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Hidden Treasures of Sonoma County

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Finding Gems Among Vineyards

By Victor Dorff

In the age of WalMart, Home Depot, and Amazon.com, concern about the plight of the small-scale merchant seems somehow quaint. Not many artisans can make a living creating and selling their own wares any more, no matter how wonderful their recipes or amazing their skills. In part, that's what makes the story of Northern California's wineries so amazing.

Quality is alive and well, and living in Sonoma County. To prove the point, Women and Wine hosted a "Taste of Sonoma – L.A." recently, featuring fine wines you may never have heard of, some of which are made and sold by mom-and-pop operations that still generate excitement about the craft of wine-making.

"My husband and I have a clear division of duties," explains Lise Ciolino of Montemaggiore. "He grows the grapes, and I make the wine. For the first part of the process, he is in charge. Then, when I say the grapes are ready, it's his turn to take care of our son and my time to get to work."

There is an unmistakable pride in Lise's face and voice as she pours from a bottle of the 2003 Syrah. "This is our most drinkable wine at the moment," she explains. "The grapes are from the vineyard we named Paolo, after our son."

Drinkable? I should say so! It is wonderful. Gentle and smooth. A pleasure.

Fueled, perhaps, by the look on my face as the tastes dance with each other along my tongue, Lise begins to describe the care that is taken in the development of the wine I am drinking: "Our process is completely biodynamic," she says, describing the term as a step or two beyond 'organic.'

At the Quivira Vineyards, 'biodynamics' is described as a form of 'post-industrial agriculture,' in which the health of the farm is the top priority, above and beyond the health of the grapevines. The 2005 Grenache (Dry Creek Valley, Wine Creek Ranch) is presented as an example of the value of biodynamics.



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As a result of what the vineyard describes as “restricted irrigation” and “rigorous pruning” to limit the yield, the grapes produced a dark purple wine unlike any other I’ve ever seen. The color was so striking that I stared at the glass in the exaggerated way connoisseurs do in the movies. I held it up to the light, compared it to other red wines on the table, and only then remembered I was supposed to drink it!

This was my first Grenache, I must admit, so my frame of reference was limited to a comparison with other varietals. I found it sweeter than the Merlots and smoother than Cabernets. In fact, the best I can say is that the Quivira Grenache introduced me to a new varietal that I am looking forward to trying again.

Quivira also furthered my understanding of biodynamics, which I was beginning to understand as an important element in the taste of these Sonoma County wines. This hyper-organic growing methodology began to sound more like a philosophy than an agricultural technique: being willing to limit the yield of a crop (and the wine it can produce) in exchange for sustainability of the enterprise as a whole... and, presumably, a superior tasting product that reflects the best a piece of land can offer.

The role played by the land, itself, cannot be overestimated, according to Armand de Maigret, VP of Marketing for Anakota. To prove his point, he pours from two bottles.



“The word “terroir,” he laments, “is easily defined in French, but it is not so easy in English.” It encompasses the history of the land on which the grapes are grown, he explains.

“Here, for example, we have two 2002 Cabernet Sauvignons from the same winemaker in Knights Valley, grown from grapes in two adjoining vineyards,” de Maigret continues. “At Helena Dakota, the vines are grown in rich red soil and are exposed to a cold wind. In

contrast, the grapes from Helena Montana, are protected from the gusty wind and grow in a soil that is white.”

As he speaks, I taste – first one, then the other – and the point is made. The Helena Montana wine is lovely, and I instantly start to wonder how many bottles I can afford. The Helena Dakota is good, but unremarkable (to me). When I find out that my preferred bottle is \$80, I find myself so impressed at the role of “tirroir” in the production of wine that I forgot to ask the price of the other.

“Tirroir is not necessarily just about geology,” de Maigret continues. “Some say it is also about history. In France, for example, a vineyard that was further away from town might reuse its casks, in contrast to vineyards closer to town that could afford to replace the casks every year. The winemakers adapt to having older casks, which is reflected in the taste of the wine. After a few generations, when the wine in the more distant vineyard has developed a character of its own, some will say that’s part of the tirroir. Others attribute the difference more to



part of the effort. Others attribute the difference more to the winemakers' technique. It's a debate that is endless."

As much as technique and terroir contribute to the taste of wine, however, the forces of marketing cannot be avoided. At the Matanzas Creek Winery, the laws of supply and demand pushed up the release date of its 2004 Bennett Valley Merlot, when the supply of the 2003 ran out.

Without bottles to sell, a winery risks losing its position on store shelves and restaurant menus. On the other hand, releasing a wine too early might mean 'damaging the brand' with an inferior taste. [Anyone old enough to remember the television commercial with Orson Welles promising to "sell no wine before its time" knows that this has long been an issue!]

For Matanzas Creek, it must have been a difficult decision. The 2004 Merlot was fine, but it wasn't "ready." The balance and texture seemed to be expressing the frustration of the winemaker at having to yield to the wisdom of the marketing department. On the other hand, there was more than enough taste in the class to make me wonder how hard it would be to find a bottle of the 2003.

Many of the smaller [Sonoma wineries](#) have avoided this problem by flying just below the radar, relying on sales to individuals for the bulk of their revenue. Back at Montemaggiore, Lise Ciolino presents the statistics as if it were an Algebra problem: "We produce between 1,000-1,500 cases a year. Two-thirds of all our sales go through our wine club. Three-quarters of our sales are direct sales to individuals. That means 90% of our direct sales are wine club sales."

Almost as if to save me from having to check her math, she [offers](#) a taste of a Cabernet blend she designed for her husband: the Montemaggiore 2003 Superiore, Dry Creek Valley. "He likes it, so I make it."

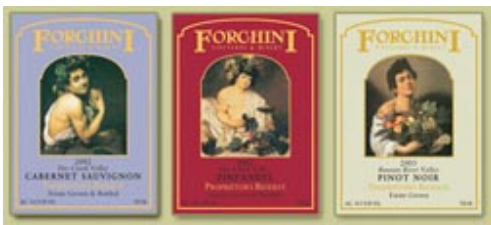
The Superiore reminds me of how personal wine tasting is. While it is a perfectly good wine, I can't wait to get back to the Syrah that went down so smoothly. For all the vocabulary and showmanship, tasting comes down to the simplest question: "Do you like it?"

Of course, you'll never know until you try it, and if a vineyard sells only to its fan-base, how do you ever become a fan?

"The truth is," Lise admits, "we don't have a tasting room, so we don't have people just driving up. Most people who join our wine club have already tasted our wines, either at a restaurant or through a friend."

The Forchini Vineyards and Winery is run by another husband-and-wife team that sends more than half of its modest yield to individuals, including the (lucky) members of their wine club.

Their 2004 Cabernet and 2004 Zinfandel were exquisite. With production of only 562 cases of the former and 350 of the latter, these wines are clearly a labor of love that most people will never experience. I wonder whether the couple has ever thought about expanding.



"We've never really been able to break through the [Napa Mystique](#)," says Anita Forchini. "We had a distributor in Southern California at one time, but it didn't help. We were told there was a problem with our labels."

Dumbfounded, I ask for clarification. In fact, I learn, the stumbling block preventing these elegant wines from getting a place on the shelves and in the menus of Los Angeles was the choice of pictures on the labels: classic Renaissance paintings by Caravaggio. The distributor apparently didn't

think [fine art](#) would sell wine... the way a yellow kangaroo can, for example.

Yes, this is the Age of Marketing, and quality is getting harder and harder to find. Nevertheless, there are still examples out there of people doing what they love, doing it well, and doing it to share with others who appreciate their work.

As my show of support for this noble cause, I have decided to join the club(s).



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