



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

There is an old expression that suggests something unique is hard to find because it's placed in an obvious location: "hiding in plain sight." In the wine world, it's very easy to use this concept, as almost every old, established wine region can be divided between producers focused on price and those driven by quality. Many regions come to mind—Bordeaux, Chianti Classico, anything labeled simply "California" AVA—and, of course, the focus of our feature: Côtes du Rhône and Rioja. This month, we highlight two dynamic examples from each, where the producers stand out from the crowd despite the often-mixed reputation of their appellations. It's also worth noting that both of these wines make excellent choices for gatherings with friends and family.

2023 Michel Gassier Côtes du Rhône | \$18

The Gassier family has been making wine in the south of France for generations. Their main base is the Costières de Nîmes appellation—the southernmost in the Rhône Valley. Until 2004, this region was classified as part of the sprawling Languedoc-Roussillon. Winemakers, including Gassier, argued that the climate, soils, and style of the region are more closely aligned with the Rhône than the Languedoc. The growers of Costières de Nîmes also benefit from some elevation—up to 250 feet above sea level—which, while far from the "nosebleed seats," is considerably higher than most other southern Rhône appellations.

It's worth taking a moment to visit the Michel Gassier website. Unlike most French winery sites that look like they were designed in 1998 and never updated, theirs is beautiful. It features many pictures illustrating the diverse soil types of the region, and Gassier shares his passion for both tradition and experimentation. They produce a wide range of wines, utilizing the classic local varieties while also testing new plantings based on soil and microclimate differences. They offer several tiers of wine, each tailored to specific terroirs, varieties, and historical sites. Our selection is their base model Côtes du Rhône, which offers incredible value and authentic character of the Rhône Valley.

For this wine, Gassier uses a blend of approximately 80% Grenache, 12% Mourvèdre, and 8% Syrah. This is a relatively high percentage of Mourvèdre for a Rhône wine, and there are a couple of reasons for this. The vineyards in this area are some of the southernmost in the Rhône Valley, and Mourvèdre is often called a Mediterranean variety. As the common saying goes, Mourvèdre performs best with "sun on its shoulders staring at the sea." It also retains acidity better than Grenache and Syrah, which is especially important given how much warmer the climate has become over the past two decades.

What I like about this wine—the reason I chose it over other Côtes du Rhône options—is its flavor profile, which stays predominantly in the red spectrum. It offers notes of red currant, muddled strawberry, and red licorice, along with hints of dried fig and fresh rosemary. It's medium-weight on the palate, with a surprisingly crunchy, vivid fruitiness that stays fresh through the finish. This versatile wine pairs well with everything from nachos and chili to fried turkey. Drink 2025–2027.

2019 Rio Mazos Rioja Graciano | \$35 per bottle

The renowned wine writer Tim Atkin, MW, is one of the few who dedicates extensive time to exploring not only Spanish wines but specifically Rioja. He visits the region for nearly a month each year and produces a comprehensive report on the current vintage and key producers. He often notes that one of the major issues with Rioja is that much of the production is dominated by large commercial wineries that care little for quality or distinctive style. Their focus tends to be on price—not just what they sell the wine for, but also on squeezing the growers in the region, offering prices that barely cover the costs of farming. It's a broken system, and this issue isn't unlike what unfolded in California during this harvest. This problem is not new. When the move toward quality began in the 1990s, many growers stopped selling to the large wineries and started making their own wines. Our feature from the Escudero family began even earlier but exemplifies why they now bottle their own wine.

The estate's full name is Bodegas Ilurce, which has been run by the Escudero family since 1940. They cultivate century-old vineyard sites on the slopes of Monte Yerga, a limestone-rich area in the southeastern corner of Rioja. Situated over 2,000 feet above sea level, the elevation and terroir help distinguish their wines.

However, it is their dedication to the native Graciano grape that has garnered broader market attention. Graciano is an ancient varietal native to this part of Rioja, traditionally used to add color to Tempranillo-based blends in Rioja Alta. But the longer growing season and abundant sunshine in Rioja Oriental allow the grape to fully ripen, resulting in a more complex and aromatic wine in its own right.

Rioja Oriental, formerly known as Rioja Baja, is the largest and arguably most misunderstood of the three sub-zones that make up the Rioja denomination. Historically, as the esteemed Rioja Alta gained popularity globally, this sub-zone was associated with flat landscapes and fruit-forward Garnacha. Many winemakers in the region felt this was an unfair characterization and successfully lobbied for a name change so their wines would no longer be labeled as Baja or "Lower" Rioja. They also began producing terroir-specific wines, emphasizing unique soil types and elevations.

Rio Mazos is a rare example of 100% Graciano, sourced from the family's oldest vineyards, now over a century old. These ancient vineyards benefit from the moderating influence of the Ebro River, as well as the high altitude and iron-rich soils of the Sierra de Yerga. All fruit used in this wine is harvested by hand and is never treated with pesticides or chemical fertilizers. In the winery, the grapes are pressed in a traditional wooden basket press and then racked into French oak barrels, with 50% of the barrels being new. The wine ages for 12 months in oak before bottling.

When opening this wine, it's recommended to decant for up to an hour to help soften the tannins, as Graciano is naturally high in tannin and benefits from aeration. Once decanted, it offers notes of crushed blackberries, dried black plums, blackcurrant leaf, cloves, and earth. Drink from 2025 through 2035, pairing it with grilled chorizo and potatoes, omelettes with Manchego cheese, or slightly chilled vegetable pasta dishes.

Chicken Braised in Two Vinegars

I found this recipe a few months ago in the New York Times Cooking section while searching for a simple weeknight meal that uses basic staples. I have a large collection of vinegars—much to my wife's annoyance—so I like to experiment with different options to keep things interesting. We typically use boneless, skinless chicken breasts for this dish, adjusting the cooking time slightly to prevent overcooking. (I divide breasts in three cuts and pound to 1/3 inch thickness.)

2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs
Kosher salt and black pepper
2 tablespoons olive oil
6 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed
½ cup best-quality balsamic vinegar
½ cup best-quality red wine vinegar
1 tablespoon finely chopped Italian parsley
2 teaspoons finely chopped oregano (optional)
Flaky salt, for serving (optional)

Season chicken well on both sides with salt and pepper. In a large sauté pan, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add garlic and cook until it starts to become fragrant and lightly golden, about 2 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon and set aside. Begin cooking the chicken, making sure not to crowd the pan (you may need to do this in batches). Cook until the chicken is no longer pink on the outside and begins to lightly brown in spots, about 3 to 4 minutes per side. If it's not cooked through at this point, that's O.K.

If you've cooked the chicken in batches, add all of the meat and any residual juices back to the pan. Pour in the vinegars, add reserved garlic and bring to a simmer. Turn heat to medium-low, cover and allow the meat to continue to cook in the sauce, about 5 to 7 minutes more.

Uncover and toss chicken well in the vinegar sauce to coat. Cook chicken about 3 to 5 minutes more or until the sauce has reduced by about half and has thickened slightly. Sprinkle with parsley and oregano, if using, and season with flaky salt, if using. Serve in bowls over polenta or with rice pilaf and spoon the remaining sauce atop.