



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Last quarter, my plan was to present an entire lineup of Spanish wines, which turned out to be harder than expected. I did not do myself any favors by waiting until the last minute to assemble the lineup. Thankfully, I found two amazing French whites to complete the set. Taking this lesson to heart, this quarter I started early in my hunt, finding what I believe to be one of the best offerings we have ever produced for the EBR.

It's hard to imagine now, but in the early 1980s, Spain was emerging from under the shadow of decades of rule by the dictatorship of Franco. There was virtually no established market for the country's wines, outside of commercial-grade Rioja. Eager to discover new categories, I can still remember ordering two dozen samples of Spanish white wines shortly after taking the helm of the Wine Merchant. What my friends and I discovered one evening was nothing but dull, oxidized wines that offered no enjoyment. (To be fair, most of us were one year out of college, and they were impressed I could get so much free wine just by asking.) What I did not know then, and would discover in five short years, was that the world of Spanish whites was changing.

Shortly after opening TWM in 1995, I received a call from a distributor asking if I would like to taste with importer Jorge Ordonez. I did not know him, but his reputation was already established as the voice of "new" Spanish wines, offering different selections and very modern styles. When we met a couple of weeks later, I was surprised when Jorge brought four coolers full of his wines, including more than a dozen whites. The tasting was nothing short of an epiphany, and the biggest discovery of all was wines produced using the Albarino grape. A short time later, we began promoting wines made from Albarino, making them some of our top-selling whites. This trend remains to this day.

You may be asking, "Why such interest in Spanish white wines?" As someone who tastes nearly 5,000 wines a year and has done so for almost three decades, I can comfortably say that no country produces the range and depth of interesting white wines that Spain does. Yes, France certainly owns the top rankings of world-class wines, but they do so with a list of grapes you can count on one hand: mostly Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chenin Blanc. Italy offers a lot more diversity and plenty of enjoyment, but the number of truly world-class whites is also limited. By contrast, Spain is a country with a nearly unlimited number of interesting varieties and a collective group of winemakers who seem to focus as much energy on white wines as on reds. This quarter, we will look at three of the brightest stars in the country, and you will experience some very unusual varieties in the process.

2023 Frore de Carme Albariño Envidiacochina "Tete du Cuvee" | \$65

This offering starts with the only wine made from a well-known Spanish variety, Albarino. This category burst onto the scene in the early to mid-1990s, the tip of the spear, if you will, for what would soon become a wave of interesting Spanish white wines. As it turns out, our featured selection is produced by Eladio Piñeiro, who was at the forefront of that invasion as the founder of the first winery established in the DO of Rías Baixas, the ancestral homeland of the Albarino grape.

As mentioned in the introduction, the featured wine comes from winemaker Eladio Piñeiro, who established the first winery in Rías Baixas in 1983. This was before the official DO was created, making him a true visionary for the category. His original winery was Bodegas Mar de Frades, which focused on using native grapes to produce its wines, especially Albarino. Eladio sold Mar de Frades in 2003, but this story was not complete. With the sale, he retained his top vineyards and launched a new, smaller project called Frore de Carme, named for his wife. This label focuses on biodynamic farming, low-intervention winemaking, extended lees contact, and aging in different mediums. While not well known due to their high price, Frore de Carme is considered by many critics to produce the finest Albarino in Spain.

Our featured wine is called "Envidiacochina," which means "the envy of the worm." This local idiom translates to "I want to walk in your shoes." It is produced from vineyards that average 30 years old and grow in the decomposed granite soils of the region. Piñeiro believes in extensive lees aging to build texture, so this wine spends six months in tank on the lees, with weekly stirring. He then blends the wine with 15% of the previous vintage, which contributes even more body and

texture. When you open this wine, I suggest decanting it for a half hour before serving and letting it warm to cellar temperature.

The nose presents a complex combination of Bartlett pear, canned peach, tangerine peel, grapefruit zest, honeycomb, and toasted fennel seeds. There is substantial texture initially, with a shock of acidity shooting across the mid-palate to provide some tension. I found this wine continued to evolve for a good hour after opening, showcasing dimensions that are rare to find in most Albarino. Drink this wine from 2026 to 2029 with grilled octopus, calamari stuffed with crab filling, or swordfish sautéed with lemon and capers.

2023 Pares Balta Satel.Lit | \$65

Sometime in early summer, I was listening to Tim Atkin's podcast, Cork Talk, where he interviewed Marta Cusiné, one of the winemakers at Pares Baltà, along with her sister-in-law, Maria Elena. I hadn't tasted their wines in several years, and their conversation piqued my interest in the brand. It turns out that Pares Baltà wines are a significant part of the portfolio sold by our former staff member, JP Donnelly-Davis. I immediately ordered some samples, expecting to mostly taste their excellent Cavas. To my surprise, Joan produces nearly 50 different wines, many of which are micro-cuvées of grapes the family has cultivated for generations. One standout is this exceptional white, made from a rare mutation called Carignan Blanc.

The Pares Baltà winery is one of the oldest in the Penedès region of Spain, establishing its first vineyard in 1790. Since its inception, this family has planned for the estate to last for generations. The grandfather of the current generation, Joan Cusiné Hill, was born in 1917 and had a family already growing grapes for the local cooperative. He dreamed of making wine under their own label and built their first cellar. He even had the foresight to buy land considered inhospitable to grapevines due to salt in the soil. Planting pine trees on this land, which absorb sodium, he later harvested them to fund the planting of more vineyards. Today, that area is considered some of their prime vineyard land.

Joan Cusiné Hill worked well into his 80s, overseeing the vineyards until he passed the torch to his son, Joan Cusiné Cusiné, in the 1980s. It was this Joan who oversaw the creation of their most popular wine, Blanc de Pacs, a dry table wine that remains their most popular non-sparkling wine today. During this period, the winery also shifted to organic, and later, biodynamic certification. Today, the winery is run by his sons, Joan and Josep, but the real contributions are made by their wives, Marta and Maria Elena. They have pushed beyond organic farming to include low-intervention practices in the winery, including many cuvées with no added sulfur. In total, they produce more than 50 wines most years, including the Microcuvée tier, where our featured wine can be found.

Considering the next generation, the family consistently focuses on the future of their wines. With the existential threat of climate change, they have begun experimenting with new varieties suitable for the region, which thankfully allows for such plantings. This cuvée, of which 2002 bottles were produced, is made from the rare mutation of Carignan Blanc. There are only 800 acres of this grape planted worldwide, most in the Languedoc region of France, with the majority of the Spanish plantings found in the Pares Baltà vineyards. Carignan is an excellent variety for extreme growing conditions because it is heat and drought tolerant. The white mutation shares these attributes.

For this planting, the vines are so old that there are no records of when they were planted; they are at least 100 years old. They are planted on limestone soils high in the Pyrenees mountains and are farmed using certified organic practices. Marta ferments the wine in three distinct ways: one-third in glass demijohns stored outside, one-third in an older French oak barrel, and one-third in stainless steel with lees contact but no stirring. No sulfur is added to this wine, even at bottling.

When serving, allow this wine to warm to cellar temperature and decant for half an hour. The nose is incredibly complex, with notes of beeswax, bruised apple, tangerine peel, chamomile, lemongrass, and fennel seed. It is dry but also possesses a nice richness for a moment, before intense minerality shoots like a lightning bolt through the wine. What I find most remarkable is that this wine shows no signs of oxidation, which is usually apparent in those bottled sin sulfitos (without sulfur). Serve it with grilled salmon brushed with lemon and olive oil, or a seafood risotto.

Artifice Viduenos Blanco 2021 | \$55

In the world of wine, those from the Canary Islands are enjoying a moment now, yet for most of the 20th century, they were nearly impossible to find unless you were drinking on the archipelago. Geography, politics, and the usual collection of European maladies have affected this region for more than a century, but a young and dynamic group of winemakers is making significant waves, and their incredibly distinctive wines are worth discovering.

The history of vineyards on the Canary Islands dates back to 1402 or 1406, depending on whose account you follow. Like Madeira, the Canary Islands quickly became a major restocking point for adventurers heading to the New World, who, of course, needed wine. For much of the next three hundred years, the wine trade of the Canary Islands flourished, with the sweet Malvasia wines achieving particular success in England. However, in the 1700s, England passed heavy taxation laws on these wines, diminishing demand. To add to the challenges, a volcanic eruption in the mid-1700s buried the port of Tenerife. Moreover, phylloxera appeared in the late 1800s, wiping out what little wine business remained. The region continued to produce small amounts of wine for local consumption, but for most of the 20th century, these wines were nowhere to be found outside the region.

In the early 21st century, a renaissance began, with young local winemakers recognizing the unique potential of wines from the Canaries. Thanks to rich, young volcanic soils, the wines offer a complex bouquet that reflects the extreme growing conditions. Many began seeking out old vines, often abandoned for decades, in an effort to define the region through historical varieties. One of the early adopters is our featured winery, Artifice, and its dynamic founder, Borja Pérez.

Artifice is Borja Pérez's label. A native of Tenerife, he left to travel the world before returning home. Interestingly, he was either a race car driver or a mechanic before taking over his family winery on the island after retirement. Although I found several conflicting sources, the consistent point is that he is unafraid to take on a challenge. What Pérez inherited was typical of the Canary Island vineyards at the time: a mix of classic and international varieties, poorly maintained or dying vines, and little market for the wine. His timing was fortuitous; other young producers across the islands recognized the same potential and began restoring their vineyards simultaneously. While not mandated by law, the vast majority work with organic practices, nurturing the old, sick vines back to health.

A great example is this unique blend by Pérez, from the Ycoden-Daute-Isora DOP, rooted in ashy, rocky volcanic soils that average 2400 feet and climb to nearly 4000 feet above sea level. This blend features many old varieties: Albillo, Gual, Marmajuelo, Listán Blanco, and Malvasia Blanca from several small sites. Fermentation occurs in 500L French oak barrels, followed by eight months of aging in large foudres on the lees. You absolutely must decant this wine for half an hour before serving. The volcanic soils, grape varieties, and winemaking process encourage reduction, a condition where the wines retain sulfur compounds created during fermentation. Oxygen breaks these bonds and allows the wine to open up. After appropriate breathing, this wine delivers a sultry nose of magnolia blossom, lantana, green apple, beeswax, wood smoke, and gunflint. On the palate, it is dry and exudes a rich, savory quality, with undertones of wild mushroom, wood smoke, and sea salt that persist into the finish. Pair this with a dish of clams and sausage, or pasta with smoked salmon and cream.