



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

This quarter is a lesson in “don’t commit to a theme too early” because I painted myself into a corner and could not get out. Luckily, the paint that put me in the corner is a stunning bottle of Chablis, perfect for the summer. So, no theme—just three great wines that all offer distinctive character.

2023 Jean Dauvissat Chablis | \$60

It does not seem that long ago that great AOP Chablis was the bargain of the White Burgundy category, with many excellent examples priced under \$30. However, starting in the last decade, changes in weather patterns have had a ruinous effect on grape harvests, forcing prices up. Coupled with tariffs on Europe and the drop in the value of the dollar, prices have really jumped. While the wines of Jean Dauvissat were always a little more expensive than those of their peers, this wine has increased by \$20 in less than four vintages. Nonetheless, it is a great example, and relative to \$100+ bottles of village-level Puligny-Montrachet, it is still a relative bargain.

The estate of Jean Dauvissat dates back to 1899, with the domain first bottling wine in 1963. Prior to that year, the wines were made and sold to local négociants, the standard practice of the time. It was not until 1978 that the property began in earnest to produce wine under their own label, increasing production to roughly 4,000 cases per year. Jean also expanded the estate to its current 25 acres, with holdings in Grand Cru, Premier Cru, and village-level sites. Sadly, Jean was killed in an accident a few years ago, so today the estate is run by his wife, Evelyne, and son, Sébastien.

What makes Chablis so distinctive is the soil, defined as Kimmeridgian limestone. This soil was formed in the late Jurassic period, 152-165 million years ago, when what is today Western Europe was covered by a shallow sea. This sea was rich with calcium-rich oysters, *Exogyra virgula*, which lived their little oyster lives one generation atop the next. Millennia of generations compacted upon each other, aided by the pressure of the water above, eventually forming what we call limestone today. This particular type of limestone, Kimmeridgian, is named for the town in Dorset, England, where it was first identified. It stretches from eastern England across France and into western Germany. In certain spots, it lies closer to the surface, such as Chablis, Sancerre, and Champagne, giving the wines a distinctive note of minerality for which they are famous.

In the case of Chablis, the classification of vineyards from Grand Cru to village level is defined by exposition, steepness of slope, and the level of clay in the soil. All of the Grand Cru vineyards of Chablis occupy a steep, south-facing slope that looms over the village of the same name. This slope is formed by the Serein River, which cuts a deep scar across the region and, along with several tributaries, creates a series of sub-valleys. Along the south and southeast slopes of these valleys are several Premier Cru vineyards. These vineyards, along with the Grand Cru sites, are known for a rocky, fractured style of limestone called Argilo-calcaire. This soil is also noted for its holding capacity, which stores water that the roots of the vines use during the dry summer months. The village-level quality vineyards, which are the source for this wine, have a higher concentration of clay, allowing for slightly larger crop yields.

Winemaking at this estate is typical for the region, almost entirely done in stainless steel tanks. This has been the standard since the 1960s and allows for the crystal clarity of the soil to shine through. The only legal grape variety is Chardonnay, and Chablis sets the standard for the “unwooded” style. At Dauvissat, the wine is aged in tanks for 18 months, with continuous contact with the lees to build texture and flavor.

Serve this wine chilled, but allow it to warm to around 50 degrees Fahrenheit before serving. The nose is a gorgeous combination of fresh Gala apple, Bosc pear, chamomile, candied lemon peel, and buttered toasted brioche. On the palate, this wine is dry but far from austere, with very good texture and richness and persistent minerality into the finish. Serve this wine with raw or steamed oysters, blackened grouper, or roast chicken.

2022 Tabordet Pouilly Fume L'Autre Rive | \$55

Normally, we present the wines in descending order of price, but this wine shares some similarities with the one above, so it makes sense to stick with the topic. Pouilly-Fumé, and neighboring Sancerre, lie just under two hours southwest of Chablis, and the soils of the two regions are very similar. There is one subtle difference with the vineyards of Pouilly-Fumé: the addition of a high concentration of flint. In French, it is called *silex*, and it was formed in the same way as limestone. However, in this area, there were also tiny, glass-like creatures whose bodies were rich in silica. It is the *silex* that gives the wines of Pouilly-Fumé their haunting note of smokiness, noted in the name of the region, “Fumé.”

Our featured wine is produced by Yvon and Pascal Tabordet, who inherited the family property in Sancerre in 1981. Over the next few years, they quadrupled the size of the estate, in both Sancerre and across the Loire River in neighboring Pouilly-Fumé. By 2012, they were joined by Marius, Gaël, and Floriane, children of both brothers, who today oversee viticulture, winemaking, and administration. When Marius took the helm in 2008 as winemaker, he felt it was important to convert to biodynamic farming for the long-term survival of the estate. This is a difficult path in a region with such high humidity, but they received their Demeter certification for full biodynamic conversion in 2023.

Marius’ approach in the cellar is respectful of tradition, with an eye toward innovation as well. Most of the wines are fermented and aged in concrete, including this single-vineyard bottling, but there is also some oak and clay vessels used for certain wines. The only legal variety for Pouilly-Fumé is Sauvignon Blanc, and this appellation only allows white wine, unlike Sancerre, which also produces red and rosé examples.

The reason we chose this wine is due to its age; being almost four years old, it is in the perfect window to experience mature but not old Sauvignon Blanc from this region. Serve it cold, but not right out of the refrigerator. The nose hits you with a mellow combination of gooseberry preserves, fresh apricot, lemon verbena, grapefruit peel, and a hint of gunpowder. The feel on the palate is quite textured, thanks to its age, with very fine threads of minerality weaving through the citrus-centered fruit. The sign that this wine still has years to go is the vibrant acidity that persists into the finish. Serve this wine with a slice of pâté and crusty bread, pork sausage over a lentil salad, or chicken breasts stuffed with chèvre and wrapped in prosciutto.

2020 Faustino Rioja Blanco Gran Reserva I | \$59

I originally selected this wine as the foundation for my theme of “all Iberian Peninsula white wines,” but before I could find the other two selections, I tasted the Dauvissat Chablis and pivoted. There is no shortage of great whites from Spain and Portugal, so we will return to that theme again in the future. This wine works nicely with the first two selections as a contrast of styles and winemaking processes. While the emphasis for the first two wines is clarity of place, this Gran Reserva white Rioja is more about process.

The Faustino winery is the largest family-owned estate in Rioja, where they farm more than 1,500 acres across the Rioja Alta and Alavesa districts. They also purchase grapes from other growers, but those are only used for wines below the Reserva level. While this is a very large estate, the ownership has always been dedicated to the quality of their production. Currently, the fourth generation of the Martínez family leads this property, moving the entire operation to farm using sustainable methods, and they are entirely energy self-sufficient.

For this Gran Reserva bottling, winemaker Juan José Díez González uses primarily Viura grapes harvested from the top sites farmed specifically for this wine. There is also a small amount of Chardonnay included, sourced from vineyard parcels specific to this wine. The grapes are hand-harvested and fermented individually in a mix of 60% new American oak barrels and 40% new French oak barrels for three weeks, using native yeasts. González also performs *bâtonnage*, or lees stirring, during fermentation to enhance richness and aromatic complexity. After the wine is dry, it spends another six months in barrel with more *bâtonnage* before blending and bottling. The majority of aging for this wine occurs in the bottle—in this case, almost five years—before release. There were only 200 six-packs of this wine produced.

In contrast to the first two wines, this bottle explodes from the glass with rich notes of toasted coconut and hazelnuts, lemon pastry cream, Fuji apples, quince, and linden flowers. The palate is rich and intense, with an initial oiliness quickly framed by vibrant acidity that extends into the finish. Serve this wine with grilled swordfish, creamy pasta dishes, or Vitello Tonnato.