

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

Understanding the advantages of unusual wines. More Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay doesn't resonate in a marketplace that is saturated with these wines.

But making unusual wines is not a recipe for success in itself. They must be delicious as well. Bill's quest for quality has not been quick or easy, nor does it ever cease. What goes into the bottle reflects not only efforts in the cellar but also in the vineyard, whether the grape varietal is suitable to the particular piece of ground where it is planted and how the vineyard is managed. Many grape growers have planted vineyards where none have existed so that they have had to guess which grape varieties would prosper on their property. Only experience gives that answer, which at times can be cruel. Bad weather and disease infestations can also be catalysts for change. In the late 1980s and 90s, the phylloxera epidemic destroyed countless acres of vineyards and forced growers to replant and re-evaluate what they were growing and how they were growing it. The result of these challenges and others is more choice and better quality for consumers. Bill Mosby has happily engaged with these issues without ever resorting to easy answers. They've given him the opportunity to create and innovate, which he cherishes.

When Bill first purchased his property in 1971, he was one of five grape growers in Santa Barbara County. They'd meet once a month and try to entice someone, anyone, to build a winery so that they could sell their grapes and begin to build a reputation for their locality. No luck. "So we did what we had to do. We started our own wineries." Today there are more than 100 growers in the area. "They're growing Cabernet way to the east up in the hills and Pinot Noir far to the west near the ocean, and Syrah and Chardonnay everywhere in between all over in every canyon on every hill." Bill remembers that when he first purchased the property, he didn't know what to grow. Because he was drawn to Pinot Noir, he

planted some but couldn't obtain the quality that he wanted. "Just a little over the hill in Santa Rita, a matter of a few hundred yards, they grow wonderful Pinot, but I had to pull mine out. You just learn by experience." And he's still learning. "I've got a Nebbiolo vineyard that has been a failure so far. I've been hoping for about three different harvests to get the Nebbiolo that I could be proud of. Maybe this year I'll have it. We'll see. Nebbiolo and Cortese, Piemontese grapes in general, are rough and tough to grow."

Bill has recently learned not to pull leaves on the south side of the vines. Last year, some of his grapes were sunburned. Enough sunlight must penetrate the leaves to create pigment and flavor in the grape bunches, but too much damages the fruit. "The sun burns out the color, the pigment. It destroys the skin on the grape, and the quality of the fruit. But most of all, the flavor and the color are bad." He's also learned that timing is extremely important, for example removing a long cane in early spring so that later lateral leaves will grow. If the removal occurs too late, laterals won't grow to their maximum. Since photosynthesis takes place in the leaves, they are in large part responsible for forming the sugars that then migrate to the fruit. Such fine tuning can make the difference between superior grapes and just adequate ones, which then reverberates in the wine.

Winemaking itself obviously has an impact on quality, and proper equipment can be most useful. "We're a small winery, but I have equipment that will match larger wineries," Bill says. "It also helps me, a one man crew, to do the work. After I crushed the grapes, I used to move the juice through a hose that I had to haul up into the tank. Now I just hook it below and the juice goes up through a curved stainless steel pipe and drops down gently into a stainless steel tank. Little things like that throughout the winery help out."

Even though American wine making equip-

ment is oriented toward large wineries, Bill wanted to buy from American manufacturers instead of Europeans because they were close, and in the event of a problem, he could get the equipment repaired quickly. "But I had something go wrong, and the guy on the phone didn't even know what I was talking about." Now he buys from Italian companies, which he says cater to small wineries since small producers abound in Europe. If something goes wrong, Bill puts the machinery on a plane and has it back in good working order within three days. "They're real artisans when it comes to stainless steel. When you look at the workmanship, you can see that they're great mechanics." His next upgrade, "before the dollar goes to pot completely," will be a new Italian press that will press the grapes without any exposure to air so that the fruit doesn't oxidize. "The juice from white wine that goes through a regular press looks brown like cider, and the one that is pressed with no oxygen contact has a beautiful light green color. I can see that it's going to be a big improvement. My excuse for getting it is for the whites, but I'll probably use it for whites and reds both."

The first time that I met Bill Mosby many years ago was on an early Friday evening. His staff of about six people gathered around a butcher block table in the winery kitchen. Bill was slicing prosciutto, cheeses, and bread that everyone was enjoying as they tasted wines. The feeling in the room was good-humored and affectionate but with an undertone of seriousness. "We still do that every Friday," Bill says. "We get together and try new wines. We have to know what other winemakers are doing. We button up everything and come into the kitchen, and everyone has a bottle to share, something they heard about that they want to try. It's a great learning experience. I bring my wines out too and want a real honest critique. My people are going to have to sell them." In addition to staff, Bill has a friend, a Doctor in Agronomy at the University of Torino, who visits once a year to give vineyard advice. "I'm always upgrading and



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Almost eighty years old and in the wine business for 40 of them, Bill Mosby has been the right man for the times. During his career, the business has undergone relentless change, which was the very reason that Bill embraced it. He could have continued to be a dentist but found the profession much less dynamic than enology and viticulture. After all, there are only so many ways to repair a tooth. Forty years ago, California wines were likely to be mass produced blends, made by a few giant wineries. Today in California, there are over 3,000 wineries operating in more than 200 appellations that continue to proliferate. Most of these wineries are small. Driven by both domestic and global competition, they employ every means possible to produce progressively better wine or die. The Mosby estate includes 45 acres and makes just 7,000 cases a year in Buelton, California near Santa Barbara. "We've never wanted to be big," Bill says. "We wouldn't have time to innovate." Learning and innovating is what he loves best, and the quality of his wines continues to escalate.

Years ago, Bill visited Italy and discovered Italian wines. What had been just a vacation became a pivotal experience in his life. "At the time, I was growing regular stuff, Pinot Noir

and Chardonnay, some Riesling, some Traminer. And on the airplane coming back, I began to reminisce about what I'd seen and decided right there that I would start making Italian wines. I'm sure glad I did." Today, he makes the whites Cortese, Moscato, Pinot Grigio, Traminer, and Garganega. He makes a Rosato from Grenache, and makes the reds Dolcetto, Sangiovese, Primitivo, Teroldigo, Sagrantino, and Lagrein. He is the only person in California growing Garganega and Sagrantino.

Because Bill Mosby is making wine from Italian winegrapes, he has a competitive advantage in his own neighborhood and throughout the state. Santa Barbara tasting rooms recommend that their customers visit the Mosby tasting room, because Mosby wines are unlike theirs. And further, he says, "When you look at a store shelf, you see 40 Chardonnays. Try talking the wine buyer into taking one off and putting yours on. It's like 'why'? You don't have a talking point."

The market for Italian grape varietals may have crashed after 9/11 when California winemakers became less adventurous. But more recently in this current competitive wine market, newer and smaller growers and wineries are embracing Bill Mosby's logic and un-

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