

## REGION OF THE MONTH

### WINERY from cover

few areas like that." He says that Burgundy, France, where the best Pinot Noir in the world is grown is also experiencing warming trends. "If you look at the harvests in Burgundy, they're earlier and much hotter, and the grapes there are much riper than they've ever been. French winemakers are calling California winemakers and asking how the heck do you deal with this very ripe fruit. They've never had that problem." If warming persists, the future for Pinot Noir cultivation may well be in states other than California, whereas warmer climate varieties like Merlot and Cabernet will continue to flourish. In agricultural circles, Bill says, climate change is on everybody's mind.

Bill Arbios is the fifth generation of his family to be farming in California but in 1973 the first to graduate from the University of California, Davis in Fermentation Sciences and Bacteriology. Bill and his wife Susan started the winery in 1993, and their prices have remained nearly the same since then. "I don't like to take advantage of people. I've always wanted to be fair and honest. That's just who I am. I felt that if I put out a very high quality product at a fair price, people would remember that. And I think they do. My wines are well received in very high end restaurants. It's all working very well." But not so for his cult-wine compatriots, restaurant owners tell him. During the best of times, restaurants could obtain only one or two bottles of cult wines like Screaming Eagle, Harlan, or Araujo. Now they can have as much as they want, and if they buy a full case, they get one free. "It's just a different world," Bill says, and the consumer benefits. "The pressure to make interesting wines more affordable is going to be good for everybody."

Under the Arbios label, Bill makes 2000 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon from his Pine Mountain vineyard, and he buys grapes for another 5000 cases of wine under his Praxis label, the word *praxis* coming from the Greek meaning "prac-

tice," according to Susan Arbios, an archeologist. She explains that Praxis was also an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy relating to the unattainable search for perfection, in this sense now most commonly used to refer to a doctor or lawyer's "practice." For Bill, Praxis wines allow him to play, to keep his creative impulses honed, making different wines with diverse styles from different vineyards. How he came to make Lagrein, a 14<sup>th</sup> Century cross between Pinot Noir and Teroldigo from Alto Adige in northeastern Italy, best describes his Praxis label.

Bill and Susan traveled to Bolzano, Italy for a visit with Utzi, the Iceman, Europe's oldest mummy from about 3300 BC, housed in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology. Bill says that seeing the Iceman was a reverential experience, "like being in church." Visitors see the artifacts that were found with him, his medical kit, hunting tools, weapons, his clothing, including his winter shoes. "After 5000 years in a chunk of ice, you can still see his tattoos," Bill says. "He had a number of diseases and parasites, and he had tattoos that they believe lined up with acupuncture sites to relieve those problems.... It's fascinating."

For Bill, nearly as fascinating as the Iceman was the local wine. "I fell in love with Lagrein, pretty much bought everything they had, drank it on the spot, and said 'Where has this been all my life?'" When he returned to California, he found only one Lagrein vineyard in the state, seven miles inland from the coast in Santa Maria. Bill makes over 1000 cases of wine from that vineyard and says that he is probably the largest producer of American Lagrein.

While he's fairly comfortable that his cool Cabernet vineyard on Pine Mountain will avoid the negative impact of higher temperatures, he's not so sure about the vineyards where he buys grapes for the Praxis label. He says that he selects vineyards that have a perfect match between grape variety and *terroir*, all of the soil and cli-

matic conditions that exist on a particular site. "But if climate changes, we may have to shift to other areas to find that perfect match again."

In the last eight to ten years, California has been producing wines from much riper fruit which in turn creates wines with a higher alcohol content, but Bill thinks that this style has much less to do with a warming climate than it does with the preferences of Robert Parker, the most influential wine writer in the world, whose scores push wines from obscurity to fame and from marginal sales to overnight depletion. "It's amazing how he can influence the entire style of winemaking. But I really believe that he's very honest in what he does. He doesn't say that this is the way that wine should be. He says that this is what he likes, and what he likes are big, jammy, over-ripe, high alcohol wines. I find that they don't work well with food. I don't like that I have to restrict the number of glasses that I drink because if I have too many, I can't speak English anymore. So I make wine that pleases my sense of what wine should be, which is lighter in alcohol, more balanced. And I don't have a chief financial officer, who says that I've got to get those scores so that we can raise prices and make some money. Now that doesn't mean that everybody likes the style of wine that I make. But people deserve to have viable options. And I think there's a groundswell of interest away from those big high-alcohol, fruity, almost sweet wines."

Not surprisingly, Bill farms organically although the vineyard is not certified. He says that he's trying to farm a little better each year and that if he treats the soil well, the vines will be balanced and will produce the kind of fruit that makes delicious wine. "I have great respect for Mother Nature," he says, "and the right way to do things, the kind way to do things. And I want this piece of land to be in much better shape when I'm done with it than when I got it. That's my attitude."



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## California Winery of the Month



## Deep Roots on a Steep Slope

### Arbios Cellars

Along with every other winemaker in California, Bill Arbios is worried about the impact that the economy may have on his business, but he's also concerned about the effect that changing temperatures might have on his vineyard. "The climate is getting warmer and drier, and grapes have a range in which they're comfortable. When temperatures surpass that range, the grape quality is just not there." But he feels that he has an advantage because his 21-acre Cabernet vineyard is perched on the steep slopes of Pine Mountain at the north end of Sonoma County's Alexander Valley. "It's about six to ten degrees cooler than the valley floor, and that adds up over the ripening season. If the valley is getting hotter and hotter, it might exceed that range where Cabernet makes quality fruit. But I think we have a good chance of remaining in the high quality zone."

The vineyard is located at an elevation of 2000 feet, and the slopes are 30 to 40 degrees. In order to prevent soil from sliding or washing away, Bill was proactive and installed a lot

of sub-soil drainage. "Much like putting in a subdivision, there's drainage everywhere under that vineyard." But instead of the 80 inches of rain that they prepared for, they're getting only 17. "That's a big change, and we don't know if it's one of the normal fluctuations that happen in climate or whether it's a harbinger of bad things to come." Yet vines have deep roots, he points out, so if temperatures get hotter, vines can grow deeper into the soil to search for moisture. But he adds that particular grape varieties mature properly at different temperatures. "For instance, Chardonnay likes a really cool climate, and if the Carneros and the Russian River stop having such a cool climate, Chardonnay from those areas won't be as attractive as it is now."

Pinot Noir also requires a cool climate, and although consumer demand for the wine is extraordinarily high, Bill feels that suitable climate and soils for the varietal are extremely limited in most of California. "Pinot requires very cool areas and soil with a lot of caulk. We have very

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