

I am guilty. For the six years that I have lived here, I have overlooked the wines of Wente; taking no notice at all. I was equally guilty when I lived in Boston. I guess that I was just looking for something else. I should have known better because Boston is loaded with retail stores that stock Wente products and I was not paying attention. Oh well! Guilty no more, as the saying goes.

I went digging to find some information on the Wente Winery and I ended up overwhelmed. The first fact that hit me like a brick was the annual production: 750,000 cases and distribution to 70 countries. How did I miss that? The second very important fact is their terroir. The first is a Livermore Valley location near San Francisco Bay with an east-west valley orientation. This presents an ideal climate for viticulture: warm days and cool nights influenced by fog and breezes from the Pacific Ocean and the San Francisco Bay. The second terroir is the Arroyo Seco area in Monterey. This appellation has one of the longest growing seasons in California, enabling the grapes to retain their natural acidity and intense varietal character. The slightly cooler coastal climate and distinct gravelly soils of Arroyo Seco help produce beautifully balanced wines.

So what do we have? We have “The Oldest Continuously Operating, Family-Owned Winery in California.” The winery is registered as California Historical Landmark #957.

The winery was established 132 years ago by Carl Wente. He purchased 47 acres of land that he was confident held excellent soil. He was correct, and soon he was producing quality fruit. Since that time the winery has grown to 3000 acres, (2200 hundred acres in Livermore and 800 hundred acres in Arroyo Seco), putting Wente in a leadership role in California winemaking. At the present time the fourth and fifth generations of the Wente Family are working together producing wine on sustainably farmed land and creating an outstanding portfolio of fine wines.

The story at Wente is unquestionably the wine; particularly the Chardonnay. However the winery is also known for a unique story involving the use of clones. The story began in 1912 when plantings of Chardonnay were brought over from Montpellier University in the South of France. This was a difficult task at best as the entire operation of the care, handling, and transportation of the plants was done by hand. However, survival was the order of the day and the plants survived quite well. They were planted in soil on the Wente Estate and today the Wente Chardonnay clones #04, 09, 67, and 79 have become some of the most planted clones

throughout the northwest, especially in California where over 100,000 acres of Chardonnay vines are planted. From Santa Barbara to Yakima, Wente clone Chardonnay has been used to make award winning wines for the likes of Hanzell, Stony Hill, Byron, and many more wineries. The one story that stands out in this scenario is that a Wente clone was the main clone used in the Chardonnay that Chateau Montelena used in the Paris Tasting of 1973. Montelena won the tasting event much to the chagrin of the other participants. (This is a story for another day; however suffice it to say for now that the Montelena event brought California some very serious recognition.)

One more twist on clones that may help to clarify. Going back as far as we are able to view recorded agricultural records, we find that there is just not one Cabernet grape or one Chardonnay grape. Rather we find that there are dozens and dozens of different clones that may have started out as one single domestic vine thousands of years ago and over the years have morphed into a large variety of different clones. When we discuss Wente wines it sometimes becomes obligatory to include a short discussion on clones because the growers on the west coast use the term “Wente Clone” as a reference to superior quality.

Wente offers four different expressions of wines in their portfolio. They are called Estate Grown, Single Vineyard, Small Lot, and the top of the line is called The Nth degree. All have the one common denominator of being handcrafted and blended at their own winery. At the present time The Nth degree is closed to new members; however existing members will be serviced through the wine club. All other offerings are available through retail stores or the winery club operations. Here in the Lowcountry the most common wines available are Estate Grown Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. In talking with folks in this area I have found an excellent acceptance of the Wente Chardonnay called Morning Fog. Morning Fog reveals crisp flavors of green apple and tropical fruit balanced by vanilla and a touch of toasty oak from barrel aging. The varietal composition is 98% Chardonnay and 2% Gewurztraminer.

Should you not see any of the Wente wines that you would like to try' just ask. You will not be disappointed.