

Grapes: Acreage—What's Hot and What's Not

(Number 45 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

The 2003 California Grape Acreage Report is out (and can be accessed on the web at <http://www.nass.usda.gov/ca/rpts/acreage/grapes/405grpac.htm>), and for the second year in a row, the total number of acres devoted to wine grapes has declined. The overall total is down by 4.9% to 529,000 acres, and that's twice last year's decrease of 2.5%! The non-bearing acreage, which shows the trend more clearly since it reflects the more recently planted vines, decreased by 29% from 70,000 to 50,000 acres.

Ups and Downs

The patterns for different varieties are similar to last year, too. Three grapes are responsible for almost all the decline in the whites: chardonnay, down by over 1,000 acres, french columbard, down by almost 3,300 acres, and chenin blanc which was down by almost 2,500 acres (all of these numbers are statewide, since El Dorado County, at 1,305 acres of vines, only accounts for about 0.25% of the State's vines). Pinot gris was again the only big winner of the white varieties, increasing by 1,900 acres in a single year, and it was the only grape to have more non-bearing acreage (meaning they were planted between 2001 and 2003) at 3,313 as opposed to 2,596 acres of bearing vines. Pinot Grigio, the Italian name for this grape, is made into a wine that's enormously popular right now, which is why everyone's planting it. Would you predict a surplus of this grape in a few years?

Among the reds, barbera, carignane and grenache each declined by more than 1,000 acres, while syrah grew by 1000 acres for the second year in a row, and it was the only variety to do so. Other winners were malbec, up 7%, petit verdot, up 23% (surprise!), and petite sirah with an increase of 18%. Sangiovese, predicted to be a big winner in the near future, dropped by about 5%. Charbono, our sentimental favorite among the obscure varieties, dropped back to 81 acres from its peak of 86, while alicante bouschet, a vine totally immersed in obscurity, dropped from 1309 to 1074 acres statewide, but El Dorado County now proudly shows a total of one acre (somewhere up on Slug Gulch Road...), up from zero!

The varieties I track for prices each year in various areas are shown below, in comparison to the past two years' acreage, and except for syrah, it's pretty much a standstill:

<u>Variety</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>
Cabernet sauvignon	73,964	75,994	75,154
Merlot	51,290	52,190	51,973
Zinfandel	49,720	50,381	50,199
Syrah	14,735	16,054	17,140
Cabernet franc	3,491	3,527	3,547

When Should You Plant?

If history is any guide, it will take a few years for an expanding economy to bring wine drinking up to a level where all the wine grapes are once again in demand, and we can expect total acreage to continue to fall for a while. When should you plant? Remember, it's generally not until the fourth leaf (three years after the spring you plant) that you get a commercial crop from new vines, so if you were to plant in the spring of 2005, you should see a full crop in 2008. Demand last peaked in 1999-2000, and some brave people are predicting a full return to good times by about 2010. The last planting boom peaked at almost the same time, so most of those new vines came to full production just in time for the big surplus, but people who planted in the early to middle nineties, before the boom was really evident, were able to cash in for a few years before the bottom fell out in 2001. The time you decide to plant is probably a compromise between your skill at crystal-ball gazing and your bank account. Remember that the current cost to bring a vineyard into production is about \$25,000 per acre (with some split between hard cash and sweat), and then decide how long you can afford for your money to "rest" before it brings a return.

What to Plant?

The landscape has changed from the early days. When we bought our vineyard in 1989, the vast majority of the County's grapes went "down the hill" to wineries in the valley and even as far away as Napa. Indeed, all our grapes were sold to wineries in the Santa Cruz mountains or to Calaveras County (and that one destination was really created as an outlet for Lodi grapes). People wanted the popular varieties: chardonnay, cabernet, zinfandel and merlot, period. There were four wineries in Fair Play, and about ten in the entire County. Today, there are almost twenty wineries in Fair Play, about forty wineries in El Dorado, and more coming on line each year. And while it's true that some of these were started by disgruntled growers who had no other outlet for their grapes, most reflect the planting of more than the required five acres, and have plans for further growth. The good news is that more of the County's grapes are staying closer to home, and most are now being made into El Dorado wines and getting the recognition they deserve.

You might think that you can look at the grapes that are being planted today in quantity, and use that as a guide for planting. Sad to say, this only reflects what growers think will be hot in a few years, and they have not had a spectacular record of predicting the future. The phenomenal quantities of chardonnay and merlot planted through about 2000 reflected not what would be wanted in the future, but what was selling then. Ask any winery how those are selling now, and you are likely to get a surly response. Ask them what will be popular in five years, and while many have strong opinions, the more honest ones will shrug.

Varietal selection has never been more critical, or more difficult. Many new wineries have chosen more traditional varieties to gain rapid entry into the market, while others

have made daring forays into the less-explored vines. Without question, zinfandel and petite sirah will have a very important place in every foothill winery for a long time to come. The former is expected by every visitor to the area's wineries, and the latter adds body and color to more wines than any winemaker will ever admit. Keep in mind that current popular vines like barbera and sangiovese don't grow well everywhere in the County, and be sure to match the grapes to your own microclimate. Will the current infatuation with syrah and pinot grigio continue until your new vines are producing, or will the consumers' fickle taste turn to something new? Shrug!