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California

*Winery of the Month*



## Traditional California Wines: The New Challenge

*Terre Rouge Easton*



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Twenty five years ago, Bill Easton wandered away from his wine shop in Berkeley, California and purchased 40-acres of land in Amador County in the foothills of the towering Sierra Nevada Mountains. In those days, Rhone varietals were developing a cult following, led by Randall Graham and his band of Rhone Rangers, who were promoting Syrah, Mourvedre, and Viognier among other varietals from Southern France. Bill Easton was part of this band of winemakers, convinced that these new California wines would take over the Foothill counties if not the greater U.S. market. But a funny thing happened along the road to maturity. Bill Easton developed a respect for traditional California varieties, especially Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sauvignon Blanc, so much so that today his production divides equally between the two groups of wines, the Rhones under the Terre Rouge label and traditional varieties under the Easton label.

Although the home vineyard is located in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley, Bill Easton grows grapes in three other Sierra Foothill counties as well, Placer, El Dorado, and Calaveras. He makes thirty different wines in small lots, including seven Syrahs and four Zinfandels. Over time, he has learned that

the red volcanic soils of his mountain wine estate, so similar to the ones he had seen during visits to the Rhone, were also hospitable to the varietals that had been planted in various places in California 50 to 100 years earlier. In other words, this large region, 250 miles long and 50 miles wide, covering 2.6 million acres in eight separate counties grouped together as the Sierra Foothills, was sufficiently diverse that it couldn't be narrowly defined by any particular group of wines. Its soils are in fact similar to those in the mountain appellations above Napa Valley on Mount Veeder and Howell Mountain.

Zinfandel was the heritage vine of the Foothills. It had been planted initially by the immigrant hoards who rushed there when gold was discovered in 1848 at Sutter's Mill near Coloma. "But a lot of people quickly realized that gold wasn't the easiest thing to work with and fell back on occupational paths that they had when they were living in Europe," Bill says. Growing vines and making wine was one of them. Zinfandel appealed because its lighter tannins allowed people to take it from the tank to the table. It didn't require barrel aging to be palatable.

Nearby Sutter Creek is just one of the his-

See WINERY back page

# WINERY OF THE MONTH



## WINERY from cover

toric towns that grew out of the gold mining boom, a Victorian village with elevated boardwalks, where gold dazzled the minds of the population, and law was an impressionistic guide that was sometimes enforced by those with an innate sense of justice and at other times by self-interested bullies. Today, tourists wander the streets, imagining the past, enjoying fine restaurants, and tasting delicious wine.

This singular landscape is different from coastal wine regions, whose breezes and fog blow in from the

ocean to cool down the growing season so that grapes ripen slowly enough to develop complex flavors. Here, cool air drifts down from the mountains at night to perform the same func-

tion. "As the crow flies, we're 50 miles from the Sierra Crest, which is at 10,000 feet. Our soils warm up much later in the spring than coastal soils, so our vines bud out much later. We have a different arc to the whole grape growing season." Consequently, Foothill wines differ from coastal wines although Bill points out, "It's hard to generalize about coastal areas because there are a lot of differences between wines that grow there. But I think our wines generally have more intensity, more minerality. The whites have definitely more minerality, a more European flavor profile, not just fruit driven flavors. We have other layers of complexity" Bill says, that come in part from stony mountain soils and vineyard sites as high as 3200 feet.

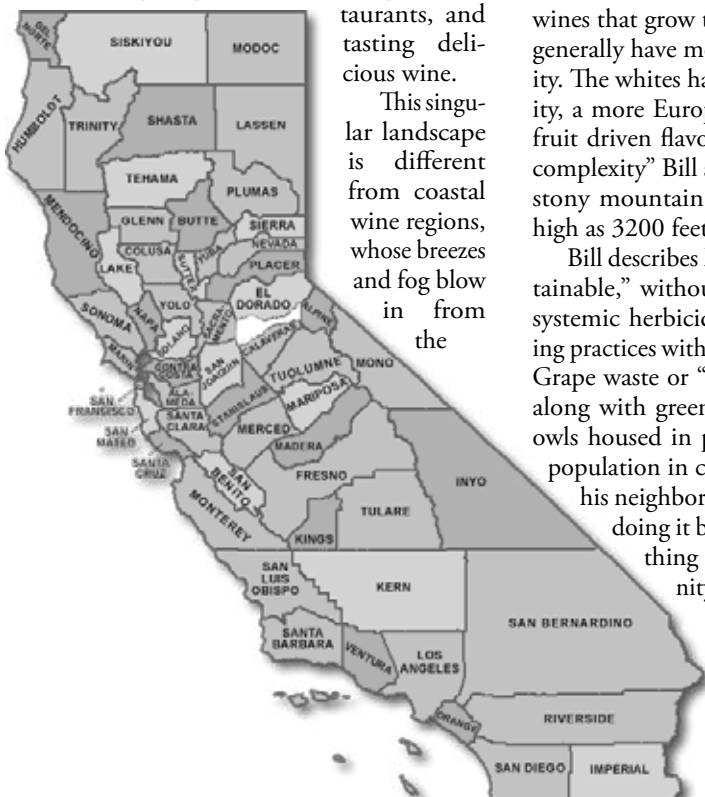
Bill describes his farming methods as "sustainable," without commercial fertilizers or systemic herbicides, basically organic farming practices without the organic certification. Grape waste or "pumice" fertilizes vineyards along with green waste compost, and barn owls housed in pole boxes keep the rodent population in check. Bill says that many of his neighbors are doing the same. "We're doing it because we think it's the right thing to do to be a good community partner growing grapes, but we also think that we make better wine from fruit that's grown this way, because there's better flavor in the fruit."

Just as Bill pursues excellence in his vineyard practices, he does the same in the winery. He buys only the best French oak barrels for his wines even though American oak barrels are much less expensive. Even some Europeans are using American coo-

perage. He also ages wine at the winery for as long as he thinks it requires to show its best even though holding back wine is equivalent to holding back income, something most wineries are not willing to do.

Proudly, Bill claims that 90 percent of the winery's electrical power to run pumps, presses, and cooling units, and to maintain temperatures in the cellar is provided by solar panels. His wine bottles are manufactured using at least 25 percent cullet, the name for ground up recycled glass. He sends all of his wine bottles from the tasting room to Amador County's waste transfer station. They are then shipped to Anheiser-Busch and ground into cullet to make beer bottles. Bill was one of the first to implement such practices, and others in the Foothills are following.

After 25 years in the Sierra Foothills, Bill Easton's Terre Rouge is the iconic winery of the region, specializing in the Rhone varietals that Bill knew would be happily at home there just as Zinfandel was. But the traditional California wines under the Easton label point to a future for Bordeaux varieties that is as yet undefined. Bill is making beautiful Cabernet Sauvignon, and as others move into the area and continue to experiment in different locations at different altitudes with different soils, the future for Bordeaux varieties, especially for Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot will define itself more completely. Pinot Noir is now making an appearance in the area. At this time, there are 300 wineries in Foothill counties exploring the potential of the region. "We wanted to make our wine in the Sierra Nevada Foothills because we felt that it was one of the most expressive places in the world to make wine, comparable to a lot of the best European appellations."



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