

Uvas: ¡Viva Diversidad!

By John L. Smith, Oakstone Winery

(Ninth in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

**“Everybody wants to take a little chance, and make it come out right.”
- Don Henley/Glenn Frey/Bob Seger, Eagles, “Heartache Tonight,” 1979**

Two important documents are published each spring: The “Grape Crush Report” and “California Grape Acreage” (both published by the California Agriculture Statistics Service, P.O. Box 1258, Sacramento, CA 95812, 916- 498-5177). The first reports the prices paid for the previous year’s grape crop, and the second totals the number of acres of each grape variety grown by people who hope to receive the prices listed in the first.

The Crush report shows that the greatest production of any white wine grape in California in 1999 was chardonnay at 458,000 tons (well surpassing the number 2 French columbard at 397,000 tons, most of which becomes ‘chablis in a box’). Astonishingly, in 1994, only 286,000 tons were crushed, an increase of 60%! Chenin blanc was a distant third at 139,000 tons. For the reds, it was zinfandel at 324,000 tons, with cabernet sauvignon second at 255,000 tons. Merlot, however, was “third with a bullet,” increasing to 239,000 tons from only 104,000 in 1996, up by an amazing 230%.

Who Are We?

El Dorado County (and even our little corner of it) has perhaps the greatest diversity in climate of any grapegrowing county in California. Except for grapes that demand the very hottest temperatures, we can and do grow virtually every grape variety known to modern viticulture.

Our primary red grape was (and is) zinfandel, a uniquely American variety whose origin is still uncertain, but which produces wines of immense depth and variety. To this we added the grapes of Bordeaux—cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and cabernet franc. To many local winegrowers, however, we are a “Rhône clone”—many El Dorado vineyards can match the Rhône valley of southeastern France in producing syrah, mourvedre, viognier, roussane, and related varieties. To others, we are very much like the Tuscany region of Italy—we can grow wonderful barbera, sangiovese, charbono, and pinot grigio. Some of our cooler regions to the north (and even some low-lying areas in the greater Fair Play district) resemble Germany’s Rhine valley or even Alsace, where white riesling (it used to be known as Johannisberger riesling), gewurztraminer, and even the oddball hybrid scheurebe can thrive.

So What Are You Planting?

To show what's happening in California winegrape growing, let's compare the change in bearing acreage (the number of acres producing marketable fruit) for several varieties between 1994 and 1999. Chardonnay increased from 56,000 to 81,000 acres, a respectable 44%. Zinfandel went from 33,000 to 46,000; up by 39%, and cabernet sauvignon from 32,600 to 40,000, only plus 23%. Merlot, the trendiest red wine grape of the late 80's and 90's, went from 9,600 to 36,500 acres—that's an increase of 380%!

Concerning, you say? Alarming? That's only half the story. Of the 30,000 acres of non-bearing white vines (one to three years old), 21,500 are chardonnay! Of the 65,000 acres of young red vines, almost a fifth (11,000) are merlot. Sonoma Grapevines (707-542-4801) is one of the largest suppliers of certified grapevines (meaning that the variety and clone is guaranteed accurate and free of viruses) in California. They report that in 1995, chardonnay represented 86% of all white wine grapes planted (it has dropped to "only" 74% in 1999) and while merlot was 49% in 1995, it appears that growers are getting the message on the coming glut of this grape, since it decreased to second place, behind cabernet sauvignon, with just 15% of the total in 1999.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Or, more succinctly put, is there a point to this statistically-burdened diatribe? Let's look at the beer market of fifteen years ago. There was a choice of only a few huge national brands everywhere in the country, and they were fighting fierce advertising battles to gain small shifts in market share. Imagine their surprise when tiny little brewpubs began to spring up around the countryside, producing beers at much higher prices, but with an astounding diversity of colors and flavors. Imagine their dismay when people actually began to buy significant quantities of these locally crafted beers, disdaining Super Bowl halftime ads for the interesting and stimulating brews created by this resurgence of neighborhood breweries. (At least one of the big guys even took the desperate measure of withholding their products from retailers who carried competing local microbrews, but it didn't work and they were severely sanctioned for it.)

The essence is this: too many people are producing too few varieties of grapes. You want to plant a vineyard? Take a chance! First, of all, it is unlikely that the grape everyone else is planting today will be in vogue when your vines mature (you can, of course, convert most vines to a new variety by grafting, but you'll lose two or three years of production doing it). Use your imagination! There's a continual shortage of petite sirah, and it always does well here. Or try that obscure Bordeaux variety, malbec. Indications are that it grows extremely well in this area. Warm region? How about grenache, another of the Rhône varieties. Got a frost pocket and still want a red? Try pinot meunier—it's a red grape that goes into champagne, which comes from one of the coolest grapegrowing regions in the world. Or grey riesling, or pinot blanc, or pinot grigio, or any of a dozen others that are not widely grown in the area. (One small note of caution—there are some varieties that will not do well here, and some that are difficult to grow anywhere. Consult an authority like an experienced vineyard manager or university viticulturalist before getting completely crazy).

Predicting the Future

This is a wonderful time to be growing grapes. Prices are high, demand is good, wineries are sprouting like yellow star thistle across the county, and there's a thriving economy bringing a great tourist market for our wines. Many of the wineries are eager to try new varieties, either to increase the range of wines in their tasting rooms, or just to add to the complexity of their blends (remember: winery ownership is a mental illness). And don't forget, if you plant now, your first full crop will arrive in the year 2004 or 2005. When you go begging to the surviving wineries at that point, dreaming about the \$1,400 per ton others got in 1999, it may be very difficult to sell your prized merlot for other than red table wine. Your homestead chardonnay, instead of bringing last year's \$1,200 per ton, may be hard to unload at any price. If, however, you had the foresight to plant something unusual which became desirable at that future time, you will be able to boast of your vision, foresight and brilliance to all your friends and neighbors who were simply following the flock. Even if you guessed wrong, you'll probably be no worse off than your neighbor who's trying to figure out how to make jelly from twelve tons of chardonnay.