



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

It has been a while since we covered the topic of hillside and mountain vineyards in this club. In Europe, vineyards were historically planted on slopes because the more fertile soils on the valley floor is typically better for food crops. This left the slopes, with thinner layers of top soil, to be planted to grape vines and fruit trees. In the new world modern farming techniques were mostly developed after the World Wars and emphasized mechanization. This requires vineyards be planted on nearly flat surfaces such as the valley floor. However, valley floor soils can often be more fertile and have a higher water table so vines can be much more vigorous. As the tide shifted in the 1980s from quantity to quality producers began looking back to the hills where conditions are best for superior quality wines. This month we will look at two wines made from vineyards growing on slopes and how that impacts quality and style.

2022 Mooiplaas Cabernet Sauvignon | \$28

I am blessed to travel to many beautiful places in the name of work and it is something for which I am eternally grateful. By far the most beautiful place I have visited for wine is Stellenbosch, which is a wine region that is roughly 40 minutes west of Cape Town in South Africa. The region of Stellenbosch is framed on all sides by mountains, called the Cape Fold Belt Mountains. This mountain belt is believed to be the remnant of pre-Pangean tectonic plate collision, which took place roughly 335 million years ago. As a result the region is framed by several mountains; the Stellenbosch, Simonsberg and Drakenstein, as well as the Jonkershoek Mountain range.

Being very old mountains, the soils of Stellenbosch are the result of weathering dominated by one type called decomposed Dolomite granite. This is a soil that is very poor in organic matter which limits the vegetative growth cycle of the vine. Over time the vines self regulate and will produce fewer grape clusters, which ultimately means more intense wines. Soils low in organic matter also do not retain much water which forces the vine root growth farther down seeking moisture. Since sloped vineyards have thin layers of top soil this means the vines reach the bedrock sooner. Many grape growers believe that the “minerality” that is perceived in wines begins to happen when the roots of the vine hit bedrock.

The Mooiplaas winery is located in the Bottelary Hills on the west side of the city of Stellenbosch at roughly 450 feet above sea level. In 1963 Nicolaas Roos purchased the estate which dated back to 1806 when the manor house was built. Nicolaas handed over the reins to his sons Tielman, the viticulturist, and Louis, the winemaker in the past decade. The family has always had a strong sense for the fragility of the ecosystem in which Mooiplaas sits. To this end they have donated more than 200 acres as a private nature preserve for the conservation of local Fynbos species. Fynbos is a collection of fragile plants native to and exclusively found on the Cape. Its botanical diversity is a source of great pride for the South African people and their destruction due to climate change and over development is considered a national crisis.

For this Cabernet Sauvignon the vineyards sits on a steep slope that faces northwest, which is the ideal exposition in the southern hemisphere. You will want to decant this wine for a half hour before serving and we recommend chilling to cellar temperature, about 55 degrees Fahrenheit. The nose is a classic Cabernet combination of fresh blackberries and blueberry preserves, dark chocolate, coffee beans, and vanilla. The palate is rich with a slightly dry edge that softens once opened. The tannins are nicely integrated so you can drink this wine now or cellar for up to three years. Drink 2025-2028 with carnitas, Korean beef ribs or lamb curry.

2022 Belle Pente Pinot Noir | \$35

I am excited to bring the wines of Belle Pente back to TWM customers as these are some of my favorite wines in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. The winery is owned by Brian and Jill O'Donnell, who began planting their 70 acre vineyard in 1994. Both were accomplished home brewers and came to Oregon eager to leave careers in Silicon Valley behind. In 1996 they rolled out their first wines and they have been friends of ours since shortly after. Theirs are very thoughtful, elegant wines that exemplify the brilliance of not just the Willamette Valley but also the Yamhill-Carlton AVA.

The formation of the mountains and valley that is the Willamette is very interesting. Collisions between the Juan de Fuca and North American tectonic plates caused an upheaval that created the coastal mountain range which forms the western boundary. At the same time certain areas were lifted as the Juan de Fuca plate slid over the North American, exposing ancient marine sea bed which under pressure became limestone. This is why the western side of the Willamette is primarily volcanic soils and the east, which includes the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, is marine sedimentary composition.

It is no accident that Pinot Noir is planted in these soils as they are similar to those in the Burgundy region of France. These soils are very well drained and not very fertile. Like the Dolomite granites in Stellenbosch, the conditions require vines to stretch deep seeking nutrients and water. This means the vines are lower yielding but the grapes they produce can craft very powerful wines. At Belle Pente, which means “beautiful slope” the soils are very thin so the wines display great power and the capacity to age.

For their entry level Willamette bottling the O'Donnells use primarily estate fruit, but also purchase some grapes from their neighbors, all in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA. They do not use the designation on this wine to give them flexibility if they ever need to buy other grapes, and it differentiates it from their other bottlings. Brian works primarily with destemmed grapes although in warm years like 2022 he will leave 5-10 percent whole cluster for fermentation. They typically ferment for 18-20 days with twice daily punch downs to extract color. The wine is then racked to French oak with almost all the barrels being at least three years old. After 12 months the wine is bottled without filtration.

Decant this wine for a half hour before serving and chill to cellar temperature. The nose shows the power of the 2022 vintage with dramatic notes of cherry cordial, pomegranate molasses, dried figs, rooibos tea and dried basil. The feel on the palate is surprisingly big and powerful for Pinot Noir, with the ample fruit framed by tannins that will need a year to resolve. We have found that the Belle Pente wines age extremely well so drink now but do not be afraid to pick up a few more bottles and cellar for 3-7 years. Drink 2025-2032 with duck confit with morel mushroom sauce or pork tenderloin stuffed with cranberry and cornbread stuffing.

Sheet Pan Chicken with Tarragon, Sherry and Onions

I resisted the sheet pan dinner craze for a long time, but now that it is just my wife and I it is a style of cooking I embrace on weeknights. This recipe has become a favorite because it is easy and works with a lot of different wine choices. I found it worked very nicely with both the features this month but go easy on the vinegar, no more than 1 tablespoon. Also, you can substitute bone-in chicken breasts for the thighs, which will cook in about 20 minutes.

½ cup finely chopped tarragon (leaves and tender stems), plus 4 whole sprigs
2 garlic cloves, finely grated or minced
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1½ teaspoons kosher salt
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
3 pounds bone-in chicken thighs (skin on)
2 large onions, peeled and sliced (about 4 cups)
4 thyme sprigs
Sherry vinegar, to taste

In a large bowl, stir together tarragon, garlic, oil, salt and pepper. Add chicken thighs and toss to coat. Cover with plastic wrap and chill for at least 6 hours, and up to overnight.

Heat oven to 425 degrees. Spread onions out on a rimmed baking sheet, drizzle with oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper and toss well. Clear spaces on the baking pan, then place chicken pieces in the cleared spaces so the onions surround the chicken. Strew thyme and tarragon sprigs over onions and chicken.

Roast, tossing the onions after 15 minutes, until chicken is cooked through and the onions tender, 25 to 35 minutes. If the chicken skin or onions are not as brown as you'd like, run pan under the broiler for 1 to 2 minutes at the end of cooking.

Place chicken on a platter. Drizzle onions with sherry vinegar and more salt and pepper if needed. Spoon onions around the chicken and serve.