



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Unless you are a travel buff or into wine, you probably do not think about the geographic and geologic differences between vineyards in California and those in Oregon. It turns out that they share a lot more than you might think because of the way the land on the West Coast of the US was formed. This month, we will look at two wines that seemingly have little in common but share a geological element despite the distance between the vineyards.

2022 Carabella Vineyards Pinot Noir “Plowbuster” | \$29

We have been fans of Carabella since they first appeared on the scene in Orlando a couple of decades ago. Then, like that old favorite t-shirt that sinks to the bottom of the drawer and is forgotten, we sort of lost track of them for a few years. So, in my tasting of potential NWR options for this month, I was really pleased to see this one come out of the distributor's sample bag. Sure enough, it performed beautifully and is a great wine to kick off 2026.

The Carabella Vineyard was created by Mike Hallock in 1996, a geologist turned winemaker. Mike had been searching for the perfect spot to grow Pinot Noir, and he found it on Parrett Mountain, located within what is now the Chehalem Mountain AVA in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. What drew him to the spot was the mix of volcanic soils, which impart great minerality to the wine and have poor water-retaining qualities. This was particularly important to Mike because he wanted to “dry farm” his vineyard, meaning no irrigation. Growing without water forces the vines to quickly send roots deeper into the soil to find moisture. Many winemakers believe that once the vine roots reach the “parent rock” or bedrock, the true expression of terroir is achieved.

Hallock's commitment to minimal impact on the wines does not end with irrigation. Since the initial plantings in 1996 and 1997, all 59 acres of this vineyard have been farmed without the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides. In addition, they have propagated a cover crop of indigenous plant species, particularly Roemer's fescue. This helps maintain moisture below the surface of the site and encourages beneficial insects as well. Finally, the vineyard is surrounded on two sides by native oak trees. The trees foster an active presence of wildlife, including birds of prey, which help protect the grapes from small animals and birds.

Mike created the Plowbuster as an homage to an assortment of farm equipment that met its demise in the process of planting the vineyard and plowing between the rows. While much of the volcanic soil is very degraded, there are some large rocks, or even boulders, that wreak havoc on the equipment. If you visit their website, there is even a picture of a boulder that sits at the top of the vineyard, looking like it would break a plow.

The winemaking at Carabella is low intervention as well, so the sense of terroir is not lost. After the grapes are harvested by hand, they are destemmed and then moved to open-top fermentors. Hallock uses native yeast for these fermentations and performs hand punch-downs until the wine is dry. At that point, it is racked to older French oak barrels, where it ages for 10 months before bottling without filtration.

This wine is often hailed by wine writers as an archetype for Willamette Valley Pinot Noir and value. Decant this wine for half an hour before serving and chill to cellar temperature. Once ready, this wine delivers a savory quality of dried strawberry, hibiscus, Darjeeling tea, dried orange peel, and a touch of new leather. The feel on the palate is bright, with moderate concentration and a precision that carries into the finish. This is a versatile wine that will work beautifully with baked salmon, rotisserie chicken, or pork chops.

2022 Lava Cap Cabernet Sauvignon | \$27

Many of you will remember that we featured the Lava Cap Merlot last April as an example of how brilliant Merlot can be when handled properly. It turned out to be one of the top-selling club selections of 2025, and many members asked me to

bring in the Cabernet to try as well. It was so well received in the Orlando store that I figured we should make it a selection too, especially since the vineyards align with our theme, as they are growing in volcanic soils as well.

For a refresher, the Lava Cap winery was founded by the Jones family in 1981. They are located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the east side of California near the town of Placerville. The family chose the location specifically for the volcanic soils, which sit on an ancient, degraded lava flow. Most of the vineyards in the Sierra Nevada Mountains are planted on decomposed granite, but a few spots like this exist and give the wines a different character.

The biggest reason I think the wines from Lava Cap are so special begins with the plantings at 2400-2700 feet above sea level (FAS). At this elevation, the vines are above the fog layer and receive several hours of extra sunlight per day during the growing season. When the family planted the Cabernet vines back in the early 1980s, they did not use trellising but trained them to stand alone using a technique called head pruning. This method has several advantages over the more common trellising techniques used in California. It is most common in areas where irrigation is difficult or not allowed, as the space between the vines allows for less root competition. Additionally, at their elevation, the UV light is more intense, so the natural umbrella-like canopy of the shoots and leaves provides shade for the grape clusters. Finally, the nature of the canopy is looser, allowing for better wind circulation, which reduces the need for fungicides. The downside is that the vines produce fewer grapes, and there are fewer vines per acre, leading to lower yields. For new wineries, this is a problem, but for a third-generation winery like Lava Cap, it provides the quality they want, which is worth the sacrifice.

To make the Cabernet Sauvignon, the family uses blocks from their oldest vines, planted in the early 1980s. The wine is aged for 22 months in French oak, with only 10% being new. They also blended 10% Cabernet Franc into the final blend. Decant this wine for half an hour as well, and chill it to cellar temperature. When ready to serve, this wine delivers a full-throttle nose of black currants, blackberries, dark chocolate, menthol, clove, and allspice. The feel on the palate is dry and savory, with a solid core of fruit lifted by modest acidity and framed by integrated tannins. Drink from 2026 to 2030 with meatloaf, pork tenderloin, or fajitas.

Coconut Miso Salmon

2 tablespoons safflower or canola oil
1 medium red onion, halved and sliced 1/2-inch thick (about 2 cups)
1 (1-inch) piece fresh ginger, minced (about 2 tablespoons)
3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
Kosher salt and black pepper
1/4 cup white miso
1/2 cup unsweetened, full-fat canned coconut milk
1 (1 1/2-pound) salmon fillet, cut into 2-inch pieces
5 ounces baby spinach (about 5 packed cups)
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice, plus lime wedges for serving
Steamed rice, such as jasmine or basmati, for serving
1/4 cup chopped fresh basil
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro

This recipe comes from the New York Times Cooking section and surprised me. It is easy to assemble and cooks quickly, and is hearty enough to serve with the Pinot Noir. My only note is to make sure you caramelize the miso paste long enough to deepen the flavor of the broth.

In a large pot, heat 2 tablespoons oil over medium. Add onion, ginger and garlic, and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 3 minutes. Add miso and cook, stirring frequently, until miso is lightly caramelized, about 2 minutes.

Add coconut milk and 3 cups water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Cook until liquid is slightly reduced, about 5 minutes.

Stir in salmon, reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer gently until just cooked through, about 5 minutes. Turn off heat and stir in spinach and lime juice.

Divide rice among bowls. Top with salmon, some broth, basil and cilantro. Serve with lime wedges for squeezing on top.