



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

The Winemakers Spice Cabinet - Barrels

At TWM, we often debate how much information we need to convey about the winemaking process in our club and weekly newsletter features. For some, it is vital information, while others could care less. To keep the writing light, we decided a couple of years ago to only mention unusual techniques or processes outside of the typical fermentation and aging steps involved in converting juice to wine. This approach does leave the discussion of oak barrels out of most write-ups, but they are still an important part of the process for many wineries.

As with so many wine-related topics, the first barrels used for the aging and storage of wine appeared in the 1st century BCE with the Romans. Prior to this, wine was shipped in clay amphorae, which were both heavy and fragile. Barrels remained the sole method of shipping wine to market until the improvement in glass bottle technology in the 16th century, at which point they primarily became aging vessels.

Barrels have two major attributes that make them suitable for aging wine: when new, they contribute flavor to the wine and allow for oxidation during the aging process, which is beneficial for several reasons. The flavor they impart is due to the manufacturing process, in which fire is used to heat the wood staves, making them pliable enough to bend into the rings that form the barrel. During this heating, the remaining liquid and sap in the stave are drawn to the surface and cooked, creating a caramelization of the sugars. Even after the barrel is formed, the inside is often "toasted" to enhance the flavor of the oak and caramelization. The barrels are then offered to winemakers with a specific menu of qualities that can be enhanced by different toast levels. This flavor is imparted into the juice or wine as soon as the barrel is filled, providing toasty, caramel notes. With each subsequent filling, the flavor from the barrel becomes less intense. Most winemakers believe that by the third or fourth "fill," the barrel has no flavor to add and is therefore considered neutral.

Even when a barrel is neutral, it can still play an important role in the winemaking process. The wood staves used to make the barrel are porous and allow a small amount of oxygen to reach the juice or wine during fermentation and aging. The oxygen plays many roles in wine development, including the creation of aromatic esters and, for red wine, the polymerization of anthocyanins (color compounds) and tannic acid, which makes the wine smoother. As you will see with our features this month, the use of neutral oak is important when winemakers want to develop the wine without adding oak flavor, which can obscure varietal characteristics and attributes of terroir.

Space does not allow us to cover all the aspects of why wine is aged in barrels and the winemaker's preference for new barrels versus neutral, or none at all. We will touch on these topics in subsequent offerings. On to the wine!

2023 Grochau Cellars Pinot Noir "The Commuter" | \$30

I have met John Grochau a couple of times and find him to be one of the nicest, most thoughtful, and humble winemakers to grace our store. John first became aware of winemaking while racing bicycles across the Loire Valley in France, where he was struck by the beauty and order of the vineyards he passed. After his racing career ended, he worked in the restaurant scene in Portland, Oregon, which further enhanced his love of wine. This led to an internship in Sonoma, California, followed by stints at Erath and Brickhouse wineries in the Willamette Valley. With just enough knowledge to be dangerous, he made his first vintage with the 2001 harvest and sold it to friends. The response was positive, so he launched his eponymous winery in 2002.

Like most Oregon producers, John makes several versions of Pinot Noir, with the Commuter being the majority of his production. He sees this wine as a snapshot of the vintage from all of the Willamette Valley. To accomplish this, he uses 11 different vineyards, ranging from Salem to just west of Portland, encompassing sites with a diversity of soil types and clones of Pinot Noir. A true Willamette Valley wine, this shows the elegance and freshness that the region is known for.

For producers of Pinot Noir, the use of oak is very tricky, especially in the cool Willamette Valley. Pinot Noir is a subtle, elegant wine that can be easily overwhelmed by the flavors of oak. At the same time, aging in wood helps to round the edges of the wine and increase the intensity of flavor. John deftly manages this by aging 75% of the wine in older French oak barrels. Fifteen percent of the wine is aged in stainless steel, and 10% is aged in concrete. We will cover the impact of those vessels in the future. He also ages the wine in barrels for 10 months. This is a practical decision, as it allows him to empty and clean the barrels for the next harvest. If he aged longer, then he would need twice as many barrels, requiring that much more space to store them.

Decant this wine for half an hour and chill it to cellar temperature. Once you do, the nose reveals a lovely mix of cooked cranberry, fresh strawberry, rhubarb, elderflower, and hibiscus tea. There is a delicate complexity to this wine, with the fruit lightly framed by a touch of tannin and moderate acidity. Drink from 2026 to 2028, ideally paired with a mushroom ramen bowl or grilled salmon.

2019 Storybook Mountain Zinfandel | \$45

There is so much to say about Storybook Mountain Vineyards that space will sadly require an enormous amount of editing. However, you should treat this wine with the utmost attention and respect, as it presents an incredible opportunity to drink a wine that is a throwback to a bygone era.

Storybook Mountain was founded by Jerry and Sigred Seps in 1976, but the history of this property goes back far longer. The original vines that were planted on this site were done so by Jacob Grimm around 1883. If that name sounds familiar, he was one half of the Brothers Grimm, authors of many beloved fairy tales. Jacob and his brother lived on the estate and ran it as a winery until the 1930s, making sacramental wine during Prohibition. The only remnant of those years is the caves they still use today, which were dug by Chinese laborers. Jacob sold the winery in 1936 to a local druggist, and by 1940, it was no longer producing wine.

When the Seps purchased the estate in 1976, they planned to make wine but had no experience. Located a few miles from Calistoga, they sought the advice of Andre Tchelistcheff on what to plant. Tchelistcheff was the longtime winemaker at BV Vineyards and a mentor to most of the first generation of Napa winemakers, including Robert Mondavi, Warren Winiarski (Stag's Leap), and Justin Meyer (Silver Oak). He advised them that, due to the exposition and soil composition, their best choice would be Zinfandel. It's important to understand that Cabernet Sauvignon was not the dominant grape variety in Napa until after the phylloxera problem of the early 1990s. With no experience, the Seps replanted the vineyard, and Jerry, a tenured college professor of European History, began learning how to make wine. They decided to name their estate Storybook Mountain Vineyards in honor of the Grimm brothers' legacy.

Although mostly by accident, their selection of this site in the Mayacamas Mountains for a Zinfandel vineyard is perfect. Today, the family farms 43 acres of vines, 80% of which is still Zinfandel, on steep slopes with eastern exposure. They are certified organic farmers, having never used any chemical treatments on their vines. Additionally, once the vines are established, they are dry farmed, meaning no irrigation, which also results in low yields. Their vineyard is also close to the Russian River, which has a cooling influence that extends the ripening time. These factors combine to allow the Seps to produce a Zinfandel that is rich but not clunky, with good acidity and tannin structure. Few producers in California make Zinfandel like this any longer, so this wine is a real treat.

The winemaking at Storybook Mountain follows a classic style. Seps, along with his daughter Colleen, ages this wine in a combination of American and French oak. We rarely see American oak used for winemaking due to the explosion of bourbon production, but most Zinfandel specialists love it for their wines. It adds a spicy, resinous, and peppery quality to the wines that enhances the same attributes in Zinfandel. Roughly 30% of the barrels used in this cellar are new, which also enhances the oak flavor in the wines. Seps ages the wine for roughly 18 months in barrels, helping to round the tannins and soften the finished wine.

You will want to decant this wine for half an hour or longer and chill it to cellar temperature. The nose is classic Zinfandel, with an intermingling of cooked, but not jammy, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, and boysenberries. What makes Zinfandel so distinctive is its briary quality, which is hard to describe but reminds me of my youth crashing through the woods and farmland of western Pennsylvania. In contrast to Pinot Noir, this wine has impressive weight, although by

Zinfandel standards, it is not a heavy example. There is a deep core of fruit that is framed by tannins and a slight prickle of acidity at the finish. Drink from 2026 to 2034 with slow-smoked brisket, pasta Bolognese, or mushroom-crusting tuna steaks.

Balsamic-Glazed Oven-Baked Ribs

I have been a devotee of smoked ribs since my first visit to Bubbalou's Bodacious BBQ sometime in the middle of the 1980s. The combination of smoke, spice, and sweet sauce was a revelation to this PA boy, whose prior experience was with my mom's efforts using Heinz BBQ sauce in the oven. For years, I believed it was impossible to have great ribs from the oven—then I found this recipe. It comes from none other than barbecue guru Steve Raichlen! This recipe copies a version he tasted at Animal in Los Angeles, where they bake, not smoke, their ribs. It is marked by the intensely flavorful barbecue sauce, which works very nicely with both featured wines this month.

FOR THE RIBS

- 2 spare-rib racks, the smallest you can find 5 to 6 pounds total**
- 2 tablespoons grapeseed or canola oil**
- Kosher salt**
- 4 large flat-leaf parsley sprigs**
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled and gently crushed**
- 4 thyme sprigs**

FOR THE BARBECUE SAUCE

- 1 cup balsamic vinegar, or to taste**
- 1 cup ketchup**
- 6 ounces (1/2 can) your favorite beer**
- 1/4 cup honey**
- 3 tablespoons grainy mustard**
- 1 tablespoon molasses**
- 1 1/2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce**
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco sauce, or to taste**
- 1/4 cup dark brown sugar, or to taste**
- 1/2 red onion, diced**
- 1 large clove garlic, minced**
- Salt**

To prepare the ribs, heat the oven to 350 degrees. If the butcher has not removed the membrane on the back of each rack, gently pry it up by sliding a sharp implement (like the tip of an instant-read thermometer) under it, then lifting gently. Grab the membrane with a paper towel and peel it off.

Spread a 24-inch sheet of heavy-duty aluminum foil, shiny side up, on a work surface. Place one rack on top, rub it all over with oil, and generously season both sides with salt. Place 2 parsley sprigs and 2 garlic cloves under the concave side of the rack and 2 thyme sprigs on top. Wrap the ribs in the foil, pleating the edges to seal well. Repeat with the second rack. Place the rib packets in a large roasting pan.

Roast the ribs for 30 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 250 degrees. Cook 1 1/2 to 2 hours more, until the meat has shrunk back from the ends of the bones by 1/4 to 1/2 inch and the ribs are tender enough to pull apart with your fingers.

Meanwhile, prepare the barbecue sauce. Place the balsamic vinegar in a large nonreactive saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium heat and cook until reduced by a third. Add the remaining barbecue sauce ingredients with 1/4 cup water, bring back to a boil, then reduce the heat to low and simmer until thick, 30 to 40 minutes. If the sauce starts to thicken too much, add a little water. The sauce should be highly seasoned; adjust to taste by adding vinegar, brown sugar or salt.

Remove the ribs from the oven and let cool briefly, then open the foil, being careful of the escaping steam. Transfer the ribs to a baking sheet. Turn on the broiler or raise the oven to 450 degrees.

Slather the ribs on both sides with the barbecue sauce. Broil the ribs until the sauce sizzles and browns, 2 to 4 minutes on each side. Alternatively, bake in the oven 8 to 12 minutes. Baste with the barbecue sauce and serve at once with any remaining sauce on the side.