

Tillers to Swillers*

(Number 40 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

As the wine industry has grown in El Dorado County, and especially in Fair Play where the wineries are so conveniently close to each other that you can almost crawl from one to the next, many people have expressed interest in climbing on the bandwagon to share in the gravy boat and get a piece of the pie (sorry). Most recently, as grape prices have begun their periodic plummet, people who just a few years ago thought they would become rich and famous by growing grapes are now entertaining the idea of processing the grapes into wine themselves. I will offer no further counsel on the wisdom of those who choose that path, and having been rebuked by a winery owner who was quite certain that winery ownership was not a mild form of mental illness (he owns two, so draw your own conclusions), I will provide no additional psychiatric diagnoses. I will, however, follow the introduction in the previous article to comment at some length on the advisability of turning from farmer into winemaker in a short span of time. These dubious suggestions will even be continued in the article that follows this one.

The Laws

In order to open a winery, you have to comply with a bewildering array of county, federal and state regulations. For the last two, there are compliance specialists to assist you (for a fee), and two with good reputations are Andrea Anderson's Beer & Wine Services in Calistoga (800-954-9463), and Richard Gahagan (a former ATF wine specialist) at 559-251-1759. They understand the laws, know the way to prepare applications, and will provide guidance on permits, licenses and even label approvals. For the County, no such service has yet been established, and the regulations are still in a state of flux, so anyone thinking along these lines needs to get (and stay) familiar with what's transpiring (a good source of current information is always the Agricultural Commissioner's office, 621-5520).

The county regulations as they stand are prone to "creative interpretation" by those who want to have a winery, so a draft has prepared by a committee of growers and vintners to clarify the language and close a few loopholes. For instance, one of the previous requirements stated only that you need five acres of grapes planted (on a 20-acre agricultural zoned parcel) to qualify for a winery. After one enterprising soul planted four vines at the corners of a five-acre plot, and claimed he had five acres of grapes, that provision was revised in the proposed version to "a minimum of 2,200 vines covering a minimum of 220,000 square feet." Also, the previous language stated that you could sell wines that were not made at the winery, if they were sold concurrently with wine produced on the premises. A free thinker could go out, buy a few pounds of supermarket grapes, start a fermentation, and after a couple of weeks, have "wine produced on the premises." This was clearly not what was intended by the ordinance.

One of the provisions being considered for inclusion in the revised ordinance is the “Boutique-” or “Micro-Winery.” This has been proposed (by the impacted grapegrowers) as an aid for the impacted grapegrowers: if they can’t sell their grapes, they would like the opportunity to convert them into wine (which they also may not be able to sell, but more on that later). Such a winery would not be entitled to a tasting room or any of the other “accessory” uses allowed for a full-sized winery on a 20-acre agricultural-zoned parcel, but would have to depend on alternative distribution schemes (much more on this later). The capacity of such a winery has been proposed at less than 1,250 cases of wine per year, which is just about what you can expect from a five-acre planting of grapes, once they are established (rules of thumb up here are four tons per acre and 60 cases per ton, so 5 x 4 x 60 equals about 1200 cases).

Philosophy?

Winemaking, like most of life, is a controlled series of mistakes: if you get good at it, you make fewer mistakes each year, and if you don’t, you probably *should* find another pursuit. (I contend that you go through life making a list of things never to do again. You can’t use anyone else’s list; they can’t use yours, and when the list is completed, your life is pretty much over.) The key issue here is the amount of time it takes to learn when you have committed mistakes. When I made my first batch of wine back in 1972, I was totally unable to wait for it to mature, so I drank it (and poured it for every unsuspecting guest) when it was much too young to be good. The polite people would wait until I turned my head to pour it into the potted palm, while the forthright would try to find a polite way to tell me it really wasn’t all that good. I saved a couple of bottles, and with a few more years’ experience, went back to taste it and learned that it was poorly made from bad starting materials, and had been exposed to way too much air, so it was badly oxidized. (A modest proposal here: get two bottles of wine and drink half of one. Cork it and let it stand for two days, then open and taste the new and the old bottle. The two-day-old wine will have oxidized, and if you can’t tell the difference between them—and many can’t—you would do better to seek a career in used-car sales.) Even if I had waited until my first opus was aged properly, the wine never had a chance to be good (it’s amazing how common it is even for sophisticated wine drinkers to fool themselves into thinking that the awful wines they make are actually *really* good). By the time I had been making wine for about ten years, I had pretty much learned how not to make bad wine, most of the time.

Going “Pro”

When I made my first commercial wine, with 20 years experience at making mistakes, there were still several more I had to make. Like any process, scaling up (from 5-gallon glass jugs to 60-gallon wooden barrels) involves some hidden mysteries. The depth of sediment in a barrel is greater, more evaporation occurs, and the wine matures at a very different rate than in smaller containers. Luckily, the first few wines were from robust Fair Play grapes that helped to cover up the kinks in the learning curve, but there was still a lot of room for improvement.

It takes some time, even with considerable experience at making wine, to adapt to specific equipment (every crusher, for instance, does a different amount of damage to the berries—some too much, and some too little), and to learn the characteristics of a vineyard and how to optimize its good properties while minimizing its undesirable ones. If you add to this the ever-changing preferences of the buying public, you have to constantly improve your skills and adapt your style throughout a winemaking career.

A lot of people start out making wine at home, and many have considerable success in a short time. Like any activity, one real difference between a talented amateur and a professional is consistency—the ability to do it right, and to do it right every time. As a home winemaker, I was happy if two-thirds or even half of my wines turned out well. In business, if you don't achieve a much higher success rate, it will be hard indeed to survive. With the phenomenal increase in the number of wineries, and the attendant oversupply of wine, a winery that does not consistently produce high-quality wines will be quickly dropped from customers' winery visitation list, as well as their supermarket shopping list. Today, there are just too many wines vying for consumers' dollars, and too many opportunities for people to switch their allegiance.

Taking the Plunge

Turning from a farmer to a vintner for your own grapes has several advantages—hopefully, you would have been making wine from your grapes for a while, and you will be able to control the quality and yield so you can grow the best grapes possible (after all, if you can't sell them, there's little incentive to produce large amounts). You'll be nearby, so you can sample the grapes regularly and pick at the time of optimum flavor, and your transportation costs will be quite reasonable if your production facility is on the same site as the raw materials.

The difficulties, however, are likely to be in an arena home winemakers have never had to enter: marketing the wine you make. Homemade wine makes a wonderful gift, and a second medium of non-monetary exchange, especially to pay back or gain favors (everybody likes free wine, and it's a marvelously personal gift, because you created it)! Since it's against the law to sell homemade wine, the idea of getting people to part with hard cash for your wine is kind of a new one. Marketing wine has always been an uphill battle, especially for new, unknown, small producers.

Getting the Word Out

Big wineries can afford distributors, public relations specialists, advertising campaigns and the other trappings of large enterprises. A small winery without a tasting room must find a way to get people to try and buy the wine, and usually must depend on a different mode of communication to spread the word. Wine tastings are a good way to start—once you have established a winery name, dozens of people will begin calling you, offering a *really great* opportunity to put your wines before *hundreds* of influential people *at no cost whatsoever* (and this is in addition to all the other requests for you to outright donate wine to support every charity auction on the planet). It's amazing that they all pitch you

the idea as no one had ever thought of such a wonderful concept, and they just invented it themselves.

Another relatively inexpensive way to become known is to enter competitions. Fees range from \$3.00 per entry at the smaller county fairs to \$50.00 at the State Fair, and the great secret all commercial wineries know is that the more you enter, the more likely you are to win. While some of the competitions widely publicize the fate of all entries (including that most hated result, NA or “no award”), many do not, and if you don’t tell anyone how many of your entries were rejected, they’ll never know. One gold medal goes a long way in getting recognition for your wine from buyers, and the same wine with seven “NA” ratings no one knows about appears just as desirable.

And best of all, many of the competitions also feature a public tasting for winning entries, where you have a *really great* opportunity to put your wines before *hundreds* of influential people *at no cost whatsoever*.

(next time—marketing through conventional and alternative channels.)

*Thanks to Mike Dunne of the Sacramento Bee for the title!