

A Pennsylvania Winemaker's Visit to California

Visiting vineyards outside of Pennsylvania always affords me a unique perspective on what we think of as “normal” viticulture. This is even more true when I see vines growing in a climate so distinctly different from our own. After getting our fill of the Unified Wine and Grape Symposium, we were invited to see Ann Kraemer's vineyard in Amador County.

For those of you who want the “take away” ideas skip to the bottom. The slow and boring digestion of the details follows:

Amador County is located just east of Sacramento, California, in old gold-prospecting foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The climate is hot and dry, affording good growing conditions for high-octane Zinfandels. Ann's vineyard is roughly 34 planted acres on about a fifty acre parcel. It is planted predominately to Zinfandel (10 acres), Syrah, Tempranillo, and a few other Rhone varieties.

I asked Anne why she chose Amador to plant vineyards. For her, it was pure economics. The wine regions of Napa and Sonoma are priced prohibitively high for start-ups, wineries and vineyards alike. Compared to East coast economics, even Amador doesn't look inexpensive.

Grape prices are remarkably comparative to ours. Zinfandel will go for \$1600/ton. The discrepancy comes in the wine pricing and the wine quality. The least expensive Zinfandels were in the low teens, and the most expensive approach \$40+ per bottle. The difference that was ready to see across the board was the quality in the bottle. Even the sub-\$20 bottles usually have plush fruits, nice balance, some depth, and are free of faults. The \$30+ bottles tend to have specific characters—a lot of them are vineyard designated wines—with deeper flavors.

What the consumers get are great values when compared to our own wines. At a certain point (on the second day) I got tired of the California-centric perspective on grape-growing. Yes, grapes were meant to be grown in California, and California was meant to grow grapes. But for all that, there was a lack of uniqueness. There was plenty of fruit, soft tannins, low acid. But the flavors weren't very different than what we can achieve at our high points. It's hard to tell if the consumer's palate is driving the style, or if the style is native to California and that consumers have only stumbled upon it. But I was hoping to be amazed, stunned at points, or blown away. I wasn't, and yet I wasn't disappointed either.

What I missed was the acid, the backbone to the wines. We can get our grape physiologically ripe (no pyrazines with deep flavors) at relatively lower Brix levels. In California, they still have herbal characters at 24 Brix on some red varieties, hence their need for extended hang times and its subsequent dehydration.

I was, on the whole, encouraged. The growers on the Left coast have it easier than we do. There's no rain. Really. No rain. That means barely spraying. But even more, it means fruit concentration. We struggle with water retention, both in the vineyard and in the winery. Our precipitation levels are so high, and our soils retain so much water, it's no wonder our fruit seems comparatively dilute. But our flavors are there in the best of times.

What the growers there have been able to do is to find the balanced vines. They've located the sites and varieties and management for successful grapegrowing. In fact, it probably is winegrowing. They've accomplished it by years of careful vineyard management. But their path was not littered with rain, disease, and trying to survive the winter. Ours will be a tougher path to great wine.

Here's what I learned from Ann:

*A balanced vine is the goal. This is seen by a vineyard that needs no hedging. Vine growth should stop on its own, slowing at veraison.

*Vine growth can be balanced by pruning, but also by crop load, and irrigation. This may mean setting a larger crop to slow canopy vigor, and then drop fruit to ripen the rest.

*Plant the grapes where the grapes grow best, soil by soil.

*Trellising needs to further the training of a balanced vine first, then tweaked to allow for winemaking allowances.

*There's a difference between fertility and vigor. This is very important for Allegro.

*Vine nutrition (with its source in soil nutrition and amendments) is paramount.

The value in the wines of California is much greater than ours. Ours are distinctive, but it's obvious why they have been so successful in the marketplace. That said, they are not out of our reach. For us, we will need to spend more than just a few years of work. It'll take decades. But I feel that they are within reach of us.

In California, they have rallied around no more than a dozen grape varieties, and mostly just a few. They grow these because they work and they know they work. **The one thing I know is true is that we need to find these varieties for ourselves.** Our diversity keeps us from a regional identity and the strength gained from that. Pennsylvania has numerous distinct growing regions (central, south central, south east, northwest, west). No one grape variety will work in all these, but some overlap may occur. This is the diversity we need. We need to be trying to be Picassos not Pollacks.

Carl Helrich
Allegro Vineyards
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