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JUST CALIFORNIAN?
JUST ITALIAN?
HOW ABOUT A
COMBINATION?

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\$29.50/month, a red and a white
Winemaker Series –
\$59.50/month, 2 reserve reds
Artisan red–Winemaker red –
\$46/month

ITALIAN WINES

Artisan Series –
\$32/month, a red and a white
Winemaker Series –
\$62/month, 2 reserve reds
Collector Series –
\$112/month, 2 collectable reds
Artisan red–Winemaker red –
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Winemaker red–Collector red –
\$87/month

CALIFORNIA–ITALIAN COMBINATIONS

CA Artisan red–IT Artisan red –
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CA Artisan white–IT Artisan white–
\$29.50/month
CA Winemaker–IT Winemaker –
\$62/month
Alternate CA & IT Artisan Series –
\$29.50/\$32/month
Alternate CA & IT Winemaker Series–
\$59.50/\$62/month

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You can also receive more than two bottles per month. California sales tax is included. Shipping is extra.

ing-down and mixing the solids that rise to the surface during fermentation. With the whites, we ferment in barrel after pressing and then age them sur lees for long periods, without a lot of racking from barrel to barrel, basically letting the grapes and the wine itself express the terroir, the particular place where the fruit was grown.”

Over-the-top alcohol

Because much of the market likes rich, fruity wine, he says that many winemakers will pick the fruit after it becomes super ripe, but at that point it will be high in alcohol, too high for wine, which is taxed at a higher rate after 14%. To reduce the alcohol content, winemakers can spin the wine in a conal apparatus, which separates its parts so that surplus alcohol can be extracted. They might also do a lot of filtration, both techniques that can easily be described as violent and that eliminate nuances and diminish the layers of flavor that we expect from premium wine. “I would filter a wine if I thought it was going to make better wine, but I try to make better wine in the beginning. A good reason to filter would be if you were making a wine that was non-malolactic, [a secondary fermentation which essentially diminishes the acid]. You’d need to filter it so that you remove any bacteria that could

start that malolactic process in the bottle. That would be one smart reason to filter. Another thing would be if the wine just wasn’t clear. But some people would argue that you don’t filter even then. I think you need to put a clear wine in the bottle, and yet some high-end producers don’t filter even in that scenario. I prefer to do a diligent racking from one barrel to another so that you very carefully take the clean wine off the top rather than bringing the lees [the solids] with it and then filtering the wine. That’s for a more mass-produced style of wine.”

When fruit comes from a good vineyard and is then treated simply and gently during the winemaking process to preserve its uniqueness, the end result in the wine is that its flavors should reflect the place where the fruit developed. “To me, what makes wine so interesting and enjoyable is that it demands an intellectual process as well as a sensory one. In other words, I want to see lots of layers of flavors going on in my Pinot Noir. I want it to be sexy, for lack of a better term. You can smell the wine in the glass, and maybe you get one thing. May-

be you smell cinnamon and spice and earth, and then if you wait a few seconds and come back to it. Then you get cherry cola and citrus, so that there are many things going on that will come out of the glass over time.” ■

“I would filter a wine if I thought it was going to make better wine, but I try to make better wine in the beginning.”

—Gary Burk

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- Italian Artisan Series \$32/mo.
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Winery of the Month



From Vegies to Vines Costa de Oro Winery

Stories abound of physicians, bankers, and business people, recycling themselves as vintners. Why they make this choice is anyone’s guess, probably more about spending their money than making more of it. Having made fortunes in cities inside of windowless offices, they feel the lure of the vineyard, not only its tactile, visual reality with an outdoor lifestyle close to nature, but also the glamour of the wine business with its tendency to make a particular winery a very visible, public extension of its owner. But Gary Burk’s story is about a row-crop farmer turned vintner for a practical reason. Since 1978, Gary’s family has owned Gold Coast Farms, 600 acres of farmland in the Santa Maria Valley, planted to row crops, such as broccoli, spinach, strawberries, and herbs. But the soils at one particular 30-acre site, called Fulgar’s Bluff, were too poor for vegetables but perfect for winegrapes. So in 1989, they planted 30 acres of vines, whose fruit happens to produce the number one finished agricultural product in California even though row crops are certainly important in the marketplace. So here’s a story that makes both dollars and sense. ➤



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May 2004

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Despite expert advice, Gary says that they didn't know what they were getting into. "My father had a golfing buddy, Dale Hampton, who was one of the founding father's of grape growing around here, and he was always telling my father that it would be great ground for grapes." Farmers need rich soil for vegetables because they want high yields. If grape vines are planted in rich soil, they grow leafy canopy and don't put their energy into the fruit. So after repeated failures with vegetables on that particular part of their land, the family decided to plant vines. "Once we made the decision to plant grapes, what made the most sense was Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, because everyone that we had experience with and respect for was telling us that these were the right grapes for the area. But

we did it blindly, not really knowing the challenges of Pinot Noir. In the end, it was the right choice. But we had a learning curve. Grape growing is very different than vegetable production."

Learning the hard way

Gary's brother-in-law is Chef Rick, known in Santa Maria and Santa Inez for his fusion restaurants, specializing in a mix of Cajun, Creole, Mexican, and Southwestern cuisine. "If he makes something that he's not satisfied with, he knows it in 20 minutes and can start over. But making wine is a one, two, even three to five year learning experience before you see how a wine develops and how it ages in the bottle." Gary had learned winemaking from Jim Clendenen at Au Bon Climat, a highly respected winemaker, especially with Pinot Noir. So Gary was well prepared to make wine, but what he hadn't anticipated was how sensitive Pinot Noir was to grow. "There are other varieties that are more bullet proof than Pinot. You can't make mistakes with the vines and expect it not to show up in the wine. In the beginning, we didn't have a clue about things like yield, canopy management, leaf pulling, watering, fertilizing, and timing issues on all those aspects. What I learned very quickly was that the quality of the grapes coming out of the vineyards had everything to do with the wine, which means your farming better be really good if you want to make really good wine.

That's when I realized that we had



We produce a sort of feminine style Pinot Noir. —Gary Burk, owner of Costa de Oro

to fine-tune what we were doing in the vineyard. It wasn't until the 1998 vintage that we really started to hit the mark. The '94, '95, '96, '97 vintages were all marketable wines. We sold them and did just fine. But I felt really proud of what I was doing with the 1998 vintage, and from then on."

No poison allowed

In addition to what Gary calls fine tuning, he has had to think about implementing sustainable agricultural practices, which have become important to consumers and growers alike. The San Francisco Wine Institute, the California trade association for wineries, has recently published a thick manual of sustainable agricultural practices to maintain soil fertility and control weeds and pests yet at the same time do so with methods that retain the health and vigor of the soils and water supply and protect workers and ultimately consumers from toxic substances that have become the mainstay of so-called modern agriculture since World War II. "When we originally planted the vineyard, the organic movement hadn't taken off,

but certainly today everything has moved to sustainable. We're not organic, but with that said, we are very mindful of what we're putting in the vineyard. Other options have developed, different farming techniques to take care of weeds on the berm, for example. There are different tilling techniques rather than just spraying all the time. What's interesting to me is that you go out into the world of sales and marketing your finished product, your wine, and you have buyers, for instance Whole Foods Market, asking if your product is sustainable, because they're interested in the whole process. No only are we mindful of doing what's right, we can also use it as a marketing tool."

Notes of cola, orange peel, & citrus

After 15 years, the vineyard is fully mature and producing fruit with a particular flavor profile. The family originally planted the vineyard with the traditional California Martini clone of Pinot Noir, which Gary feels has a huge impact on wine flavors. "We produce a sort of feminine style Pinot Noir. It's not a big, huge fruit-bomb style, because we can't make that with the Martini clone. What we try to do is more elegant, refined, feminine, aromatically driven, and texturally driven. Those are the things that we can highlight with the Martini clone. And then we have flavor profiles typical of the Santa Maria Valley,

meaning that we see some notes of cola and orange peel or citrus blossom along with classic cherry, berry flavors. And I think that also in our area and in our vineyard, we get some real meaty character. Again it's that Martini clone, where you get earthiness and spiciness, kind of an allspice character, whereas the Bien Nacido Vineyard [the most prestigious in the area] will get more white pepper, hard spice. In some of the newer vineyards, Deerberg

Vineyard and Oliveras, they've planted the Dijon clone, so those tend to be more fruit oriented.

Ours tends to be more spice oriented. If you had them side-by-side, and you weren't familiar with the region, you would probably think they were similar. But if you're familiar with the region, you can get into some of these sub flavors that come from different vineyards. But with that said, we have planted 2.5 acres with the Dijon 115 and 777 clones that we're just starting to get fruit from. So they're different from the orig-

inal planting. We'll see what they produce."

Expressing terroir

Given a mature vineyard whose fruit has a specific flavor profile, which of course varies from vintage to vintage with the weather, the question then becomes how the winemaker can preserve the distinctiveness of the fruit. At a time when technology is offering many options that can manipulate results, Gary

chose traditional methods that preserve the integrity of the fruit, preserving the flavor nuances that the vineyard produces. "What I learned at Au Bon Climat was much more risk taking in the style of wine-making, doing things not to make

"What I learned at Au Bon Climat was much more risk taking in the style of wine-making, doing things not to make just clean, correct wine but making wine that has character and style."

—Gary Burk

just clean, correct wine but making wine that has character and style. So we don't do a lot of intervention in the winemaking process, trying not to manipulate the grapes too much, or the wine too much. Basically with the reds, we get the grapes in, manually punch-

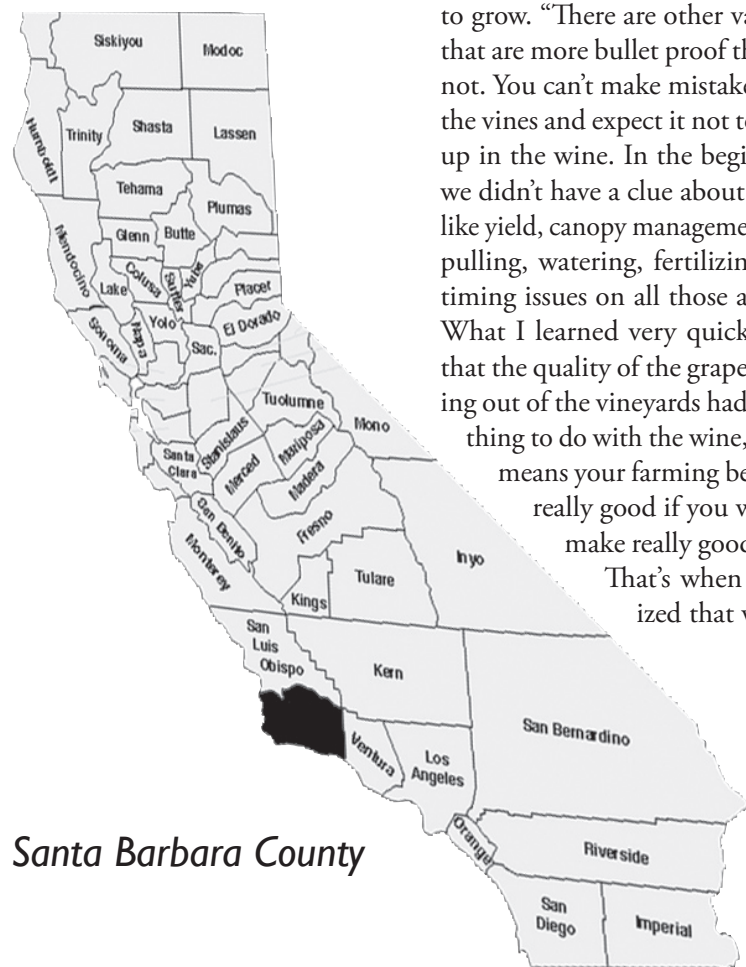
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