



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

For this quarter, I decided to stick to the classics of Europe—good, useful wines for special occasions. As always, the goal is to educate and broaden horizons. However, let's face it: at this time of year, you're likely drinking these wines with people who may not share your passion. For the European Reserve Club, this means diving deep into the classics—specifically, a Barolo, Bordeaux, and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

## **2019 Clos des Menuts St. Émilion Grand Cru "L'Excellence" | \$69**

I often tell customers that Saint-Émilion is the prettiest town in Bordeaux—a walled village with majestic white limestone buildings. What most visitors don't know is that the limestone used to build these structures comes from the very quarries beneath the town, creating a network of caverns. Throughout history, these caverns have served various purposes—from protecting inhabitants during wartime to storing grain in peaceful times. Today, they are primarily used for wine storage, and our featured estate has some of the largest holdings in the area.

Clos des Menuts is a historic estate located near the old village of Saint-Émilion, on the western side of the fortifications. The first recorded wine sale from this estate dates back to 1538, conducted by the Frères Mineurs. The estate's modern history begins in 1885, when it was purchased by Jean Edmond Andrieu. Little is known about his management, but it is known that by the time he sold it in the 1950s, the estate comprised just 1 hectare (2.3 acres) of vines—sold to Pierre Riviere, whose family still owns it today.

It may be hard to believe, given the current popularity of Range Rovers among local winemakers, but in the 1950s, Saint-Émilion was a sleepy village with a modest winemaking heritage. Investments by families like the Rivières sparked the village's rise to prominence in Bordeaux winemaking by the 1980s. Today, Saint-Émilion and neighboring Pomerol are regarded as benchmarks for production on Bordeaux's right bank.

Many are surprised to learn that the powerful wines of the right bank are primarily based on Merlot, rather than Cabernet Sauvignon. This can be confusing for California enthusiasts, who often see Merlot as a lighter, softer blending grape. While partly true, in Bordeaux, Merlot achieves higher ripeness levels than Cabernet Sauvignon, which reverses the roles: Merlot provides structure and power, while Cabernet Sauvignon offers aromatics, tannin, and acidity.

Since the Riviere family purchased this estate, they have expanded their vineyards and renovated their extensive cave holdings under the town. You can visit the winery and tour the caves, which are also used for tastings. Under the guidance of Pierre's sons, Jean-Pierre and Philippe Riviere, the estate now encompasses over 75 acres of Saint-Émilion vineyards. For their top-tier wine, L'Excellence, they select the best grapes from a small 10-acre parcel planted with 85% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 5% Cabernet Franc. The wine ages in small French oak barrels for 18 months and is held at the winery for several years before release.

Decant this wine for up to an hour before serving. Its nose is a brooding blend of dried cherry, dark chocolate, toffee, fennel seed, soy sauce, and old leather books. On the palate, it offers impressive power and texture, with slightly dusty tannins framing the ripe fruit. It's ready to drink in 2025, but can also be cellared until 2035. Pair with a standing rib roast or herb-and-breadcrumb-crusted rack of lamb.

## **André Brunel Châteauneuf-du-Pape Cuvée Reserve 2022 | \$55**

The wines from André Brunel hold a special place in my heart. I visited this estate in 1993 during my first trip to France, and arriving there was a welcome relief from the cold, gray skies of Burgundy. The trip took place in late January through early February, and it was very cold—even for someone who grew up in Pittsburgh. During the first part of the trip, in Sancerre and Burgundy, I froze despite wearing several layers. It also didn't help that I developed food poisoning on the last night in Burgundy. Two days later, we arrived in the picturesque village of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, where the sun was

shining, and the temperature was warm enough to remove my heavy jacket. Being able to keep food down was an added bonus.

There I met André Brunel, whom Robert Parker described as looking like actor William Hurt. I didn't see the resemblance, but perhaps after a few bottles of wine, it might have been more apparent. Sadly, André passed away in 2022, but the estate is now managed by his son, Fabrice, with help from Romain Pitaud. Fabrice is the eighth generation of the Brunel family to run this estate.

As an old estate in the Rhône, they farm 15 different vineyard parcels scattered across the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation. Their primary wine is called Les Cailloux, which is also the term for the large, round river rocks that cover the region. These rocks absorb the intense Provençal sun during the day and radiate heat back onto the vines during the cool summer nights. This process boosts sugar production in the grapes and lowers acidity, resulting in powerful, textured wines. Before the advent of temperature-controlled fermentation, winemakers built complexity and structure directly in the vineyard by cultivating up to 13 different grape varieties, including a few white ones. After WWII, most producers shifted focus primarily to Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre—all of which thrive in this hot, dry climate.

The Cuvée Reserve from this estate is produced from vineyards farmed by longtime friends of the Brunel family, following strict guidelines. Before his death, André had begun to minimize the use of oak in aging his wines—the use of new oak had gained momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which he felt was too imposing. Fabrice has taken this even further by eliminating oak entirely with the 2022 releases, and the results are absolutely stunning. Decant this wine for half an hour, and you'll be rewarded with a gorgeous nose of cherry liqueur, crème de cassis, black licorice, bay leaf, thyme, and allspice. The palate offers a rich but not overwhelming texture, with soft tannins and a long finish. I enjoyed the sample bottle at a local Thai restaurant, paired with a whole fried snapper served with mint and spicy sauce—so it pairs well with just about anything. Drink 2025–2030.

### **Baroli Barolo 2020 | \$49**

Of all the classic regions of Europe, it is Barolo where I find the most useful wines for any occasion involving a tablecloth. Based exclusively on the Nebbiolo grape, these wines are powerful but not heavy, and as aromatically complex as any on earth. I also find that Barolo has a wide window of drinkability—showing well upon release but also aging effortlessly for up to two decades. This bottling from the Baroli family is a great example and a welcome addition to any of your holiday plans.

Despite the similarity in name, this is not an old, iconic estate from which the entire region takes its name. In the 1990s, Silvano and Elena Baroli decided they needed a break from their hectic lives in publishing and purchased an estate in the village of Castiglione Falletto, in the heart of the Barolo region. Their first vintage was in 1996, and for several years, they managed the business while employing others for the winemaking. Then, in 2000, their son Achille joined the team, dedicating his life to winemaking. For years, he worked alongside their winemaker in the cellar before taking full reins of the estate in 2012. Today, the wines reflect Achille's passion for the region's classic wines, while also incorporating modern technology to guide their production.

To produce their “normale” bottling, they use grapes from their holdings in three villages within the Barolo region: Castiglione Falletto, Barolo, and La Morra. Since producers are only permitted to use Nebbiolo for these wines, they often build complexity by blending vineyards from different soil types within the region. Vineyards on the west side of the appellation, including La Morra, are planted in Tortonian soils—calcareous marl with sand and clay. These give the wines finesse and perfume. On the eastern side, vineyards are planted in Serravallian soils—compressed sandstone that imparts power and structure. Using a mix of these grapes allows Achille to craft an incredibly supple and balanced Barolo that can be enjoyed now or cellared for up to ten years.

Decant this wine for at least half an hour to fully appreciate its character. It offers classic Barolo notes of violet and jasmine, mingling with tart cherry, hibiscus, old leather, chanterelle mushroom, and white pepper. On the palate, it is medium-bodied, with surprising tannins that rise mid-way and frame the finish. Serve with stuffed turkey thighs, roast duck, or slow-roasted pork ribs with Italian seasoning. Drink from 2025–2035.