



Tim's Wine Market

September 2025

By Tim Varan

I cook a lot, but I've never come across a recipe that specifically calls for a teaspoon of rotundone. If that ingredient is unfamiliar you certainly will recognize its contribution because it is the primary compound responsible for black pepper's distinctive flavor. Rotundone is a sesquiterpene molecule that imparts a bold, peppery aroma and flavor, and it's also found in the skins of certain grapes, adding that same spicy, peppery quality to their wines.

This month, we focus on two wines where growing conditions and winemaking techniques enhance the expression of rotundone, creating a captivating peppery character. As a bonus, both wines are presented in styles ideal for enjoying slightly chilled as we transition out of the dog days of summer.

To prepare you for this theme, it's important to differentiate between two compounds commonly confused in wine: pyrazines and rotundone. Pyrazines, which smell like green bell peppers, are prevalent in varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, and their crosses like Cabernet Sauvignon. These compounds develop early in the grape's formation but diminish during ripening.

In contrast, rotundone smells like black peppercorns. It starts in small amounts in the grape skins but increases as the grapes ripen. Rotundone is most notably present in Rhone varieties such as Grenache and Syrah, but it can also be found in other grapes like Blaufränkisch (Lemberger). Winemaking techniques that preserve or emphasize rotundone—such as minimal extraction and aging—allow its peppery qualities to shine without being overshadowed by oak or overwork.

2022 Paxton Shiraz NOW | \$25

Paxton Winery, established in 1979 by David Paxton, is among my favorite Australian producers. They pioneered organic farming and never embraced the high-alcohol, over-extracted styles popular in the 1990s, focusing instead on elegance and expressing a sense of place. Their latest line, the NOW series—meaning Natural and Organic Wine—embodies this philosophy, with preservative-free wines including no added sulfur.

Syrah, or the Australian synonym Shiraz, is an incredibly versatile variety that grows well in many growing regions. Initially propagated in the Northern Rhone Valley and responsible for the great wines of Cote Rotie and Hermitage, it has been carried across the globe and planted in many regions. In the 1830's James Busby carried vines from France and Spain to Australia and is responsible for establishing Syrah Down Under. Unfortunately, he often mislabeled the cuttings he carried and used the names "Scyras" or "Ciras" interchangeably which created the unique spelling of Shiraz. It is a variety that is prone to overripeness so climate is critical to produce wines with balance.

The Paxton vineyards are scattered across the McLaren Vale region south of Adelaide. This region is bordered by the Gulf of St. Vincent, benefiting from warm days, cool nights, and steady sea breezes, ideal for organic cultivation. The vineyard for this Shiraz, called Quandong Farm, was planted on virgin soil, giving it a unique terroir. Winemaker Ashleigh Seymour harvests the grapes at peak ripeness, using native yeasts and gentle extraction to produce a wine that's bottled without additional sulfur.

Decant this wine before serving. Exposure to air helps wake up its complex nose, which offers aromas of blackberry preserves, leather, crushed black pepper, soy sauce, black olives, coffee grounds, and dried thyme. On the palate, it feels fresh and crunchy with a burst of fruit and a modest but persistent finish. Enjoy with beef kabobs or pasta tossed with olives, grape tomatoes, and artichokes.

Red Tail Ridge Blaufränkisch 2022 | \$35

When Nancy Irelan introduced us to her estate wines at Red Tail Ridge, it was clear that this vineyard produces some of the most exciting domestic reds. Located in the Finger Lakes, her vineyards feature shale and alluvial soils formed during

glacial periods—ideal for cool-climate grapes like Blaufränkisch, which is known for exhibiting a peppery, spicy profile attributable to rotundone.

Not surprising, there has never been a New World Red selection of Blaufränkisch in fifteen years. This variety, also known as Lemberger, is popular across Central Europe where it produces wines with ripe fruit elements and a spicy undertone. Depending on soil and climate it can also produce wines with firm tannins. It is the dominant quality variety in Austria, where it is thought to originate in the region of Styria. For years this variety was thought to be related to Gamay but DNA analysis has disproven this theory.

While this variety may sound strange there is actually a fairly long connection with US vineyards. When farmers began planting grapes in Washington State in the early 1970's they were unsure what would be successful. Some planted Blaufränkisch but chose the German name, Lemberger, as the warm, dry growing conditions are similar to those of Austria. The grape never took off although Hogue Cellars continued to bottle an example until they were purchased by Constellation Brands in 2006. Ironically, they purchased most of their Lemberger from our friends at Kiona Vineyards, who created the Vivacious Vicky label as a way to use it up. Today they bottle a small amount of Lemberger selected from fifty year old vines.

When Nancy and her husband Michael decided to make wine in the Finger Lakes region of New York they quickly focused on cool climate varieties. The Finger Lakes have a short growing season, like Central Europe, but plenty of sunlight to achieve full ripeness of some varieties. Blaufränkisch, locally known as Limberger, is perfect for the region producing medium bodied wines and firm structure. The grapes for this Blaufränkisch were harvested at optimal ripeness, then fermented in open-top vessels and aged in a mix of German oak tanks and French barriques for 12 months. Bottled without filtration or fining, the wine showcases a silky texture paired with vibrant, spicy fruit.

Decant this wine for about half an hour to fully appreciate its aromatic complexity—notes of blueberry, black raspberry, cocoa, white pepper, porcini, and a hint of forest floor. The oak integration softens the edges, leaving a smooth, spicy finish. It pairs beautifully with grilled whole snapper or pork schnitzel with mushroom sauce.

Cacio e Pepe

What better dish to highlight the peppery quality of the feature wines than the Roman classic, Cacio e Pepe that emphasizes pepper!. There are many versions of this recipe but I prefer one I have adapted from Mark Bittman (formerly of the New York Times) and Cooks Illustrated. The most important thing is to toast the peppercorns first and buy good Pecorino Romano and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheeses as these ingredients make the dish.

Salt

**1½ cups finely grated Pecorino Romano,
plus more for dusting completed dish**

1 cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

2 tablespoons ground black peppercorns

¾ pound spaghetti

Good olive oil

Gently toast the peppercorns in a skillet over medium heat until fragrant, 1-2 minutes. Let cool 2 minutes then gently crush in a mortar and pestle or with a sauce pan until small pieces but not dusty.

Put a pot of salted water on to boil. In a large bowl, combine the cheeses and 1 tablespoon of black pepper; mash with just enough water to make a thick paste. Spread the paste evenly in the bowl.

Once the water is boiling, add the pasta. Just before it is perfectly cooked (taste it frequently once it begins to soften), reserve a cup or so of the cooking water, then use tongs to quickly transfer the pasta to the bowl. Stir vigorously to coat the pasta, adding a teaspoon or two of olive oil and a bit of the pasta cooking water to thin the sauce if necessary. The sauce should cling to the pasta and be creamy but not watery.

Plate and sprinkle each dish with additional Pecorino and pepper. Serve immediately.