

A modern touch on an old style

Acorn Winery co-ferments a medley of grapes for flavorful wines

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Sonoma County's wineries come in all sizes and there are almost as many different approaches to winemaking as there are wine labels and winemakers.

Very few make wine the way Acorn Winery's Bill Nachbaur does. Although, in many ways, his style of making wine is among the very oldest.

Nachbaur's award-winning red wines are made from field-blend vineyards where a dozen or more different varieties of vines grow in a single row, making a patchwork quilt of different tastes, ripening times and winemaker challenges.

Some of Acorn's vineyards were planted in 1890 and have survived and thrived through the Great Depression, Prohibition and the modern times of corporate behemoths, mechanized competition and fickle consumer palettes.

Acorn is among the smaller wineries in Sonoma County, producing just 3,000 cases of wine annually from its 27 acres of vineyards. The garage-like winery is located south of Healdsburg where Positas gravelly loam mixes with other gravelly loams and some alluvial soils. The Russian River Valley climate is cool and the growing season is usually a long one. More than 20 different types of grapes are grown there.

By contrast, most vineyards are planted in a single variety and produce single grape wines like chardonnay, pinot noir or cabernet sauvignon. Many wineries make blended wines by fermenting varieties separately and later "back blending" them from individual tanks or barrels.

That's not how Nachbaur does it.

He walks through his vineyard every day, watching each vine grow and the fruit ripen. Approaching harvest, he must choose a best time to pick all the grapes at once, even though they are never equally ripe.

Each year the flavors are different but they always get dumped together in the same vat to "co-ferment." Nachbaur's approach is a proven success, earning him the Sonoma County Harvest Fair's Sweepstakes Medal in 2002.

Co-fermenting different grapes together in the same vat is like making a medley of songs where the sum is much greater than all its parts.

Chances your are favorite winery's great "old vine" Zinfandel has some Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet or Carignane in it as well. That trio of grapes has been a favorite medley of old-timers who made wine by the barrel and drank it by the jug.

Long before Prohibition and just after the Gold Rush — and even before many of the early Italian



Photo by Sarah Bradbury
GRAPE BY GRAPE — Acorn Winery's Bill Nachbaur checks on a zinfandel vine in his mixed block vineyard planted in 1890. Nachbaur's Russian River Valley Vineyard is located in one of the cooler regions in the area and he typically is among the last of the growers to finish his harvest.

immigrants came here — the county's earliest vineyards were all "mixed-block" affairs where some of the grapes remained anonymous, if you will.

Acorn's vineyards were first planted in 1857 when the Brumfield family owned 600 acres that stretched from current day Limerick Lane to the Russian River banks, just south of today's location of Foppiano Winery and vineyards.

In those days, and for many years to follow, Zinfandel was the grape most planted. Nachbaur's "old-vine" vineyards are planted primarily with the Zinfandel trio (Zin, Alicante Bouschet, Petite Sirah) plus Carignane and more than a dozen others, including some white grapes.

There are regions in Europe like France's Bordeaux and Loire Valley and Italy's Piedmont and Chianti regions where field blending and mixed-varietal vineyards is the ancient norm.

Before Acorn, Ridge Vineyards, Ravenswood, Trentadue and many of the pioneer Italian growers like Seghesio, Foppiano and Pedroncelli all produced "old vine" Zinfandels and other field-blend wines.

"It's more complete and complex to have different grapes in the wine," said Nachbaur. "They each offer different tastes and feels to different parts of your palette. The smells and flavors offer what I call a front, middle and back taste, ending with a nice long finish."

Acorn's wines are made to go with food. The Heritage Vines Zinfandel, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, Axiom (Syrah) and even the lighter Cabernet Franc are all slow-ripeners, low-yield, full-bodied wines.

Some wineries make wine by the tank load, filling acres of stainless steel fermenters. Nachbaur literally makes all his wines bunch by bunch and even grape by grape.

Two weeks ago, following the season's rude rainstorm (Oct. 12), Nachbaur walked among his 100-year-old vines, randomly picking individual grapes from all the mixed vines, collecting them in a single plastic bag.

"We take them into the lab and measure the sugars and test for ripeness. Each year we have a mix of perfect ripeness, some unripe grapes and even some raisining which we have to pick around.

"Then we roll the dice, picking the best time to pick the Zinfandel (24-25 brix) and go for it. Sometimes we have to let the Petite Sirah hang longer than we might like. But it's really not in our control."

As winemaker, a Nachbaur always prefers to give his grapes and soil top billing rather than himself. "We don't set out to make wines that say, 'Hey, look at me.' Our wines are to enjoy with food and with company."

Acorn wines have entertained lots of company since its first estate vintage in 1996. Nachbaur, and his wife Betsey — Acorn's only other full-time employee— are very successful, selling all their wines through their winery, wine club and limited list of restaurants, without the need for outside distributors or a sales staff.

Acorn also sells about half its annual yield to a few local wineries including Ridge, Rosenblum, Stryker and DeLoach. They custom crush and do barreling at other facilities, including Mauritsen Winery in Dry Creek Valley.

The Nachbours want to keep Acorn small, although demands for their wines would support increased production and a larger winemaking facility.

“I like being outdoors and in my vineyard,” said Bill about his second career he started after retiring from his government law practice almost 20 years ago.

“I like the growing part of the business. I believe all wine is made in the vineyard. I look at all these old vines, all mixed together, and I wonder sometimes what the old-timers had in mind. I often think of my predecessors here. How did they know this (field blend planting) would work?” he asked himself.

Acorn’s vineyards are managed with sustainable practices such as integrated pest management, no pesticides, zero frost protection and minimal water use.

Since acquiring the land in 1990, the Nachbaurs have planted new vineyards in Cabernet Franc, Zinfandel, Sangiovese and Syrah, as well as mixes of Merlot, Dolcetto, Petit Verdot and more.

Part of Acorn’s vineyards were planted with Zinfandel and Sangiovese in 1950 by Americo Rafanelli, when he owned a portion of the land.

Federal winemaking rules require a bottle of wine to have a minimum of 75 percent of a varietal to be called a Zinfandel or Cabernet Sauvignon for instance instead of a blend like a Rhone-style, Meritage or Bordeaux-type.

Acorn makes a Medley wine each year composed of a field blend and co-fermented mix of Zinfandel, Syrah, Cinsaut, Cabernet Franc, Sangiovese, Petite Sirah, and other varieties. Nachbaur guesses that he’s made a wine that has contained as many as 14-20 different types of grapes.

Acorn’s field blend style of winemaking is not a “shotgun” approach. Besides centuries of field blend winemaking experience from Italy and France, Nachbaur keeps journals from his past harvests and vintages and consults with many other local growers and winemakers who make “old vine” wines and do field blending as well.

While the Nachbaurs may make only a small fraction of what many larger wineries produce each year, it’s safe to say no fermenting vats are watched more closely than those at Acorn.

“People ask me if I’ve given names to my individual vines,” Nachbaur revealed. Well? “I won’t say I’ve gone quite that far yet.”