

MENDOCINO COUNTY

WINERY from cover
ies, tourists, and the businesses that cater to both. Greg is devoted to Mendocino, and apart from his own small vineyard in Potter Valley, he buys only Mendocino grapes for a dizzying number of label themes. Saint Gregory is his first and oldest label and features a French Burgundian theme with Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, and the South African Pinotage, a hybrid that crosses Pinot Noir and Cinsaut. Monte Volpe follows Californian-Italian varieties originally grown in northeast Italy all the way down to Sicily. Enotria features varieties from Italy's Piedmont region, where Greg's grandfather was born, and the Graziano label specializes in old Mendocino varieties like Zinfandel, Petit Sirah, Carignone, and Chenin Blanc.

For 31 years, Greg has been not only making wine but also traveling the country to sell it. He gets face to face with buyers, and he says the experience helps him understand what people want and how they perceive his wines so that he can then make wines that please them. So what do people want? His immediate answer is that they want sweet, heavy, and dark because the marketplace has been flooded with such wines from California and Australia, and this style has educated a younger generation of wine drinkers to expect that profile, which winemakers then continue to make because they feel that consumers want it. Even European winemakers, who are energetically courting enthusiastic U.S. wine drinkers, are adapting their own leaner wines to American palates because as Greg says, "we have one of the largest middle class populations in the world with money to spend on wine." With their own wine consumption falling, Europeans are doing everything they can to please a huge emerging U.S. wine market.

When the comedy "Sideways" hit in 2004, it created a big demand for Pinot Noir, the favorite wine of the fumbling, lead character. Winemakers made as much Pinot Noir as fast as they could to satisfy demand. "The same thing happened to Merlot and Chardonnay. It happened to a lot of

grapes. But wineries made wine that wasn't like the variety it was supposed to be. You taste a lot of Pinot Noir today, and it looks and tastes like Syrah. Most Americans don't even know what Pinot Noir should taste like. Most of them are buying cheap Pinot Noir, and a lot of it is not good.... It's more about selling the wine than it is actually about the wine. It used to be that you made good wine. You sold it for a good price, and that's how you competed in the world market. Today, it's all about marketing. Where have you seen a wine on TV? What kind of score did it get? What advertisement did you see? What kind of colorful "critter" label does the bottle have? That's what's happened to wine, and Pinot Noir has fallen into that trap. So sometimes, when people drink really, true, honest Pinot Noir, they're not sure they like it."

When Greg hears "sweet, heavy, and dark" in the marketplace, he must at least think about the mandate if he wants to make a living. But devoted to what he knows and to the fruit that Mendocino produces, he has managed to translate the notion into wines that are more complex, nuanced, and refined than much of his competition, wines that reflect his 30 year frame of reference, instead of strictly current trends. "You have to be true to the appellation. That's part of the secret. When you pick fruit that is too high in sugar, when you put fake oak in your wine, when you micro-oxygenate your wine, when you add chemicals, over fine or filter your wine, you basically end up taking the *terroir* away from the wine. You lose the specificity of a variety or a wine." In other words, like all fine winemakers, he wants the particular characteristics of soil composition and climate to be recognizable in the wine, and he accomplishes that by making wine in gentle, traditional ways that don't attempt to overly transform it, which today is easily possible with technology and allows mass produced wines to be entirely consistent from bottle to bottle, year to year.

"We try to make the wine as naturally as possible.

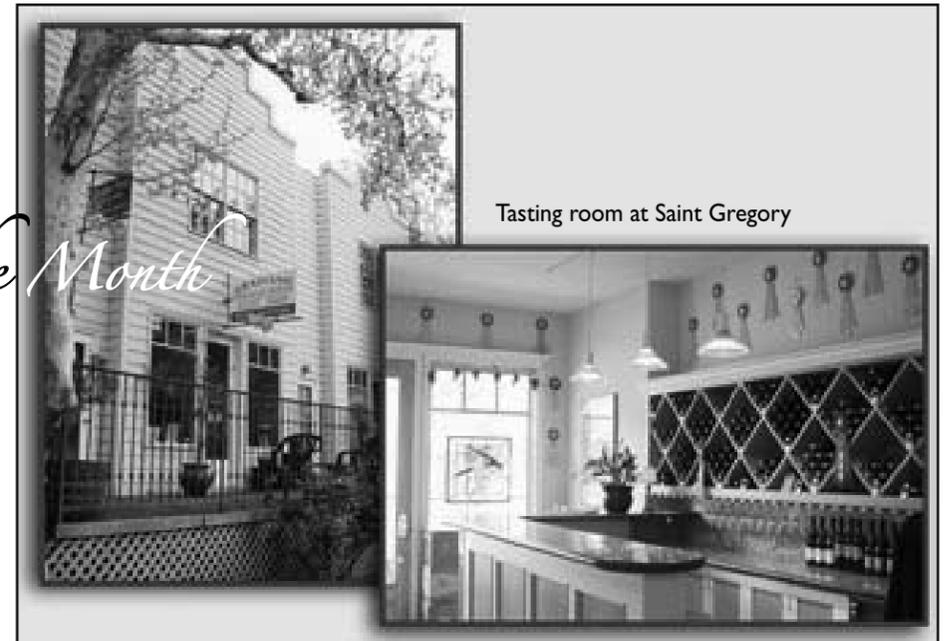
We try not to move the wine too much. We seldom rack the wine. We use some indigenous yeast. All the bacteria for malolactic fermentation is indigenous bacteria that has been growing in our winery for a long time. We fine all of our red wines with fresh eggs whites coming from our property. We filter the wine, but again, we don't exaggerate. We do as little as possible to the wine, but that being said, we try to 'make' the wine and give it things that it needs without giving it too much. We pick the grapes ripe, but not too ripe. We use oak barrels, not oak chips or any weird stuff like oak tea or oak slats. Our wines are fresh, complex, and interesting. They're balanced, not too dark, but they have good color. When you look at our Pinot Noir, it has lighter Pinot Noir color."

So how do consumers expand their tastes and get wiser? "It's all about education," Greg emphasizes. "It takes a lot of time. You have to drink lots of wine. You have to spend lots of money. You have to read a lot." While those recommendations might be unrealistic for many, Greg has one easy suggestion. Read labels. If wine drinkers want to avoid mass produced, corporate and profit-driven wines, they should read, especially, the back label. For example, the words "vinted" or "cellared" have no legal definition, so when they appear on the back label, that the wine was "vinted" by a particular company, the company has not made the wine. "If the label says that the company 'produced' the wine, then you know that it 'made' the wine. Now, is a produced wine always better than a vinted or a cellared wine? Not necessarily. It depends on who the company is and how good its financial situation is so that it can go out on the bulk market and buy wine that might be very good. And how good a blender is the winemaker, who might have blended various wines for a particular bottling. But the language is at least a hint at what might be in the bottle."



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Blessed Wines of Saint Gregory

Like any other producer of goods or services, wine makers continually look over their shoulders at customers. The relationship between winemaker and wine drinker is close, not unlike a marriage, in which one partner influences the tastes and behavior of the other in an on-going exchange. During the last 15 years, a style revolution has occurred. The quality of California wine has increased dramatically, and a trend toward smooth, dark, higher alcohol, fruity, wines has emerged and replaced a more traditional, less flamboyant style that was lighter in alcohol, higher in acid, more tannic, but fresher wines. So what's not to like in new style wines?

The single answer that emerges among older winemakers and sophisticated consumers is that modern wines can be excessive in one way or another, too alcoholic, too oaky, too soft. While everyone agrees that smooth wines are more pleasing than aggressively tannic ones, wines made from over-ripe fruit, which eliminates gritty tannins, tend to taste alike and can be simply too high in alcohol. Wine, after all, is not a cocktail but is

meant to accompany a meal and sipped between bites. Whereas tannins insulted the palate before, high alcohol does it now, stinging the mouth and creating wines with heavy, sweet flavors that overwhelm food. Many younger wine drinkers and even winemakers are familiar only with this newer style, but older folk are yearning for a lighter hand as they've watched alcohol levels drift up to 15.5 percent and higher when they used to be 12.5 percent. Even wine writers, who helped to promote new style wines are beginning to turn against them. Eventually, the result will be more balance in the glass, but in the meantime, a lot of fingers are dueling with one another as winemakers and consumers attempt to define what a good glass of wine should be.

Out of sight in Mendocino County, Greg Graziano has been making wine for 31 years. Apart from having been born in this craggy, evergreen county, a two-mile drive north of San Francisco, Greg says he loves its quiet, rural beauty, unlike Napa, which has seen phenomenal growth in the last 15 years and is over-run with winer-

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