



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Every spring, I receive many questions from customers about traveling to Tuscany and my list of top wineries to visit. I have so many favorites that my answer usually depends on where they are staying. Tuscany is a fairly large area, and if you're not careful, you can spend much more time in the car than enjoying the beautiful food and culture. Depending on the location, I have both old favorites and new discoveries because it is such a dynamic place for winemaking. This month, we will examine the region through the lens of two examples: the first is my favorite estate in the village of San Gimignano, and the second is a new discovery from the Chianti Classico region.

## **2025 Fontaleoni Vernaccia di San Gimignano | \$20**

We are so happy to have this wine back as an Explorer Club selection. There are only a few wines that have graced the shelves of TWM for the majority of our nearly 31 years in business, and Fontaleoni Vernaccia di San Gimignano is one of them. That was until they changed distributors three years ago, and the new agent decided not to buy it. Thankfully, they now see the error of their ways and have brought it back for us.

The story of this winery is a true rags-to-riches tale set in post-WWII Italy. In 1959, Giovanni Troiani left his sharecropping life in the Marches region to try his hand at grape growing in Tuscany. This may sound like a no-brainer today, but in those days, Tuscany was no better than the Marches in terms of stature. He fell in love with the beauty of a hillside overlooking the town of San Gimignano and purchased a small farm. Like many in the region, this was subsistence farming, raising a combination of cattle, cereal crops, fruit trees, and a few grapevines for homemade wine. In 1980, his son Franco took over and began shifting more of their farming to grapes, eventually deciding to bottle wine under their label. Today, the estate has grown to more than 100 acres, with 60% dedicated to producing wine.

It is no accident that the family has done well in this region because their timing was perfect. Vernaccia di San Gimignano was the first Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) for white wine created in Italy in 1966. Recognizing the unique attributes of the Vernaccia grape and the growing conditions of San Gimignano lifted the fortunes of many local growers. The wine is now held in such high regard that it was elevated to the top category, Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG), in 1993.

At the heart of this wine is the unique Vernaccia grape. The tongue-twisting name of this wine comes from the grape and the region in which it is grown. For over nine centuries, producers around the town of San Gimignano have grown the Vernaccia grape. Although located west of the Chianti Classico zone, between the towns of Florence and Siena, the soils and climate are not as conducive to growing Sangiovese. In fact, as much of a fan as I am of Franco's white wine, I have never really loved their red.

Today, the estate is managed by the third generation, Matteo and Simona, who assumed control after Franco's death in 2016. They have transitioned the estate to farming using organic practices (non-certified) and employed regenerative techniques such as not tilling under the cover crop. They have also switched to harvesting the grapes at night to preserve their natural acidity. Fermentation and aging for this wine are done entirely in stainless steel to preserve freshness and aromatics.

When serving this wine, you don't want it too cold. It is fine to chill it in the refrigerator, but let the bottle warm for ten to fifteen minutes before serving. Once you do this, you will discover a wine with exotic aromas of white peach, lemon blossom, candied kumquat, and honeysuckle, with an undertone of wet pebbles. On the palate, this wine shows brightness at the start but rounds out and broadens into the finish, where it lingers for several seconds. You will want to serve this wine with some food, although it doesn't need anything heavy. Try it with everything from soft, creamy cheeses to cold shrimp with a white cocktail sauce.

## 2022 Vallepicciola Pievesciata | \$25

We do not normally use two different red wines for the Explorer Club, but this month there was confusion with the importer, and we were shipped a lower quantity than we need. Never fear, I had this one queued up in case there was a problem. Luckily, it is quite close in style and origin to the first selection, so the theme still works.

The Vallepicciola winery was founded in the 1990s by the Bolfo family, driven by their dream to rejuvenate a centuries-old, abandoned monastery in the village of Pievasciata. This tiny village is located in the hills of the Castelnuovo Berardenga sub-zone of Chianti Classico, known for producing powerful wines. Like many Tuscan estates, their land is divided between olive groves, grapevines, and undeveloped areas to allow native wildlife to flourish. With almost 500 acres—200 under vine—they cross a number of different soil types, elevations, and exposures, giving them the opportunity for a lot of diversity. They also renovated the monastery into a five-star hotel, with surrounding grounds to stroll and take in the beauty of Tuscany.

At the heart of their wine program is a state-of-the-art winery built away from the hotel, constructed under the guidance of Alessandro Cellai. Cellai is one of the most celebrated winemakers in Tuscany, also working at the famed Chianti Classico estate Castellare and at a previous club pick, Rocca di Frassinello. Alessandro has guided this winery since its inception but recently stepped back to a consulting role, handing the reins to Gaia Cinnirella. The winery is obviously in good hands because Gaia most recently worked for Ornellaia and Masseto, two of the most famous estates in Tuscany.

For their "super Tuscan" blend Pievesciata, Cellai aimed to showcase the potential of this property to produce Bordeaux varieties in addition to Sangiovese. The blend for this wine is 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, and 20% Sangiovese. All the fermentations were done in large concrete tanks; then, the wine was blended and aged in second-pass French oak barrels for 24 months.

Decant this wine for half an hour before serving and chill it to cellar temperature. The nose is an explosive combination of fresh black currants, blackberries, dried cranberries, toasted walnuts, dark chocolate, and a touch of baked potato skin. The palate is dense and full, with moderate tannins rising quickly to frame the fruit. Good now, this wine will drink beautifully until 2032. Serve it with pasta Bolognese, stuffed flank steak, or this skirt steak with Italian chimichurri.

### Skirt Steak with "Italian Chimichurri"

This is a modified recipe from New York Times Cooking that I have rebranded with the name Italian Chimichurri. The piquant sauce is reminiscent of the Argentine classic, with the unmistakable basil element also giving it a pesto-like quality. My modification to the process is to reserve a couple of tablespoons of sauce from the marinade to drizzle over the steak when serving. This also works with other cuts of steak.

**1 cup basil leaves, more for garnish**  
**3 scallions, white and green parts, thinly sliced, more for garnish**  
**2 tablespoons fresh lemon thyme leaves, more for garnish (German thyme works)**  
**2 large garlic cloves, roughly chopped**  
**2 tablespoons coarsely chopped peperoncini (1 to 2 peppers), pickled jalapeño or other pickled peppers**  
**2 ½ teaspoons kosher salt**  
**Finely grated zest of 1 lemon**  
**Juice of half a lemon**  
**¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil**  
**2 ½ pounds skirt steak**

In a blender or food processor, combine basil, scallions, lemon thyme, garlic, peperoncini, salt and lemon zest and juice. Pour olive oil over mixture; blend until it turns to paste. (Reserve 2 tbsp for serving.)

Using paper towels, pat steak dry and place in a large bowl; slather paste mixture all over meat. Cover and refrigerate at least 30 minutes or overnight.

Light the grill or heat the broiler with the rack as close to the heat source as possible. Use a paper towel to pat steak dry. (You can leave some of the paste, but for the best sear, the meat should be dry when it hits the grill.) Grill meat over direct heat until char lines appear, and meat is done to taste, 3 to 5 minutes per side, or broil until charred, 2 to 5 minutes per side. Let rest for 5 minutes before slicing against the grain and serving, garnished with herbs and scallions.