

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

but I think that gets to the core of who they are.” They’re adventurous, and unless they’re dramatically impressed, they’ll go on to another wine. Nor are they motivated by scores. “If I were to say that our wine got a 94 in Wine Spectator, they’d probably say, ‘I need to go now, but I’ll tell my father.’” But Pietro adds that they like what is novel and interesting, and without them, he wouldn’t be producing his newest wines, like Albarino, nor would there be so much Gruner Veldliner entering the U.S now.

Rosa d’Oro specializes primarily in Italian winegrape varietals although Pietro and his father are interested in other unusual grapes that might be growing in Lake County. Pietro notes that younger chefs who have opened new restaurants during this recession are highly specialized while their wine lists are more diverse and encourage wines like his. The San Francisco Chronicle recently gave a Three-Star review to a new restaurant in Napa that provides pizza and house-cured meats exclusively. While restaurants are becoming more specialized, wine lists are becoming more diverse. “Who knows how this will shake out in the future, but right now, it’s a good thing. Without it, our winery would be more or less out of business in this recession if it were dependent on the older generation of restaurants that try to appeal to everyone with a single menu and offer more conventional wines. But he observes that the wine business like others is cyclical and that in another ten years Napa Cabernet could again be a top seller, “but maybe at a lower price point.” Chardonnay is enjoying a resurgence of interest, but this time as a leaner wine, fermented in stainless tanks. Rhone varietals have a permanent place in California now, along with unique Southern Italian varietals like Negro Amaro. Pietro is planting this grape as are others. “That interest helps out everybody instead

of the tired smoking jacket kind of thing that wines were becoming.”

Lake County now hosts 33 bonded wineries, but the County has not yet defined itself other than that Cabernet has been unsuccessful whereas Sauvignon Blanc has done extremely well. Clear Lake, the largest lake in California, has a strong cooling effect on the climate as does the Mayacamas Mountain range, and during the summer, temperatures can drop as much as 50 degrees at night. Soils are typically volcanic. According to a study made by the University of California, Davis, Lake County wineries have the lowest pesticide and fungicide use in California because the dry climate prevents pest and mold pressures.

If Lake County’s vineyard focus is undefined, its wineries need to establish identities of their own. Pietro is thinking that he might like his wines to reflect the vintage, a concept that is diametrically opposite to what most wineries want, which is consistency from year to year regardless of weather conditions. In other words, if a vintage is hot and dry, the wines will be riper with less acid. Instead of adding acid to disguise the effect that the weather had on the fruit and subsequent wine, Pietro is thinking that vintage differences from year to year could be interesting to his customers and perhaps should not be obscured by winemaking interventions. “As long as the winemaking is good, and we handle it properly, there shouldn’t ever be a wine that is below standard quality. Each wine would have interest of its own relative to that grape.”

Vintage variation is highly important almost everywhere in the wine producing world, except in California, he points out. Consistent product is a given in California because not only is weather favorable from year to year but also California winemakers have no regulation that prevents them from adding acids or tannins to

make up for what the weather may not have provided. This is not true in most European countries where winemaking is regulated. For example, in order for Italian wines to exhibit the DOCG quality designation on labels, the wine must contain certain grapes from a certain area, grown in a specific way, and aged for a certain amount of time, among other mandates. The wines undergo chemical analysis and are tasted by a board. Of course, any winery that does not want to submit to the process, need not. This regulatory system has increased wine quality dramatically throughout Italy as it has in other European countries which have similar regulations. Pietro comments that never in his experience with selling Rosa d’Oro wines has any customer asked if one vintage were better than another, when in fact, Lake County can experience dramatic weather swings from year to year.

“It’s an abstract notion, and it may not even be desirable,” he admits. “Ideally, we’re selling to a similar group of customers. We’d like them to be able to track our wines from year to year.” The winery makes just 2000 cases a year now and sells most of its wines from the tasting room, so vintage variations could be interesting to customers just as single vineyard designations are considered interesting. A given winery in Dry Creek might produce six different Pinot Noir wines, harvested from six different vineyards. Some consumers find the characteristics of a particular vineyard worth their attention.

Finally though, Pietro looks forward to making great wine. “Step by step, day by day, we’ll figure that out. A lot of it goes back to the vineyard. The next step for us is getting the grapes to be as transparent as they should be, establishing some sort of idea of what our *terroir*, for lack of a better word, what that actually looks like. Nobody knows what *terroir* means, but you know when you taste it. That’s part of the mystery.”



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California

Winery of the Month



Pietro Buttitta: Grapes on His Mind

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When Pietro Buttitta met his wife nine years ago and was thinking about the rest of his life, he told her that he had this weird relationship with grapes that he couldn’t really explain. He wasn’t a big wine drinker or a big drinker of any sort, he said, but he knew that destiny would drive him toward wine country at some point. At the time, he was studying philosophy at Portland State University in Oregon but quit before graduating and enrolled in the Cordon Bleu culinary school while working in restaurants at night. His food education would serve him well in his future with wine.

Pietro had grown up on the family ranch in Sonoma County where his father, Nick Buttitta, grew grapes for local wineries. After the family sold the property, Nick developed his own wine estate in Lake County above Napa. In 2008, Pietro joined his father and began working in the vineyards and making wine. At 37 years-old, Pietro Buttitta now has grapes on his mind full time, which he always knew would happen. Nick says that he and Pietro “go head to head sometimes.” No surprise there. Pietro Buttitta is a keen observer of both the big picture and the small one, of historical and emerging food and wine trends, of grape growing and winemaking practice, and of Lake County viticulture. Now a sommelier, he has a quiet intensity that selects and tracks wine issues, and he has a million ideas that he’s

impatient to implement. “There are times when I push too hard. I’m very bad with patience. I think it’s my number one problem.”

Wine consumption is undergoing a change, Pietro notices, as younger people, especially the Millennial generation, impact the market place in a different way than their parents, the Baby Boomers. The Millennials exercise more eclectic food choices, especially ethnic foods. So the steak and the big Napa Cab paradigm is giving way to lighter Italian or Spanish reds with ethnic foods. “The playing field is a lot wider these days.” Given the amount of affordable, unique, and interesting wines and the range of foods that are available in multi-cultural venues from restaurants to farmers’ markets, wine and food pairings are changing. “It’s not that the rules are out the window, but there’s a lot more wiggle room to play.” Pietro points out that over the last 12 years, ethnically oriented cookbooks have increased sales by 1400%. Master Sommelier Alpana Singh’s recent cookbook pairs Rieslings with steak, he says. “Instead of working the similarities between food and wine, she’s working the counter points and contrasts effectively.”

But the Millennials are a dicey demographic, Pietro says. They have no brand loyalty, and that can be problematic for wineries. Unlike Generation X, “It’s beyond me that they got to name themselves because they didn’t like ‘Y,’

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