

ARTISAN WINEMAKING ISSUE

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What Makes Great Wine?

Accomplished vintners discuss vineyards, priorities, methods

by Paul Franson

What goes into making great wine? What distinguishes the wines that earn top scores and top dollar from other wines? To take the process of premium winemaking apart and examine its components, Wines & Vines interviewed winemakers recognized for their artistry. Some are well-known names, others not so famous, but all make wines that consistently appear on Top 10 or Top 100 lists.

A few we surveyed didn't answer, and one flatly refused to share his secrets, while others were at least a bit circumspect. Napa Valley consulting winemaker Mia Klein admitted, "It's very difficult to try and put it into words. At least for me it is. That's part of the art of it; there are no systems or recipes for success, and it's difficult to describe."

Many top winemakers, however, were happy to tell fellow vintners what they consider most important. Their answers were surprisingly varied, though virtually all agreed the grapegrowing is most important—interesting comments from people famed for their winemaking.

Most noted the importance of paying attention to every detail of the process and to picking by taste, not numbers—although none, perhaps modestly, blatantly mentioned what seems a key element to outside observers: a great palate.

Made in the vineyard

It's almost a cliché to say that great wine is made in the vineyard, but clearly it is. With his tongue in cheek, Napa Valley winemaker Aaron Pott stated, "If you get it right in the vineyard, even a trained squirrel could make good wine."

Pott has worked with Quintessa Estate and Blackbird Vineyards, among others, as well as his own Huis Clos Wines from Napa's Mount Veeder. Pott's view may partially reflect his background; he has a master's degree in viticulture, and like most of the winemakers queried, he pays a lot of attention to what happens in the field as well as in the cellar.

Allison Tauziet, the winemaker at cult Cabernet producer Colgin Cellars in St. Helena, Calif., agreed. "It truly is what I believe makes great wine. It's not in the winemaking, it's in the vineyard." Her three steps are:

- Start with a distinctive site for the vineyard.
- Employ conscientious viticulture to realize the complete potential of that site.
- Make careful picking decisions, and then keep the winemaking simple. Let the wines speak for the vineyard.

Likewise, David Ramey of Ramey Wine Cellars in Healdsburg, Calif., a master of Chardonnay and other wines, listed his tips:

- Great grapes—can't make good wine without 'em.
- Letting nature make the wine rather than trying to manipulate it into shape. (Ramey uses native yeast and malo, blends early and doesn't own a filter.)

Celia Welch makes wines for Napa Valley's Scarecrow, Keever Vineyards and others, as well as her own label, Corra. She noted that making great wine in small lots is easier than in large ones, since you can be so close to the process.

"You have to walk up and down every row, observing the grapes and tasting." She said you also must develop a great relationship with the vineyard manager. "I don't pretend to be a viticulturist. They need to know what your style and goals are, and what level of quality is expected. If you want to be off the chart in quality, you need to talk to them." She added, "I ask a lot of questions and learn a lot talking to them."

Welch works with seven different estates and tastes their grapes with her assistant every third day or even more frequently as they get close to ripening. "We may pick part of a vineyard. We pick the grapes when they're ready, not by blocks."

At Paul Hobbs in Sebastopol, Calif., winemaker Megan Baccitich said that Hobbs wines express the individual vineyards and vintage with the winery's own touch. "We try to select the utmost

distinct vineyard site.” That involves the variety, clone, rootstocks, soils, row orientation, amount of fog, wind and night and day temperatures. “It takes a lot of experience, and often time, to find and perfect the best sites.” Hobbs practices precision farming, with each 10 acres broken into five blocks. These often require different management of soil amendments and irrigation. “It takes less nutrition in a swale than on a hillside, for example,” Baccitich said. Keith Emerson is the winemaker for Vineyard 29 in St. Helena, Calif., where he also crafts his own artisan labels Emerson Brown and Sonría. “We pay a lot of attention to water,” Emerson said. “We have the usual tools like pressure bombs and soil moisture probes with data collected wirelessly, but also have been using sap flow meters from Fruition Sciences. The winery first tried them experimentally, then adopted them in 2009. They give a good indication of what’s happening in the vines.”

Mark Aubert of Aubert Wines in Napa, Calif., who has made wine for Peter Michael and Colgin, said: “Great wines always are made from vineyards that have a great exposure and aspect to the sun; usually hilly sites are the norm. The vineyard needs to be meticulously cared for, and the pedigree of vine stock or clonal material usually is heritage and usually originates from the great vineyards of France.”

While most of the other winemakers we queried specialize in Bordeaux varieties, Richard Sanford makes Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The pioneer in the Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County now owns Alma Rosa Winery and Vineyard there. Sanford feels that place is fundamental to wine quality. “Pinot Noir is particularly expressive of the place it’s grown,” he said. He also thinks it takes a generation of winemaking to learn how best to make wine from a specific location; he’s been doing it for 40 years.

Gary Brookman, winemaker at tiny Grace Family Vineyard in St. Helena, Calif., said it’s vital to know the characters of your vineyard. “If you have tannic grapes, don’t over-extract. If your grape source is from deep, fertile, moisture-rich soils, work them a bit for some tannin extraction to balance out the over-abundance of fruity character you are likely to inherit with these kind of grapes.”

Robert Foley of Robert Foley Vineyards in Angwin, Calif., reinforced the previous comments: “Getting the most expression, intensity of character and balanced fruit from the vineyards are keys. Soil type and drainage are fundamental, so I tend to farm where these are favorable for the kinds of wine I enjoy making. Mountainous terrain and alluvial deposits at lower elevations are my favorites.

“Vineyard balances then come into play—balanced stress in particular. Those relate to water and nutrition, vigor, sun vs. shade, crop levels and timing of vineyard practices.”

The critical picking decision

Picking time is obviously of prime importance. Foley pointed out that harvest time is irreversible. “I evaluate this based on physiological observations, primarily softening of the clusters, lignification of the stems, darkening and pliability of the seeds—and I don’t check sugars until the crop is harvested, as I find Brix to be the most misleading index. Flavor maturity and extractability are more important to me.”

Baccitich said the Paul Hobbs approach is to flag the grapes vine by vine, blocking off diseased vines and end rows for special treatment, as well as the tops and bottoms of hillsides. “You have to be out there walking the vineyards and have good communication with the crews doing the work, but it’s still delicate to ask for all these separate pickings,” she admitted.

Sanford noted that two camps of Pinot Noir have arisen: the super-ripe, opulent style, and a more restrained and elegant version. He belongs in the latter faction. He picks the grapes at 25° to 26° Brix. “In our cool climate, they ripen with great acidity.” He looks for blueberry and raspberry chords in the wine. “They’re not pruny or raisiny.”

Conditions in the grapegrowing regions of Washington are somewhat different than they are in California, but Jean-François Pellet, the winemaker at Pepper Bridge Winery in Walla Walla, Wash., also considers attention to detail vital. One example is to remove a quarter-ton of green fruit per acre at veraison.

Unlike much of California, Walla Walla doesn’t have an Indian summer. “When the cold comes in mid-October, it’s over,” Pellet said. “I taste early in the morning every day. My taste seems most sensitive then.” Pellet also tracks berry weight and finds local Cabernet berries are about 1.0g vs. a 1.3g average in Napa, which may explain some of the intensity of flavors.

Winemaker Michael Silacci recalled that Opus One in Oakville, Calif., started picking at night in 2001. “The flavors of the fruit picked during the day didn’t quite match the sugars. We knew

that grapes plumped up slightly at night.” He found that there were too many leaves in the night-picked fruit, but arranged fans to blow them away during the sorting process.

Priorities in the winery

When it comes to actual winemaking, Baccitich’s attitude is, assuming you start with great grapes picked at the right time, “My job is not to screw anything up.”

Though most winemakers who make great wine have access to the most advanced technology, they don’t necessarily use it very much. Foley noted, “Our winery operations are basic. I don’t believe in sorting tables. We sort in the vineyard where the fruit hangs for observation. You just have to walk more. Basic cuvaision and aging in French oak for 20 months, quarterly racking. Each ripening lot is cubicled and shed separately, so I can track developments and measure my judgments. I blend *terroirs* rather than varieties. Basically, it’s making great grapes from understood land.”

Welch noted the huge improvements in the quality of winery machinery. An example is sorting equipment. She sorts before and after crushing. The leaves, jacks and shot berries are passively removed by the sorting equipment, with humans focusing on the problems that get through.

Brookman explained what he does in the cellar. “I cold-soak for immediate color and fruit extraction (without pumping over). Once fermentation begins, our pumpover scheme will build up as temperature of the must rises and sugar is consumed. Then once fermentation is slowing down, I will back off on extraction so as not to overwork the seeds and get unwanted tannins. With the small berries and large skin area, color is evident and also of excellent quality (i.e. purples and bright reds).

“At the end of fermentation, I allow for maceration without pumping over for polymerization of tannins and color stabilization. Pressing is also gentle; a bladder press and low pressures are key here.”

Baccitich said she doesn’t inoculate with yeasts and also doesn’t inoculate for malolactic or add tannins, enzymes or nutrients. She said she also doesn’t fine or filter. Baccitich tastes the fermenting reds every day and presses when she tastes the right tannins. “The sweet spot to press on is the tannins.” She has both a basket press and a 5-ton pneumatic press.

Pellet uses cold soaks, some short and some long, depending on the location and fruit. He inoculates with yeast, finding no difference in outcome, and perhaps reducing stress.

Pepper Bridge also punches down caps, but Pellet warned that it can be very reductive, so the last few years, he’s adopted rack and return starting at 20° Brix to provide a little oxidation of unwanted odors. He doesn’t rack the barrels much. “This seems to preserve the freshness of the wine.”

Barrels are clearly an important part of fine winemaking. Welch likes to work with a number of coopers, because she finds some barrels work best with different vineyards. “It’s a long, slow process, and it’s difficult to convey in words what you want.”

Brookman said, “Our barrel regime is mostly new French oak; Taransaud and Sylvain are the coopers of choice here. Tight grain, long-aged wood provides subtle, yet evident oakiness.”

Listening to the litany of tips from winemakers who make great wine, you have to notice the emphasis on getting the best from the vines, using taste to pick and make other decisions, and generally manipulating as little as possible. Clearly a great sense of taste and smell is vital, but another essential element comes through clearly: Diligence. Celia Welch summed it up well:

“You have to do everything perfectly.”