



Tim's Wine Market

August 2026

By Tim Varan

The selections this month are made from two grapes that are very different in nature. The first is produced using the Tannat grape, which has thick skins and very high tannins. For the second pick, the featured variety is Zinfandel, which has thin skins and is generally considered low in tannin. The way both wineries deal with these varieties to produce big, full-throttle wines is a study in modern winemaking. One works to make the wine softer, through different aging techniques, while the second uses oak to add tannin to give the wine a greater potential to age. Both are great now, or put away for a year or two.

2022 Garzon Tannat Reserva |\$25

This has been a staple wine in Orlando for a few years. It is an excellent example of a new world interpretation of the variety, giving us all the charm while voiding the somewhat rustic nature of the old world examples of the grape. In fact, the 2015 bottling of this wine was the first Tannat to make the Wine Spectator Top 100 in 2017, coming in at number 41. Fans of big wines will find a lot of comfort with this one, and it has a really cool back story too.

The first thing you may notice about this wine is that it hails from Uruguay. Although this country does not have a long history of exporting wine, they have been producing it on a commercial scale since the 1870s, and are the fourth largest producer in South America. Their industry was started, much like Argentine winemaking, by Italian and Basque immigrants who flocked to South America around that time. They found that the cuttings they brought from their native land did well in the dry, temperate climates of the country, and industry took off. As was the case in Argentina, the wines were rarely exported because their domestic population drank most of it. It was not until just a couple of decades ago that the number of wineries and acres planted grew enough to provide excess for export.

The dominant grape in Uruguay is Tannat, which history tells us was carried to the country by Don Pascual Harriague in 1870. Harriague was from the Basque region of France, where Tannat is the preferred grape and used to make the fascinating wines of Irouléguay, Tursan, and several other very obscure appellations. It is slightly more famous for its use in the wines of Madiran, which lies just north of the Basque Country and inland of Bordeaux.

One of the things that strikes me about Tannat from Uruguay is how much softer and rounded the wines are compared to their French cousins. The climate where the grapes for this wine grow is warmer and sunnier, with cool ocean breezes that create a wide diurnal temperature swing. Garzon's vineyards also lie in a region known as the Ballast Hills, which their owner feels contributes to the wines' complexity. Ballast is a soil series that was formed at the time of the Pangea, roughly 250 million years ago. Over time, it has been weathered by climate, so there is an incredible complexity to the mineral quality of the soil, which is then taken into the grapes. This helps explain why this wine has great power, but also a subtle complexity that is rare in this variety.

If you think this may be a primitive affair, I urge you to visit the Bodega Garzón website and see the winery built by owner Alejandro Bulgheroni. It is the first LEED-certified winery outside of North America, and their consulting winemaker is Alberto Antonini, who came to fame as the head winemaker for Antinori in the 1990s. The winery also sports a 120-seat restaurant directed by none other than Francis Mallman. Fermentation is done in large concrete tanks, like those found at Cheval Blanc, and aging is done in a combination of French oak tanks and barrels, as well as concrete. For this Tannat, the wine is fermented in the large 150HL concrete tanks, then aged on the lees in barriques for 6-12 months. Both techniques introduce a small amount of oxygen into the wine, which has the effect of softening the hard tannins.

When you are ready to serve this wine, you will want to decant for a half-hour. Once you do, it delivers a complex nose of muddled blackberries, soy sauce, dried mushrooms, hickory smoke, and black licorice. On the palate, it is fresh and lively, with relatively obvious tannins and oak that stretch into a long finish. Drink 2026-2028 with grilled steaks or slow-roasted leg of lamb.

2022 Baca Zinfandel Home Base | \$38

In my opinion, the story of the Zinfandel grape is the most interesting of all varieties grown for wine production. For more than a century, its history has been steeped in mystery and speculation, with many characters contributing to its narrative. Only in the past decade has the truth been revealed through extensive research. Unfortunately, this reality comes at a time when Zinfandel has lost most of its popularity in the U.S., which is the most important market for this variety.

When I started my career in the late 1980s, Zinfandel was very popular with consumers, as Cabernet Sauvignon had not yet become the dominant red variety in Napa Valley. Zinfandel was often referred to as “America’s grape.” Even then, there was considerable evidence that the variety was not native to the U.S., but the wine industry was young and striving to establish legitimacy against the established European regions. The popularity of White Zinfandel also contributed to its prominence, introducing the grape to many Americans, including myself, despite displaying little varietal character. The story of White Zinfandel is intriguing in its own right, born out of a desperate attempt to save a struggling industry. Space does not allow for that story here, but it is well detailed on the Sutter Home winery website under the link “Our Roots.”

In his book, **Angels' Visits: An Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel** (1991), author David Darlington explored several hypotheses about the origin of Zinfandel in America. He credited much of Zinfandel’s introduction to a colorful historical figure, Count Agoston Haraszthy. Again, space does not allow for a comprehensive timeline of Haraszthy’s life and his contributions to the wine industry, but the essential points are that he was a Hungarian immigrant who, in the 1860s, established Buena Vista Vineyards in Sonoma County. At that time, phylloxera was ravaging the European varieties planted in California. Consequently, the California legislature commissioned Haraszthy to travel to Europe to find alternatives. Proficient in 19 languages, Haraszthy was an excellent choice, and during his travels, he collected over 350 different varieties and 100,000 vine cuttings before returning to California. Legend has it that Zinfandel was among the varieties he collected and brought to the U.S., although the country of origin was lost due to a mix-up in labeling. For over a hundred years, this version of events was accepted until science began to elucidate a clearer picture.

In 1994, Dr. Carol Meredith at the University of California at Davis began applying DNA technology to grapes, helping to debunk many origin stories based on legend rather than fact. One of the first varieties she studied was Zinfandel, determining that it is related to a group of varieties originating from the Dalmatian coast in what is now Croatia. She also confirmed that Primitivo, commonly found in Puglia, Italy, is the same variety and thus a synonym for Zinfandel. Meredith identified a connection with Plavac Mali, a moderately popular grape in Dalmatia, and encouraged collaboration with Croatian researchers Edi Maletic and Ivan Pejic. They traversed the country in a study they called Zinquest and discovered an identical DNA match with a grape called Crljenak Kastelanski. However, the story does not end there.

In 2002, in the nearby village of Svinišće, the team found a similar vine growing in the garden of an elderly woman, locally known as Pribidrag. Continuing their research in 2011, they established that the DNA matched that of a 90-year-old vine called Tribidrag. This specimen, documented as being propagated in the region since the 1500s, resided in an herbarium. According to the principle of anteriority, all of these varieties are now technically classified as Tribidrag. Since that term does not roll off the tongue easily, and I doubt many people care, we will stick with the synonyms Primitivo and Zinfandel.

Our feature example is from the Kathryn Hall winery, and their label Baca, which focuses on Zinfandel from Sonoma County. For their Home Base Zinfandel, they purchase grapes from the Mauritson family, who have been farming in the Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma County for 6 generations. This wine is a blend from two sites: Mauritson Home Ranch and Rudy’s Vineyard, both on the east side of the valley. Zinfandel can be notoriously tricky to grow, as the grapes on the clusters do not ripen evenly. These sites, with perfect exposure to sun all day, mean that the vines are capable of pushing the fruit to get fully ripe. The grapes are also hand sorted, with green and overripe berries removed, which further enhances the balance. To build a little additional structure, the wine is aged in 30% new French oak barrels for 10 months, and is blended with 2% Petite Sirah.

Decant this wine for a half hour and chill to cellar temperature before serving. The nose is classic Zinfandel; with a red and white interplay of cooked cherries, blackberry preserves, menthol, caramel, and vanilla paste. There is a nice, plump sense of fruit at first, then tannins rise near the finish and provide some structure to what would otherwise be a fruit bomb of a wine. Drink 2026-2029 with ribs, brisket, or smoked pork chops.

Picadillo

The wines this month lend themselves to a dish with a lot of flavor. While scanning my database of “recipes to use one day,” this one stood out. Sure enough, it is killer with both wines. It also helps that my wife loves this dish, and we always have the ingredients on hand.

This version comes from America’s Test Kitchen, with a couple of tweaks I have developed after making it a couple of times. Being Italian, I take up the tomato quantity a bit with the addition of tomato paste, which makes for a richer sauce. Also, do not skip the step of adding baking soda to the meat before cooking. This creates a softer texture to the meat by denaturing some of the protein fibers so they hold more moisture in the form of cooking liquid. You can serve this over rice, or use it in tacos, empanadas, or burritos.

1 pound 85 percent lean ground beef
1 pound ground pork
2 tablespoons water
½ teaspoon baking soda
Salt and pepper
1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and cut into 2-inch pieces
1 onion, halved and cut into 2-inch pieces
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 tablespoon dried oregano
1 tablespoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
6 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1 (14.5-ounce) can whole tomatoes, drained and chopped coarse
¾ cup dry white wine
½ cup beef broth
½ cup raisins
3 bay leaves
½ cup pimento-stuffed green olives, chopped coarse
2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar, plus extra for seasoning

Toss beef and pork with water, baking soda, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in a bowl until thoroughly combined. Set aside for 20 minutes. Meanwhile, pulse bell pepper and onion in a food processor until chopped into ¼-inch pieces, about 12 pulses.

Heat oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add chopped vegetables, oregano, cumin, cinnamon, and ¼ teaspoon salt; cook, stirring frequently, until vegetables are softened and beginning to brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add tomato paste and stir until it darkens, about 3 minutes. Add tomatoes and wine and cook, scraping up any browned bits, until the pot is almost dry, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in broth, raisins, and bay leaves and bring to a simmer.

Reduce heat to medium-low, add the meat mixture in 2-inch chunks to the pot, and bring to a gentle simmer. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally with 2 forks to break the meat chunks into ¼- to ½-inch pieces, until the meat is cooked through, about 10 minutes.

Discard the bay leaves. Stir in olives and capers. Increase heat to medium-high and cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce is thickened and coats the meat, about 10 minutes. Stir in vinegar and season with salt, pepper, and extra vinegar to taste. Serve.