



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This month, for our educational lesson, we will focus on another important but often overlooked topic: cap management. This is one of the early steps in winemaking, occurring after the red grapes are processed and placed into the fermentor, where color is extracted from the skins. The debate arises when the skins of the grapes float to the top of the fermentor and form a cap over the wine must below. "Must" refers to the grape juice before fermentation is complete. For many years, the standard technique for most varieties has been "punching down," where the cap of skins is physically pushed down under the fermenting must. Some winemakers prefer to drain must from the bottom of the tank and then pump it back to the top, allowing it to pour over the cap and filter back through the skins. This process is known as "pump over." This month, we will examine how two winemakers use these techniques to produce full-bodied red wines with excellent results.

There are two common processes: first, the classic technique of "punching down" the cap. The purpose of this technique is not only to help extract color from the skins but also to prevent the top of the cap from going dry. If this occurs, acetic acid—the chemical name for vinegar—can develop on and around the skins, which is undesirable. Typically, the cap is punched down by placing a stiff board over the top of the fermentor, and a person with a long stick with a pad at the end climbs up and pushes down the skins. This action breaks up the cap, allows oxygen into the must, and releases carbon dioxide. Today, modern machines can perform this work, but they can be too expensive for small operations, so the technique is still often done by hand. A drawback of this method is that modern winemakers find it can be too aggressive for thin-skinned varieties, like Pinot Noir, potentially leading to over-extraction.

With the advent of modern pumps, another common extraction process involves pumping the must from the bottom of the tank and redistributing it across the top. Depending on the winemaker's intention, grape variety, and style of wine being produced, this process can be as simple as pouring the hose over the cap of skins. A few years ago, a "sprinkler" was developed that distributes the wine over the cap in a manner similar to a lawn sprinkler. It is worth noting that some winemakers believe that the use of pumps is aggressive and can damage the wine, whereas others contend that punching down is too harsh. Thus, it becomes clear that there are no definitive answers in this debate.

The final popular version that has emerged in recent years is the use of conical fermentors, which taper to the top. In this vessel, the cap of skins is not allowed to rise to the top of the fermentor, keeping the skins submerged beneath the must. This method, referred to as a submerged cap, still requires some agitation of the skins to help extract color, most often through pump overs.

Our features this month are from two wineries, the first employs two of the techniques and the second wine uses the latter. It is a great showing for these processes and how it effects the final wine.

Anticura Cabernet Franc Barrandica 2023 | \$25

We love Cabernet Franc but often find New World examples to be too high in alcohol. A reliable source we cherish, when we can get it, is the Anticura Cabernet Franc Barrandica, which strikes a balance between demonstrating good varietal character and showing plenty of ripeness.

The Anticura winery is a 225-acre vineyard located in the middle of the Uco Valley, near the town of Vista Flores. I had the chance to visit another winery in Vista Flores a few years ago, and their winemaker told me it was the sweet spot for Bordeaux varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, in this vast region. This is because the elevation lies at just under 3,000 feet. The valley rises higher as you travel south, which is the better area for Malbec and Bonarda. Despite its New World location, this winery has Old World roots, being owned by Anne-Caroline Biancheri, with winemaking directed by Hervé Chagneau, both French. In addition, they worked with the late mega-consultant Michel Rolland, who is also French and was raised on the right bank of Bordeaux, where Cabernet Franc is more important than

Cabernet Sauvignon. The focus of this winery is their flagship blends, but they produce a spectacular Cabernet Franc, sourced from a single vineyard within their holdings.

When they began planning the planting of their vineyards, Rolland considered the growing conditions of the vineyard to be perfect for Cabernet Franc. The soils are a deep loam, heavy with limestone, creating a low-vigor environment for the plants. This means the vine focuses less energy on the growth of the canes, leaves, and flowers, and more on ripening the fruit. For Cabernet Franc, this is important because high-vigor sites can accentuate the stemmy quality in the grapes. In winemaking, the wine is fermented using a submerged cap for the first seven days, after which the tank is closed, and pump-overs occur in an oxygen-free environment. After two weeks, the tank is then opened, and the wine receives another two weeks of daily pump-overs in the presence of oxygen. This process not only enhances aromatic development but also helps stabilize the color. The wine is then aged in French barriques, 85% of which are older, for twelve months before bottling.

When it is time to serve this wine, please decant it for up to an hour before serving. This not only allows the bouquet to develop but also helps unwind the tannins. As soon as you swirl this wine around the glass, it emits the dramatic aromas of Cabernet Franc: fresh blackberries, blueberries, violets, green brined peppercorns, and pepper jelly. When you take a sip, this wine presents a crunchy presence of fresh berries, with subtle notes of peppers making an appearance. The surprise is how much this wine gains in mid-palate texture as the fruit builds like a wave into the long finish. Enjoy it over the next two to three years with lentils and sausage, beef tenderloin or our duck ragu recipe.

Casas del Bosque Syrah Gan Reserva 2022 | \$29

We love this winery in the Maule Valley of Chile, but we tend to prefer their wines that come from the vineyards they farm in the cooler Casablanca region, west of the capital, Santiago. The climate is greatly influenced by the cool Pacific Ocean, making it similar to that of Champagne in France. Heavy winds from the coast also significantly reduce the yield of the vineyards, further adding complexity and depth to the finished wines. Finally, the soils of Casablanca are primarily weathered bedrock, with little organic matter. This restricts the capacity of the vine to produce grapes and contributes a hint of minerality to the finished wine as well. It is a harsh environment for growing grapes, but certain varieties that thrive in cool climates—Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and even Syrah—do well under these conditions.

Our feature this month is uncommon for Chile: a Syrah. This is very different from the Australian Shiraz that we featured last month, exhibiting qualities more common to the Northern Rhône Valley. This wine comes from the winery's westernmost vineyard, Las Dichas, the coolest part of the Casablanca Valley. The vines are ungrafted and were planted between 2000 and 2010. In this area, the characteristics of the cool climate are accentuated in Syrah by the iron-rich granitic soils, which contribute a meaty quality to the wines. Yields are very low despite irrigation, which is necessary as the Casablanca region has experienced drought conditions for most of this decade. In fact, they have only been able to produce this wine two out of the last three years due to a lack of rain.

The grapes are hand-harvested, destemmed, and cold-soaked for three days at a low temperature. The fermentation is then allowed to start in open-topped tanks, which are hand-plunged twice daily. Twenty-five percent of the final blend spent 12 months in new French oak 225L barrels, while 75% of the blend was aged for 12 months in second- to third-use French oak barrels. The two components were then blended and allowed to rest for a month before bottling without filtration.

Decant this wine and give it a chill to serve at cellar temperature. When you pour a glass, it reveals a very French-like Syrah bouquet of baked cherries, black raspberry purée, black olive, pipe tobacco, and white and black peppercorns. The palate is very savory, akin to a Crozes-Hermitage from France, displaying more elegance than power. Serve this wine with smoked brisket, pork shoulder, or duck roasted with black olives.

Duck Ragu with Black Olives

This recipe is out there, even for me, but for different reasons the flavors work so well with both wines. It comes from a blog (ericademaine.com) I found when I was searching for a recipe involving duck quarters and green olives. That dish I had in Provence in 2000 and have tried to replicate a few times with marginal success. This version leans Italian, and uses

black olives, but the flavors end up melding beautifully with the addition of citrus. While it looks complicated it really is not; a simple braise, shred the meat, build the sauce back up, then toss with pasta. I found that it was better to let sit in the refrigerator over night to help remove some fat, and the flavors were more integrated. This also makes enough to freeze half and have for a quick but luxurious dinner in the future.

3 duck legs (including thighs)

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1 onion, cut into small dice

1 carrot, cut into small dice

1 celery stalk, cut into small dice, plus a handful of leaves, if you have them, lightly chopped

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon allspice

3/4 cup of dry vermouth

2 cups chicken broth

2 fresh bay leaves

1 teaspoon honey

1 1/2 cups well-chopped canned tomatoes

The juice from 1 large orange and the grated zest from 1 1/2

1/2 cup black olives, pitted

A few drops of rice wine vinegar

1 pound fresh tagliatelle or pappardelle

About a dozen basil leaves, lightly chopped

A good-sized chunk of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.

Lightly score the duck through its fatty skin in a crisscross pattern. Rub the legs with salt and pepper. In a Dutch oven, brown the duck legs over medium heat, skin side down. Render the fat and brown the skin for about 5 minutes. Flip them over and brown the undersides for another 4 minutes. Remove them from the pan and place them in a bowl or on a plate.

Pour off all but about 2 tablespoons of the duck fat (save the rendered fat for roasting potatoes). Turn the heat back to medium and add the onion, carrot, celery (and leaves, if you have them), cinnamon, allspice, and a little more salt and black pepper. Sauté until everything is soft and fragrant. Add the duck and any juices it has released back into the casserole, and sauté for another minute. Add the vermouth and stir for one minute. Then, add the chicken broth, bay leaves, honey, and tomatoes, bringing the mixture to a boil. Cover the casserole and place it in the hot oven.

After about an hour, open the pot and add the orange juice and zest. If the liquid has cooked down a lot, you may want to add a bit more chicken broth or water. Give the duck legs a turn, cover the pot, and return it to the oven for another 1 1/2 hours.

Remove the casserole from the oven. By this time, the duck should be tender and nearly falling off the bone. Take the duck legs out of the pot and place them on a large plate. Let them sit until they're cool enough to handle.

The sauce should have a nice maroon sheen and be thickened but still loose enough to cling to pasta. Skim off any excess fat.

When the duck is somewhat cool, pull off all the meat and shred it a bit with your fingers, dropping it into the pot with the sauce. Add

the olives and stir. (This is where I let the pot cool on the counter, then refrigerate overnight. When I rewarmed it the next day...) Check the consistency and judge whether you might need to add a little water or broth. Give it a taste. I find that sometimes the richness of duck needs a little extra acid, so add a few drops of rice wine vinegar to brighten the flavors. You may also want to add more black pepper.

Cook your tagliatelle or pappardelle until tender. While the pasta is cooking, put a low flame under the sauce to gently keep it hot.

Drain the pasta and pour it into a large serving bowl. Add the duck sauce and the basil, and gently toss. Serve right away, with grated Parmigiano at the table.