

WineInk

by Kelly J. Hayes, Aspen Times Weekly

AN ACORN IN THE FIELD

A couple of columns ago we talked about blending wine from the fermented juice of grapes from different vineyards, or different varietals. But there is another way to make blended wines. An ancient practice is regaining popularity with many modern winemakers who are making what are called “*field blends*.”

“*Field blends*” result from the process of planting two or more grape varietals in a single vineyard and then harvesting and fermenting them together. In ancient times that is how all wines were made. A farmer would go into his fields and find a number of different grapes growing in the same plot. It mattered not, as the farmer simply picked everything and made his wine from the grapes nature provided.

When new immigrants arrived from France and Italy during the California Gold Rush, they found fields of zinfandel grapes flourishing in the foothills and valleys. They integrated these fields with cuttings and clones they knew about and brought from the “old world.” Grapes like petite sirah, alicante bouschet and carignane were interplanted in these vineyards to improve the zinfandel and make it more appealing to the palates of the transplanted wine-lovers.

To this day, many of the “ancient” vineyards that were planted by these immigrants are maintained and heralded for the flavors produced by this marriage of different grape varietals in the field.

Recently I visited Betsy and Bill Nachbaur at their rustic vineyard in the Russian River Valley appellation of Sonoma County. Since 1996, the Nachbaurs, along with consulting winemaker Alison Doran, have been making field blend wines in a process as painstaking and labor intensive as it is rewarding. The wines they make and sell under their **Acorn Winery** label are among the most approachable and interesting that I have tasted this year.

The original plantings of the grapes at the Alegría Vineyard, which serves as home base for Nachbaurs, date to the 1890s. The vineyards were planted, as was the custom at the time, with a number of different grapes. Bill says that it is “important to honor the wisdom of the winegrowers who went before.” So he has maintained the tradition of interplanting and making field blend wines instead of tearing out the old vines and planting pinot noir, which is the current hot trend in the valley.

Walking the vineyard with Bill, I saw the vines of the different grapes planted side by side as he pointed out their singular nuances. Different grapes mature at different times, and they have unique requirements in terms of sun, shade, water, etc.

The time, coordination and effort needed to monitor and successfully raise grapes in this environment require obsession, and the Nachbaurs’ devotion can easily be construed that way. Ironically, they use only about 75-80 percent of their yearly crop yield to make their own wines (total production is about 3,000 cases) and they sell the rest of their fruit to other wineries.

The Acorn wines run the gamut from the delightfully refreshing sangiovese-based **2007 Alegría Rosato** to the rich, chocolate- and leather-tinged **Axiom Syrah**. And the style of winemaking and grape composition of these field blends is varied as well.

The **Acorn 2005 Heritage Vines Zinfandel, Alegría Vineyards Russian River Valley**, for example, is made from 78 percent zinfandel (just enough to call it zinfandel in California, where a wine must have 75 percent juice from a single varietal to be labeled as such) with the remaining 22 percent a combination of 11 different grape varietals, including alicante bouschet, cinsaut and grenache.

In contrast, the **Acorn 2005 Sangiovese, Alegría Vineyards Russian River Valley** is 98 percent sangiovese, made from a field blend of seven different clones of sangiovese and just a drop of both canaiolo and mammolo.

Then there is my favorite, the **2005 Medley Alegría Vineyards Russian River Valley**. Acorn’s signature wine or, as they refer to it, their “essence,” the Medley is a blend of more than a dozen grapes. But get this: They use those grapes to make up to 20 “base” field blends, and then they blend those blends together. The result is a rich, harmonious wine with spice, fruit, tannin and, most of all, a bold taste.

If you’re interested in trying the Acorn Wines field blends, visit their website at www.acornwinery.com and you can order directly from the Nachbaurs. It may take some work, but like Bill and Betsy’s wines, it will be worth all the extra effort.