

## PICK & CHOOSE

JUST RED? JUST WHITE?  
JUST CALIFORNIAN?  
JUST ITALIAN?  
HOW ABOUT A  
COMBINATION?

### CALIFORNIA WINES

Artisan Series –  
\$29.50/month, a red and a white  
Winemaker Series –  
\$59.50/month, 2 reserve reds  
Artisan red–Winemaker red –  
\$46/month

### ITALIAN WINES

Artisan Series –  
\$32/month, a red and a white  
Winemaker Series –  
\$62/month, 2 reserve reds  
Collector Series –  
\$112/month, 2 collectable reds  
Artisan red–Winemaker red –  
\$48/month  
Winemaker red–Collector red –  
\$87/month

### CALIFORNIA–ITALIAN COMBINATIONS

CA Artisan red–IT Artisan red –  
\$33/month  
CA Artisan white–IT Artisan white–  
\$29.50/month  
CA Winemaker–IT Winemaker –  
\$62/month  
Alternate CA & IT Artisan Series –  
\$29.50/\$32/month  
Alternate CA & IT Winemaker Series–  
\$59.50/\$62/month

### DOUBLE UP

You can also receive more than two bottles per month. California sales tax is included. Shipping is extra.

movie Sideways, but I think it would have happened anyway. Chardonnay was the all time success in the California wine industry. All of a sudden, Chardonnay became the biggest selling wine in the world. I believe that happened because people could drink the wine by itself. It has a certain amount of natural fruit sweetness that doesn't require food. It's not astringent. It's a meal in itself, a happy meal. Merlot became the same thing, and it was easy to pronounce. It was soft, and it became a huge phenomenon. Pinot Noir is also very easy to drink. It's soft and it's easy to pronounce. Zin, Syrah, and Cab are all pretty tannic, so they're great with food. But when you go to a party and have a glass of wine by itself, you look for something soft. Pinot Noir has always been a difficult grape to grow, but we know where to grow it now. Vintners from Oregon to California are making some really nice Pinots now, so I think it's time has come. The lighter, cheaper Pinots can still taste good and be what Pinot is supposed to be, and the complexity in higher priced Pinots can go on and on.

#### But Zinfandel is also a softer wine.

It can be, but Zinfandel has so many different styles that it's almost a crapshoot. You never know what's in the bottle. My problem in the last few years is that it's hard to find one under 15 percent alcohol, let alone 14 percent. You have a couple of glasses of Zin, and you risk getting a D.U.I. That doesn't work. There's a place in Sebastopol called Vinovation, and what they do is de-alcoholize wines. Their client list includes probably the majority of wineries in the state, because

they've found a method that strips alcohol without stripping anything else. They used to use a pretty crude centrifuge technique, but it's much more sophisticated now. Most wineries do it simply to put the wines in better balance. There's a kind of dichotomy operating, where the critics, and therefore the public, demand wines with more forward fruit flavor, and the way to get it is with mature fruit. The catchword is *physiologically ripe*, and what that means is *sugar sweet*. If you're going to make a dry wine, you have to ferment all that fruit sugar to alcohol, so you end up with sky-high alcohol. So what some people are doing is making the wine, fermenting it dry, and then taking some of the alcohol out to try to balance it.

#### This year has been cool, so we won't be seeing those high alcohol levels.

I lost about half of my Syrah crop up in Dry Creek. We had rains in June. But it was really spotty, depending upon where you were. You could be half a mile away and not affected. A number of people, especially in western Sonoma got hammered pretty hard. What happened was that mildew set in and worse, shatter when the grapes pop. I dropped more fruit than I picked. That happens quite a bit out here in western Sonoma, and it happened to Pinot Noir, a pretty thinned skin grape. All and all, it was a big crop, and we have more grapes than we usually do. We've been doing this for over 20 years, and the big hype is that every year's fine in California. But there hasn't been two years anywhere near the same. Ultimately, each year may be fine, but it's not cookie cutter. ■



YOUR ACCESS TO OUTSTANDING WINES FROM CALIFORNIA AND ITALY

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## California Winery of the Month



## Beginning in the Garage Taft Street Winery



CelebrationsWineClub.com

Anna Maria Knapp, Owner  
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San Rafael, CA 94901

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October 2005

**M**ike Tierney projects his voice around the room like an actor, his speech animated by humor and subtle shades of emotion. He says he developed his vocal cords from yelling at high school students, his day job for 25 years before recently retiring. Simultaneously, he developed and managed Taft Street Winery with his brother John, who recently retired as winemaker. Their partner Mike Martini, former mayor of Santa Rosa and now councilman, has a voice much like Mike Tierney's, which he no doubt developed yelling at constituents. In the 1970s, all three were attending the University of California, Berkeley, where Mike Tierney earned a Ph.D. in anthropology. At the time, Mike lived on Taft Street, a few miles away from the university. The three friends began to make wine in Mike's garage, outfitting the space with barrels, stainless steel tanks, a basket press, and hand corker. By the late 1970s, they were making 1000 gallons of wine until a neighbor called the police. The rest may be history, but it wasn't dull. ➤

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In 1982, the partners commercialized their activity and moved to their first bonded winery in Forestville, Sonoma County, where Mike and John Tierney had spent summers as kids, vacationing at their grandparent's country home. Total production that first year was 1,700 cases. "I usually taught four classes in the morning from 7:30 to noon. Then I'd fill up my pick-up truck with wine and spend the afternoon cruising around the San Francisco Bay Area and selling it," Mike Tierney remembers. Today, their yearly production is 60,000 cases, 60 percent of which they make for small client wineries, who bring their fruit to the facility, and the rest they make for their own Taft Street label. The winery is located in Sebastopol, within the boundaries of the Russian River Valley appellation of Sonoma County, which contains about 50 wineries and borders the Dry Creek appella-

tion. Taft Street's immediate neighbors are Hanna, Topolos, Kistler, Miramar Torres, and Iron Horse, but the partners have a new winery and tasting room on the drawing boards, which will be located a few miles away in Windsor. Apart from the small Syrah vineyard that Mike Tierney owns in the Dry Creek Valley, where he lives, they buy almost all of their fruit and have long-term contracts with growers in the surrounding Russian River, Dry Creek, and Alexander Valley appellations. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are their wines of choice and reflect the growing area. The following is my conversation with Mike Tierney, slightly edited for clarity, about consolidation and how it affects both wineries and consumers.

**What's on the front burner in the wine business these days?**

The biggest thing in the wine world today is the consolidation of wholesalers. When we started, there were 75 distributors in California, and now there are 20. But only three or four make any difference. This is not only a countrywide phenomenon but worldwide, and the biggest companies are not in the U.S. They're Australian and Dutch, or from other countries, and they own not only wineries but also distilleries, breweries, and distribution. A half dozen are multi-billion dollar concerns, and they're gobbling up big chunks of the wine busi-



"Oddly enough, things change in 20 years." —Mike Tierney

ness everywhere. Your old-time Louis Martini, Mondavi, Clos du Bois, Souverain, St. Jean, Simi, and hundreds of other California wineries are parts of larger portfolios. And that is continuing as we speak. We were in that game for ten years, and we got out just recently. We were with a national sales company that is a big producer of Scotch and is a worldwide player in international markets. They were developing a wine portfolio and became our exclusive agent. They bought our wine and sold it. We played that game for over 13 years and finally decided that wasn't why we got into the wine business with some suit in New Jersey telling us what to do. 'Make this wine. Do it at this price.' As consolidation increases, more and more power concentrates in the hands of fewer and fewer players. Even though you may go into a Safeway or a Molly Stones and see hundreds and hundreds of wines, most of those wines are being placed there by three or four or five companies.

**How do you sell your wine now?**

In the last two years, we have been recreating our national sales outlets and distribution. I did that 20 years ago, and it was a lot easier because there were fewer wineries and a lot more distributors. Oddly enough, things change in 20 years! Things

are different and a hell of a lot more difficult for small wineries. The internet, direct sales to customers, wine clubs, have all been helpful, and many really small wineries, producing 5,000 to 10,000 cases per year, they see that as the only way they're going to make it, because it's virtually impossible now to get on with a big distributor, and if they do, they're one of 20,000 other wineries and don't get any attention from the distributor. That's what makes these shipping laws that are being passed or not passed so very important. Shipping direct to customers is critical to small wineries. Our approach has been to look for smaller, more focused, sometimes very small distributors, and sometimes medium. We were very lucky in California to get a company with ten or 12 top end wineries that it represents. So far, it's been the best of all worlds. We're getting a serious look at our wines from retailers, whose door we couldn't knock on ourselves, and we're not buried in this avalanche of wines out there. We have a similar company that distributes in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Florida. In New York, it has 30 or 40 sales people on the streets. It's a medium sized but family-owned company. In other states, we work with small companies that have only five or six sales people. But we don't make that much wine. And we have our own wine club with about 400 members, so that is at least 400 cases of wine that we sell directly to those

customers each year. People sign up in our tasting room. But although there are a number of wineries around here, we're somewhat off the beaten path. Dry Creek Road in Healdsburg has a larger concentration of wineries. On a Saturday and during the summer it's much more crowded there with many more visitors.

**Many people are turning away from mass-produced foods and beverages. But regardless of size, wineries are all projecting a "small" image. How are consumers supposed to know the difference?**

Easy, subscribe to 20 magazines and become a fanatic! From what I understand of buying habits, 90% of wine is purchased the same day it is consumed. It's a decision made on the spur of the moment, so that's why the labeling and shelf position are so important. A lot of wine geeks seem to be out there, but they are relatively few in terms of everyone who buys wine. So the whole purpose of many of the newer labels is to hide the fact that a wine is made in vat #640. But there are a few clues on the label. If the label has the name of a California appellation or a single vineyard, with a few exceptions, those are indications that the production is small. If the back label says anything other than *produced and bottled by* a particular winery, that's a red flag that it's been made elsewhere, prob-

ably at a big facility. If it says *vinted, made, cellared, hand crafted* by a particular winery, those words don't mean anything. The odds are that if you go to a store, and you see two \$10 wines, and one has *Russian River Valley, Smith Vineyard, produced and bottled by Joe Schmatz*, and the other has *California* on the label, *made and bottled by Joe Schmatz*, if that was the only information that you had, the former would be a better buy. But again there are exceptions. If a winery is making 300,000 cases of a Chardonnay, it's going to have a hard time finding that fruit in the Russian River Valley. A lot of people make Sonoma County Chardonnay. Clos du Bois probably makes a million cases of Sonoma County Chardonnay, and Gallo probably makes a million cases. There's also another quality concern, especially with Pinot Noir, which doesn't grow very well in very many places. It does grow well in a few places, Carneros, Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast, Santa Rita Hills, and certain parts of Santa Barbara. So if you go to a store to buy Pinot Noir, I would be very hesitant to buy something that said California on the label. I wouldn't be interested if it came from the Sierra Foothills. Even from Napa Valley, I wouldn't be excited.

**Pinot Noir is now the hottest wine in the marketplace. How did that happen?**

The time was just right. We had the

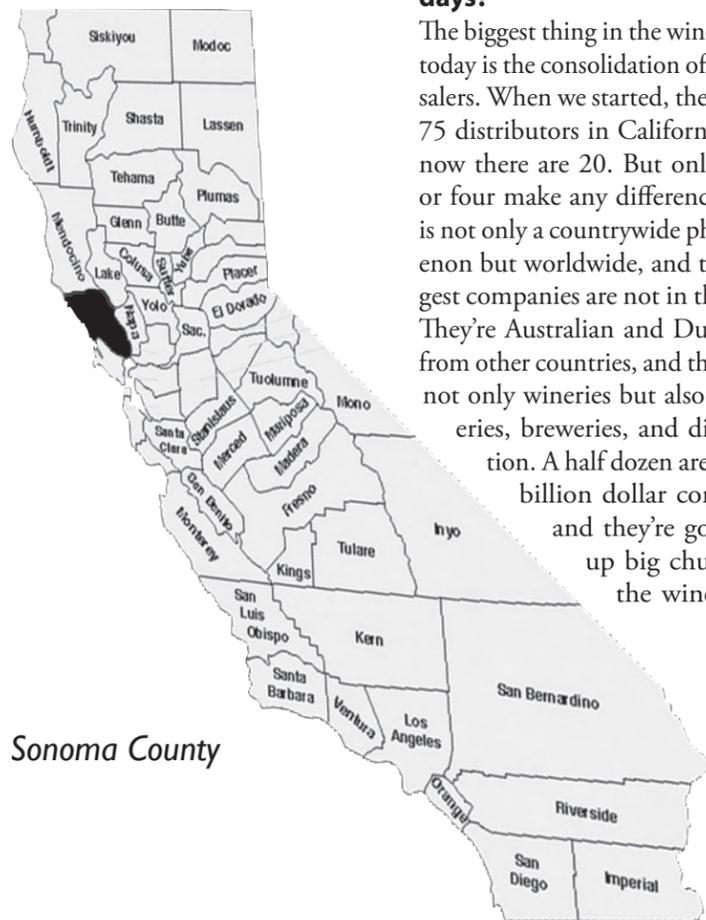
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Sonoma County

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