



Tim's Wine Market

June 2026

By Tim Varan

Every month when I sit down to write about the new club selections, I usually read the previous month's commentary to maintain a consistent voice. All I can say about May is, "I am sorry." *Cap management?* That was my theme? While I do not subscribe to the misquote attributed to Ernest Hemingway, "Write drunk, edit sober," I am not really sure where my head was with that one. I have UC Davis wine textbooks on my shelf at home, and I am not sure I have ever read the chapters on cap management because the topic is so boring. For what it's worth, I wrote the section last month purely from anecdotal knowledge gathered from speaking with thousands of winemakers over the years. Sheesh. I promise not to do that again.

This month I am going to keep it simple because an opportunity has arisen that allows us to feature a very expensive wine as one of the selections. The first pick was made with a tight budget. It is a solid wine, as you will see, but there is not much of a story behind it. The second selection is worth the membership all by itself, as you will see.

Cult Cabernet Sauvignon 2022 | \$20

This may sound like a broken record, but the ocean of extra wine available in California and just about everywhere else in the world is creating some great opportunities. Not only are consumers getting a lot more bang for their buck, but wineries with a bulk label program are benefiting as well. Enter Cult Cabernet Sauvignon, produced by the Silvestrin Winery in Napa Valley. As a way of bolstering cash flow amid flagging direct-to-consumer sales and distributor consolidation, many wineries create labels for wines they produce at lower price points than their flagship brands. Sometimes they actually make the wines, but more often than not, they purchase already finished wines from the bulk market and slap their label on it. For those of us who know what to look for, the signs are easy to read: tech sheets that are vague on details regarding the winemaking process or the source of grapes. In this case, the only real information is that the wine comes from Lodi, is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, and has essentially the same chemistry (alcohol, acidity, and pH) as every other Cabernet produced in California.

The last half of that paragraph may sound cynical, but as someone who has purchased wine professionally since 1989, it is interesting to note that the cycles of this business never really change. Back in the late 1980s, there were far fewer grapes grown in California than today, with regions like Paso Robles and Lodi barely in existence. Napa was getting all the buzz, while its neighbor, Sonoma County, was riding on their success. Prices for land to plant vineyards in those areas started to climb, leading people interested in building wineries to look for cheaper alternatives. Many went to Paso Robles, but the region of Lodi was already planted with numerous vineyards, primarily selling to Gallo to supply their ocean of grocery store jug wines. Then came phylloxera, a root louse that treats the roots of a vineyard like an all-you-can-eat buffet, forcing most of Napa Valley and Sonoma to be replanted. Wineries were left without any grapes for at least three years, prompting them to scour California for other sources and discover Lodi.

Vineyards in Lodi largely escaped the phylloxera issue because their soils were formed by the nearby Sacramento River, which means they are primarily sandy. Phylloxera hates sand because they travel underground, and their tiny tunnels collapse. I know that sounds simple, but it is the truth. Regions in the world with sandy soils have never had phylloxera. Lodi also enjoys a favorable climate, with warm days and cool evenings, as air moves down from the Sierra Nevada mountains, making the evenings a little chilly. This yields grapes that have a good balance of natural acidity and sugar, meaning the wines are full-bodied but possess a degree of balance.

For this wine, we know very little about the winemaking, but when you open it, I suggest chilling it to cellar temperature. The tech sheet and label say 13.5% ABV, but it tasted hotter to me, like a wine in the mid-14s. The bouquet is classic Lodi, with rich notes of morello cherries, dried dark figs, dark chocolate, and bourbon barrel. Like many Cabernets in this price range from California, it is a dry wine but carries a whisper of sweet fruit at the tip of the tongue, indicating it has a couple

of grams of residual sugar. It is thick and rich, with a fair amount of oak wrapping around the fruit and carrying into the long finish. Enjoy this with burgers, fajitas, or all by itself.

Grand Napa Master Blend 2022 | ~~\$90~~ \$50

That is right; the winery price for this wine is \$90, but that price is not realistic. It is more commonly found between \$45 and \$50, so that is the price I am using. Nevertheless, this is a serious bottle of wine from a very respected Napa winemaker. When you drink this, you will see why I wanted to include it in this club, even though I didn't have much budget for the second selection, the Cult Cab.

Grand Napa is a Napa Valley winery located across the street from Peju, between Niebaum Lane and Bella Oaks Lane—a very swanky address. The owners of the winery focus on sustainable farming and have vineyards throughout the valley. Additionally, the winemaker is Stéphane Vivier, a French transplant from Burgundy who made his name at the helm of HdV. HdV is a winery in Carneros that is a joint venture between Larry Hyde and his sister, Pamela de Villaine. Larry is one of the most respected farmers in Napa Valley, and Pamela is married to Aubert de Villaine, the recently retired director of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. For those not familiar, DRC produces some of the most sought-after and expensive wines in the world. For several vintages, Stéphane worked alongside Aubert and honed his skills to produce elegant and balanced wines without the gimmicks that are so common in the valley today.

This wine is a blend of grapes from two vineyards at the northern end of Napa Valley: St. Helena and Calistoga. While this part of the valley can get quite hot during the day, there is always an afternoon breeze that comes through the Chalk Hill Gap, dropping the temperature by 20 to 30 degrees in less than an hour. Similar to the phenomenon in Lodi for the Cult Cabernet, this maintains balance in the grapes. The big difference is that these vineyards are probably farmed at half the crop yield, which means the wines are much more concentrated.

Going back to my prior comment about vague tech sheets, we know that this winery takes pride in its work by providing great detail. The wine is 55% Cabernet Sauvignon, 38% Cabernet Franc, and 7% Merlot. After a 21-day fermentation, the wine was racked to 40% new French oak barrels and 60% three-year-old (neutral) oak barrels, where it was aged for 20 months. One missing detail is whether the blend was made before aging or before bottling. It's nice that they leave a little mystery in our relationship.

Decant this wine for half an hour and chill it to cellar temperature before serving. The nose presents a more restrained combination of red and black fruits, with notes of red plum, black cherry, blackberry, milk chocolate, and caramel. On the palate, there is plenty of weight, but it is nicely restrained by well-integrated tannins that frame the fruit into the finish. It's good now, but you could also cellar this wine until 2028. Enjoy it with a seared ribeye, bacon-wrapped filet mignon, or a nice Iberico pork chop.

Garlic Braised Short Ribs With Red Wine

I love short ribs in all varieties, and this has become my go-to recipe. This one comes from the New York Times Cooking section and has a 5-star rating with over 10,000 reviews. While it looks like a lot of steps, it is actually pretty easy. My suggestion is to always make this one day before serving and refrigerate it. Short ribs render a ridiculous amount of fat, so chilling overnight allows you to remove the hardened tallow, resulting in a sauce that is less greasy. Strain out the veggies before refrigerating and discard them, then return the ribs to the liquid and chill. The next day, defat the sauce, warm it gently on the stovetop until the ribs are warmed through, and then spoon the sauce over them.

Since the ingredient list and directions are longer than the remainder of this page, I have put the entire recipe on the next page. Serve this over mashed potatoes, risotto, or polenta with either of the selections this month.

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
5 pounds bone-in short ribs, at least 1 1/2 inches thick
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
2 large heads garlic, halved crosswise
1 medium onion (about 10 ounces), chopped
4 ribs celery (about 8 ounces, chopped)
2 medium carrots (about 6 ounces), chopped
3 tablespoons tomato paste
2 cups dry red wine (about half a bottle)
2 cups beef stock or bone broth (use beef bouillon dissolved in water if unavailable; chicken stock will work in a pinch), plus more as needed
4 sprigs thyme
1 cup parsley, coarsely chopped
1/2 cup finely chopped chives
1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest

Heat oven to 275 degrees. Heat oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Season short ribs on all sides with salt and pepper. Working in batches, sear short ribs on all sides until deeply and evenly browned, 6 to 8 minutes per batch. Transfer browned short ribs to a large plate and continue with remaining ribs.

Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of remaining fat, leaving the good browned bits behind. Reduce heat to medium, and add garlic, cut side down and cook, undisturbed, until golden brown, about 1 to 2 minutes. Add onion, celery and carrots and season with salt and pepper. Toss to coat and continue to cook until vegetables are softened but not yet browned, about 5 to 10 minutes. Add tomato paste and stir to coat. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until tomato paste has started to caramelize a bit on the bottom and up the edges of the pot, about 2 to 3 minutes.

Add red wine and, using a wooden spoon, scrape up any browned or caramelized bits. Let this simmer 2 to 3 minutes, just to take the edge off and reduce a bit. Stir in beef stock along with thyme. Using tongs, return short ribs to the pot, along with any juices that have accumulated, nestling them in there so that they are submerged (if they are just barely covered, nestle them bone side up so that all the meat is submerged, adding more beef stock or water as necessary to cover). Bring to a simmer, then cover and transfer to oven.

Cook, undisturbed, until short ribs are meltingly tender and falling off the bone (you should be able to shred the meat with a fork), 3 1/2 to 4 hours.

Using tongs, remove the ribs from the pot, taking care (for presentation purposes, really) not to let the bone slip out and transfer them to a large plate. (While you could serve the short ribs right out of this pot, the vegetables have all given up their flavor and texture and aren't worth much now, so feel free to strain the sauce for easier eating.) Scatter parsley, chives and lemon zest over the top of the short ribs. Separate the fat from the sauce, season with salt and pepper and serve alongside.