



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

In the 1960s, the famed oenologist (wine scientist) Émile Peynaud recommended to his clients, the elite châteaux of Bordeaux, that they should declassify some of their lesser-quality production into a “second label.” The initial goal was to improve the quality of their primary wine, known as the Grand Vin. Initially, the second labels were quite uninteresting, as the wineries focused little attention on them. As prices skyrocketed in the 1980s, the second labels became an important part of the marketing strategy for the châteaux, who saw them as a way to introduce customers to their house style at a lower price. Today, most châteaux produce a second label, and often a third or even fourth, depending on their size.

By comparison, most of the early California wineries that engaged in “second labels” did so under a different name, and often appellation. The early versions, like Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars producing Hawk’s Crest or Caymus producing Liberty School, were often about expanding production away from costly, estate-grown grapes to offset expenses. This became particularly important in the early 1990s, as many Napa wineries had little production while replanting their vineyards due to phylloxera. Eventually, many of these wines were sold off, with Hawk Crest now made by Chateau St. Michelle (which used to own Stag’s Leap) and Liberty School eventually becoming Austin Hope.

Today, the “second label” business in California is less prominent. Many wineries prefer to use their primary label as their marketing vehicle and create other labels under entirely different brands. Often, they barely associate the two, avoiding the comparison between the brands. This month, we bring you two different perspectives on these “second labels” and how New World wineries approach the production and marketing of them. Coincidentally, both wineries have produced wines featured in our Reserve Club over the years, making this a true look at their efforts to produce “everyday” wines.

B. Wise Wisdom Red Wine 2021 | \$29

The wines at B. Wise Winery are the passion of Brion Wise, who came to Sonoma in 1993 after building a successful oil business. Being an engineer by training, he wanted the challenge of building a vineyard and winery from the ground up, so he selected a former cattle ranch on what is now Moon Mountain and went to work. For almost a decade, he drilled a well, planted the vineyards with the help of John Cauldwell, and built a winery, culminating in his first release in 2002.

After launching his winery, Brion sought to expand by purchasing several other wineries. He started by acquiring his neighbor, Amapola Creek, in 2020. Some of you may remember the Amapola Creek Red Wine that we featured in 2024. Wise also purchased Mark Herrold Wines in 2023. Coincidentally, Herrold has been a consultant to Wise since the inception of the winery. Then, in 2024, Wise purchased the old Cosentino vineyards and winery from Vintage Wine Estates. All of these, except for Cosentino, are operated as separate wineries, not “second labels.”

At the core of all B. Wise wines is his estate fruit from Moon Mountain. This appellation is one of the few that lies on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas Mountains, which form the border between Napa and Sonoma Valleys. The vineyards of Moon Mountain benefit from higher elevations and coastal breezes, with a western exposure that allows for a long day of sunshine. This enables the slow ripening of both red and white varieties, producing wines with impressive power and structure. Like the Amapola Creek Red Wine we featured in 2024, this too is a blend. This time, it is 63% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Zinfandel, 10% Syrah, 5% Petit Verdot, and 5% Cabernet Franc.

When you open this wine, you will want to decant it for a half hour or more before serving. The nose of this wine begins with the unmistakable notes of oak: toasted coconut, caramel, and clove. Then the fruit emerges with rich tones of stewed black cherries, boysenberries, and black licorice. On the palate, the oak persists, wrapping the ample fruit with some dry, dusty tannins. Drink from 2026 to 2029 with steaks and roasts.

Vasse Felix Cabernet Sauvignon “Filius” 2023 | \$29

The style of wines produced by Brion Wise announces itself with a bullhorn. They showcase lots of oak, big fruit, and high alcohol. By contrast, Vasse Felix has built an international reputation as a world-class winery known for its elegance and capacity to age. This was not an easy task, as the winery sits at the western edge of Australia in the isolated Margaret River region. They produce a few tiers of Cabernet Sauvignon, including their legendary “Premier” bottling. A few years ago, they created Filius, which they call the “baby brother” to demonstrate the house style, but it is ready to drink upon release.

The Margaret River region of Western Australia is located three hours south of the city of Perth, just below Geographe Bay, on an outcropping of land that gives the continent of Australia a small horn on the southwest side. Until the 1950s, the isolated area was primarily devoted to cattle farms and intrepid surfers chasing some of the largest waves in the world. Then the legendary UC Davis professor Harold Olmo spent eight months in the region conducting a feasibility study to determine if the area would be suitable for wine production. Thanks to his efforts, several families began planting vines in the area in the early 1970s. These include such noteworthy estates as Leeuwin Estate, Cullen, and Vasse Felix, founded by Dr. Tom Cullity. It was during this time that Robert Mondavi, acting on Olmo’s advice, visited the region looking for a new property to expand his empire. Even though Mondavi would later say that it is one of the most perfect grape-growing climates in the world, it was far too isolated for him to consider the investment.

What makes this area so special is its proximity to the ocean and the timing of its rains. The Margaret River receives more than 40 inches of rain per year, but virtually all of it occurs during the winter when the vines are dormant. The rains saturate the ground and provide ample water for the vines during the dry summer. In addition, the weather in this part of Australia is dominated by the cool Indian Ocean, as well as winds originating in Antarctica. The days during the summer are quite warm, but by evening, the cold winds off the ocean dominate the weather, rapidly chilling the grapes. This provides a perfect balance of ripeness and natural acidity. More than a few expert tasters have told me that the wines of this region remind them of St. Julien in Bordeaux, where the wines are known for their richness, ripeness, and texture.

The Cullity family sold Vasse Felix in 1987 to the Holmes à Court family, who hired winemaker Virginia Willcock. Although Virginia is not widely known to many U.S. consumers, she is considered a rock star winemaker globally. Not only does she excel at Cabernet Sauvignon, but this address is also famed for Chardonnay, thanks to Virginia. For this Cabernet Sauvignon, they use a combination of estate-grown and purchased grapes from trusted neighbors in the Margaret River. Virginia employs a combination of classic pump-over and roto-tank extraction during fermentation, leaving the wine on the skins for only 12 days. The wine is then racked primarily to older French oak barriques, with 10% new, where it is aged for 12 months. This wine is also a blend, with 4% Malbec and 1% Petit Verdot in the final mix.

Decant this wine for a half-hour before serving; this is important because it is under screw cap. In contrast to the B. Wise wine, this wine is more restrained, with a nose of fresh black currants, dried cranberries, candied orange peel, claro cigar wrapper, graphite, and dried rose petals. When you take a sip, the tannins are fairly forward, providing a dusty dryness that quickly frames the ample fruit. What makes this such an exceptional Cabernet is the acidity, which provides focus and food-pairing capacity beyond just big cuts of meat. Drink from 2026 to 2032 and serve with lamb chops, roast chicken, or salmon.

Roasted Salmon with Mustard & Brown Sugar

Yes, red wine does go with fish and this recipe proves it. It is simple, no measuring, and works great with both feature selections. I used whole grain mustard to add a little extra kick and improve the appearance. Serve with a squeeze of lemon.

Salmon fillets, preferably wild caught

Heat your oven to 400 degrees.

Dijon mustard

Make a mixture of Dijon mustard and brown sugar to the degree of spicy-sweetness that pleases you. Salt and pepper the salmon fillets.

Brown sugar

Salt and black pepper

Place the salmon fillets skin-side down on a lightly oiled, foil-lined baking sheet. Slather the tops of the fillets with the mustard and brown sugar glaze and slide them into the top half of your oven. Roast for about 12 minutes, then serve.