

The Wines of California at Mendocino

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 22 November 2011 14:14

Today I am faced with the same problem that I had in February. Where do I start my article? The wines of California are so numerous, and so often very good, that I resurrected my dartboard and the dart landed in the wine district of Mendocino. (To be politically correct; it is Mendocino County. Mendocino County wine district is quite large in land area and it is home to ten wine regions.) It was another lucky shot indeed.

Now I am able to go directly to The Roederer Estate. This is a real treat. The Roederer Estate was started in California in 1982 by Jean-Claude Rouzaud. At that time, Mr. Rouzaud was the fifth generation owner of the Roederer Estate in Champagne, France. Selection of the site in Mendocino took place only after an exhaustive search for the right spot; a plot of land that would provide for a cool climate and well-drained soils that are ideally suited to the Roederer winemaking style. The 580 acre estate that was chosen was also enhanced by ocean winds that provided a cycle of warm days and cool nights. This condition allowed the grapes to mature slowly on the vine and develop a full varietal character. Sparkling wines produced at Roederer are Brut NV, Brut Rose NV, L'Ermitage, and L'Ermitage Rose. The winery uses only Chardonnay and Pinot Noir Grapes. I am confident that all of these excellent wines are available in Low Country. Look for the Brut NV to be in the \$50 range.

Why all the fuss about Roederer? To explain the fuss is the fun part. The Roederer Estate was first established in the Champagne region of France in the early 1800's. Their reputation as a quality house grew rapidly. In 1867, the Czar Alexander II of Russia commissioned the Roederer house to produce champagne that came in a clear glass bottle with a flat bottom. This was in contrast to all champagne bottles that were green in color and manufactured with a punt bottom. (The green color was intended to protect the product from breakdown due to light penetration. However the Czar was afraid of a terrorist act and so he requested clear glass.) The Roederer house responded by using the clear glass with a UV inhibitor plastic wrap. It worked; and the packaging continues to this day. The product is called Cristal. It is available worldwide and it is yours for about \$ 200. It is reputed to be a VEBLEN good. (See Winespeak.)

The above story is just one of many success stories to come out of the Mendocino District. Going back 50 years or so we find that Mendocino was an area looked upon as a growing area for quality grapes. Winemakers would ship the harvested grapes to southern wineries who appreciated the Mendocino County grapes as a first rate product at a very competitive price. However, this scenario was short lived. The larger wineries such as Mondavi, Duckhorn, and

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Beringer saw economy and value in establishing wineries right in Mendocino. The trend continued as many more owners followed suit. Some of those that did were Parducci, McDowell, and Fetzer. Soon the number was around 70. I mention Parducci and McDowell Valley Vineyards because their products are sold in Low Country. However the more important story is that of Fetzer.

Fetzer was the first winery to produce wine made entirely from grapes grown without chemical pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and/or fertilizers. It is called "Sustainability" and it is their way of life. This way of life has not hurt one bit. The company is profitable, the employees are loyal, and Fetzer has received numerous awards for their environmentally and socially conscious efforts. For us here in the Lowcountry, The Fetzer label is "Bonterra". I would describe the effort at Bonterra as very ambitious. The winery produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Grenache, Syrah, Mourverdre, Merlot, Zinfandel, Chardonnay, Viognier, and Sauvignon Blanc. All of these grapes are grown organically. As a result of the success of the sustainability method, many wineries have either adopted it partially or entirely as their choice for producing grapes. When shopping for wines, look for the word "organic" on the label.

(The Fetzer family recently sold their operation to Brown-Forman of Kentucky.)

WINESPEAK

What is meant by the term **NV**? This term is used to mean non-vintage or a wine that does not represent a particular year. The wine is blended from grapes that were produced from several different years. NV is not necessarily a downgrade in quality.

What is a **Punt**? This is the indentation found at the bottom of many wine bottles, especially champagne or sparkling wine bottles. For thousands of years winemakers and historians have debated the use of a punt. There has never been agreement on what a punt is for.

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What is meant by the term **Veblen**? Economists use this term when referring to a luxury or prestige item. The Cristal Champagne mentioned above has always been a luxury wine.

Next stop is Sonoma.

Cheers!

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