineyards twice over the years—once at the original site near St. Helena, and later at the new facility on Silverado Trail. Kirk makes a staggering number of wines, most from single-vineyard sites owned by longtime friends in the valley. He's also the winemaker for several cult-level projects, including Trespass Vineyard (a former club pick), all produced under the same roof.

Kirk has a signature style: full-throttle, deeply extracted wines with plenty of oak and alcohol. Personally, I've found some of his wines a bit too much, but during a recent tasting of his Florida offerings, Scout's Honor stood out as a highlight. It remains one of his most beloved wines—and in this vintage, it's showing particularly well.

The 2021 Scout's Honor is built around Zinfandel, a nod to old-school Napa. This year's blend is 76% Zinfandel, 14% Charbono, 8% Petite Sirah, and 2% Syrah. The Zin comes from two old-vine, dry-farmed sites in Calistoga: Venge's own Signal Fire Vineyard and the Frediani Ranch. The Charbono also comes from Frediani's old vines, while the Petite Sirah hails from Robbie Mondavi's Oso Vineyard on Howell Mountain. A final touch of Syrah comes from the high-altitude Stagecoach Vineyard in the Atlas Peak AVA. The wine aged for 14 months in 50% new American oak, with the rest in second-pass French barrels.

You'll want to decant this for at least an hour and give it a light chill—clocking in over 15% ABV, it benefits from both. The nose is loaded with milk chocolate, caramel, dried black figs, Luxardo cherries, boysenberry preserves, and warm baking spice. On the palate, it's a bit drier than recent vintages, with a powerful core of fruit, impressive concentration, and firm, grainy tannins. It's a natural fit for smoked meats or grilled sausages. Drink 2023–2026.

## Cajun Meatloaf

Like many of you I grew up eating meatloaf, which I still love BTW, but finding this Cajun version was an epiphany. I discovered it while reading David Darlington's [\*\*Angels' Visits: An Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel\*\*](#) in which he recommends a version of this recipe as the perfect pairing. This version, which is a bit more tame, works great with both wines this month as the mirepoix also works nicely with the pepperiness of the Carménère. If you want to ramp up the heat of this even more, sprinkle the raw meatloaf with additional Creole seasoning before baking.

**1 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil**  
**1 1/2 cup yellow onion, finely chopped**  
**3/4 cup celery, finely chopped**  
**3/4 cup green bell pepper, finely chopped**  
**1/2 Tbsp. Creole seasoning**  
**1/2 tsp. black pepper**  
**1 lb. ground chuck**  
**8 oz. ground pork**  
**1 cup dry breadcrumbs**  
**3 Tbsp. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley**  
**2 large eggs**  
**1/4 cup, plus 2 Tbsp. ketchup, divided**  
**1 Tbsp. light brown sugar**

Preheat oven to 350°F with rack in top third position. Line a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan with a double layer of aluminum foil, leaving a 3-inch overhang on long sides. Lightly coat with cooking spray, and set aside.

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add onion, and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 4 minutes. Add celery and bell pepper; cook, stirring often, until tender, about 4 minutes. Add Creole seasoning and pepper; cook, stirring often, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer to a large bowl; spread in an even layer across bottom of bowl, and let cool for 5 minutes.

Add beef, pork, breadcrumbs, parsley, eggs, and 2 tablespoons of the ketchup to onion mixture in bowl. Gently fold together using your hands just until incorporated. Press into prepared loaf pan. Stir together sugar and remaining 1/4 cup ketchup in a small bowl; spread over meatloaf.

Bake in preheated oven until well browned and a thermometer inserted in thickest portion of meatloaf registers 165°F, 50 minutes to 1 hour. Let cool for 15 minutes. Remove meatloaf from loaf pan using foil overhang as handles, and transfer to a cutting board. Cut into 8 slices.