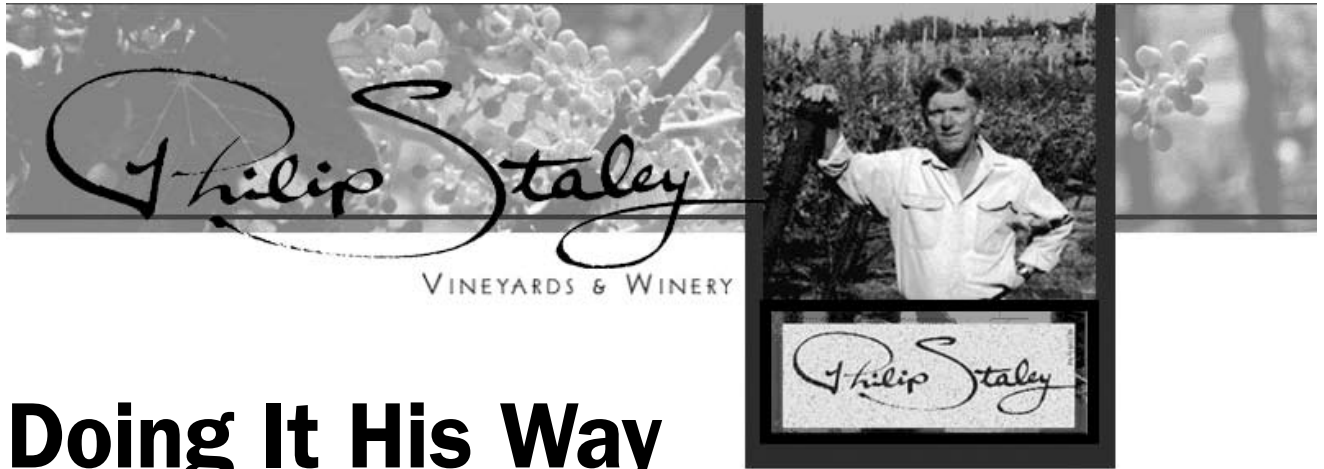




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## Doing It His Way

*Philip Staley Vineyards & Winery*



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After 30 years in the wine business, Philip Staley makes his living exactly the way he wants, something that most of us don't achieve overnight if ever. Part of its charm is that the wine business has many facets, so those who are in it are not likely to be bored. Generally, there's the business of wine, running a company, developing markets and selling the production. Viticulture is the other sector, one of the most complicated but remunerative crops in the entire agricultural spectrum. Wine making is obviously another main aspect of the business, a particular combination of science and art.

Size matters in the formula. Many small winery owners wrestle with all of these complicated segments, but the larger the winery becomes, the more compartmentalized these functions are, with owners becoming mainly administrators. Ninety percent of California wineries produce 40,000 cases or less a year, which constitutes a medium sized winery. At that point, owners are dealing with all parts of the business. Of course, the wine sector has always been specialized, and it's becoming increasingly so. Some businesses just grow grapes; some make wine only; others are support businesses for the industry, and the fragmentation of services goes on. If you're in the wine sector, finding your sweet spot in all of this complication isn't easy. But Philip Staley has found his. "I feel really lucky that I can do what I do for a living."

One of three founding partners of Alderbrook Winery in 1981, Philip Staley saw the winery grow to 40,000 cases during the 13 years that he was the winemaker there. At that time, Americans were still drinking mostly

white wines, and Phil was unable to convince his partners that the winery should be making reds too, specifically the Rhone reds that he loved. In 1988, he purchased his own 21-acre wine estate on a knoll above the Russian River Valley, finally cultivating his dream vines, Syrah, Grenache, and Viognier. By 1999, he was making 5,000 cases and farming his vineyard. At the time referring to Alderbrook, he said, "I don't want to own a big winery anymore. I want to work only with varieties that I like. I want to either control the vineyard by owning and farming it or work with a grower who will farm to my specifications. And I want to have very personal contact with my wines. I don't want to be an executive winemaker... I certainly would have been making a whole lot more money in this business back at Alderbrook than I am here. But I'm a whole lot happier now than I was."

Five years ago, he sold the estate, so he no longer owns vineyards. But he still owns his winery in Alexander Valley, which he built and equipped in the early 1990s. Today, he makes 1000 cases for his own label each year. "I've thought about this a lot," he says. "I might go from 1000 cases to 1500 or maybe 2000. But passed that, I'm not going to make anything other than small lots of hand-crafted wines. I may do more varieties if I have more fun doing it, if I want to do it. Making wine is a lot of fun, but it's a lot of work. I don't want to re-create that Alderbrook sort of thing, where we produced thousands of cases. I have no interest in doing that again." Nor did he want to re-create running both a vineyard and a winery together as he had done at his own wine estate.

See **WINERY** back page

## WINERY OF THE MONTH



### WINERY from cover

“Every year, I try something different, something new, something I’ve never done, be it a new variety, which is usually what I do, or an old variety in a different way, approaching it differently. And most of it never gets re-created again. And some of it does, like Tempranillo. I made it the first time on just an absolute lark. I found it fascinating, and now I’m making that wine every year.” In other words, for Philip Staley, it’s not the business of wine that drives him or even growing grapes. It’s the wine making itself. Every winemaker must understand the science because it governs the fundamental process of making wine. But he believes that the artistic part of winemaking is the more challenging and important in terms of whether the winemaker is successful or not. “The scientific part you can learn. The artistic part is the gift that you have, or you don’t.”

Ever since he purchased a fateful case of Rhone wines from a Berkeley, California wine shop in the late 1070s, he’s been a champion especially of Syrah, Grenache, and Viognier, and blends thereof. The market has waxed and waned for these varietals, but since he founded his own wine estate, they’ve always been his staples, regardless of any other enthusiasms like Tempranillo that may have caught his attention. “When I first started making these wines in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we expected that Syrah certainly was going to be the next hot variety. But it floundered. What I’m seeing now is that it does have a following. It’s still not going to sell like a Zinfandel or Cabernet. But many people seek out Syrah, and Viognier has become popular. Certainly in restaurants I’ve seen the tendency in the last five or six years.”

In the Rhone region of France, where these grapes are indigenous, the varietals are usually blended. And Phil finally sees more market acceptance for blended wines than in the

past. “I think Americans are finally getting hold of the concept that you didn’t blend wine to make nothing into something. The blend is greater than the sum of its parts, whatever that adage is. My reds, except for Pinot Noir are all blended wines. My Tempranillo is 13 percent Carinena and 12 percent Garnacha. And my Syrah is always three percent, maybe four, and one or two percent Viognier. That’s what they do in the Rhone because it gives the wine aromas. Grenache will sometimes stand on its own. Sometimes it’ll get a little bit of Syrah, depending on the vintage from year to year. But blending is very common there.”

Although Phil is intrigued by the creative challenge of making fine wine, he insists that he’s not trying to reinvent the wheel. He feels that his expertise has doubled over the 31 years that he’s been a winemaker but that his style has changed very little. “I’m a traditional winemaker. I use old-school European techniques. I’m not trying to be innovative. I’m not trying to make any wine taste like anything other than a traditional wine in a California setting. But I am trying to make that wine as agreeable as it can possibly be.”

Other than his own 1000 cases, which are the finest expression of his craft, Phil also makes wines for other customers, *custom crushing* as it’s called in the wine business, a common practice in bonded wineries now. The customer might own just a wine brand or label rather than an actual winery or vineyard and have its wines made by an existing winery. A grape grower might want to have wines made from his or her own fruit and develop a customer base without incurring the costs of owning an actual winery. A start up might begin by having an existing winery make its wines. Or a larger winery might not have room to try out a new wine program and commission another winery to do the job.

Another common practice for wineries with excess capacity, and many of them have it, Phil rents space to other winemakers who function independently but share the premises and make their own wines there. The capital investment for a functional winery, including equipment is expensive, so renting space in an existing winery is attractive for small-production winemakers. From the viewpoint of the winery, expensive equipment gets more use and produces more income when other winemakers also use it. “A lot of the equipment gets used really very little, some of it only three weeks out of the year.” Another advantage for winemakers working in such an environment is that they can share information and solve winemaking problems that may arise. So Phil’s winery is a mini wine college with winemakers working independently but interacting a lot.

Selling his wine is an easy task these days, especially since he makes only 1000 cases. One of five owners of Family Wineries, a tasting room in the Dry Creek Valley, Phil sells most of his wines there at the tasting room directly to customers who visit. The rest he sells to Northern California Restaurants. So he’s not traveling throughout the country, working with out-of-state sales people, a task that soon gets old as anyone knows who travels regularly for business reasons. Other than California, he markets his wines in only two other states, Montana and Idaho. “I’m a fly fisherman and visit there on a regular basis, so that I can have a vacation and do a little business at the same time.”

So Philip Staley is now the winemaker he’s always wanted to be, devoting most of his time to winemaking and making only the wines that he chooses, but at the same time owning his own business. “I feel very, very fortunate,” he says gratefully.

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