



Bedrock Wine Co. Summer/Fall Release August 2015

Anatomy of a Field-Blend.

Back in 2007, I started Bedrock Wine Co. to work primarily with old, field-blended vineyards. For me, their incredible diversity, featuring grapes from the Iberian Peninsula, France, Italy, the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, and beyond are symbolic of the melting pot that is the United States. And because of this diversity they are the wines that we make in California that have no international comparison. When working with old, mixed California vineyards we (the California industry) get to be the standard bearers. I am incredibly grateful to everyone who buys the wines as it allows me to engage more deeply with these incredible old vineyards and in some cases prevent them from being torn out. Also, because of the Mailing List I get to sit here and geek out about field blends while watching our Sutter press squeeze out the first drops of 2015 Ode to Lulu rose from 120-year-old own-rooted vines rather than working the market someplace in an effort to drive sales. Having seen my father work so hard to spread the gospel of old vines and Zinfandel for so many decades it is certainly not something to be taken for granted. And in that vein, it is not just the Mailing List but also the intense hours and effort put in by our assistant winemaker Cody Rasmussen and cellar master Luke Nio (who are both becoming talented winemakers in their own right) that allow Chris and I the ability to take on farming oversight we never thought possible and to spend hours in the library geeking out on topics like this.

Now, class is in session.

The question of why some old vineyards in California are so diverse is one that I have been digging into for quite a while. Thanks to the librarians of northern California, who had the foresight to save obscure grape purchase receipts, as well as the inventor of graph paper, who unintentionally created the perfect paper for mapping out every vine in a vineyard, here are the main factors I believe account for field-blends.

Varietal-labeled wine was not as important: Prior to the shift to varietal labeling in the 1950s and 1960s, American winemakers and growers were more interested in making wines of a particular “style” such as “Claret” or “Burgundy” or with white, “Hock.” As such, the importance of a varieties’ character was more about what they contributed to a blend of grapes rather than about whether it was good on its own. In planting vineyards for a particular “style” of wine, vineyardists would adjust varieties based on climate, soil, etc. For instance, in hot climates where acidity and lower sugar are needed, one tends to find more Carignane, Grenache, Trousseau Noir, Mataro (Mourvedre). In cooler areas, one generally finds varieties that are earlier ripening and/or bring more color such as Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, and Grand Noir.



Winemaking: Even going back to 1882, industry leaders noted the tendency of the States main “Claret” grape, Zinfandel, to have variable ripening which could cause sugars to be higher than expected in tank (we call this the “soak-up” factor today) resulting in stuck fermentations and “acetification.” To battle this, they recommended the blending of varieties that were later ripening. They were also convinced, as was considered true in Europe at the time, that blending the varieties before fermentation resulted in a better, “more harmonious” wine than one blended after fermentation. Even today we are learning, in a more scientific way, about the potency of co-fermentation and the resulting co-pigmentation, co-polymerization and the resulting stabilization of color, tannin and aromatics.

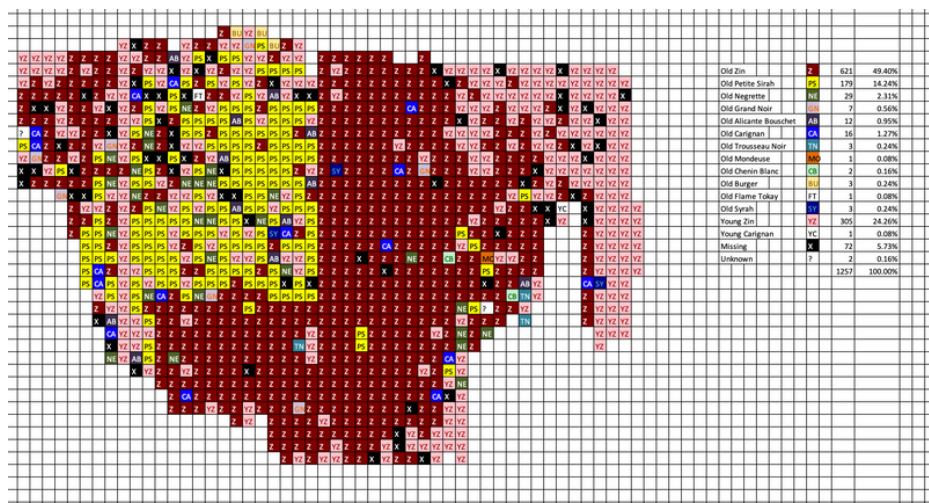
Hedging Viticultural Risk: Just as one might diversify a stock portfolio growers likely planted many different varieties in an attempt to offset potential crop loss. Vineyardists in the 1880s and 1890s were working with varieties that had little or no track record in California. On top of this, the more progressive ones were also experimenting with myriad rootstock selections whose rooting and grafting propensities were not well known. Beyond Phylloxera, there were also issues of powdery mildew and other pests.

Neighbors: As I found reading the journals of Eli T. Shepherd, who owned the present day Bedrock Vineyard in the 1880s, it was common for neighbors to buy and sell rootstock and vine cuttings from each other. Newer imports were purchased from the intrepid growers and nurserymen who foraged for vine material in Europe, but Zinfandel, Semillon, Mataro, and others already present in California were not purchased through a nursery. For instance, Shepherd went to the nursery of J.P Drummond (now Beltane Ranch in Kenwood) for St. Macaire, Beclan, and other cuttings. Drummond was also the first to import Petite Sirah into California in 1882; file this fact away for the next section, as Pagan Ranch lies across the street from Drummond’s old nursery. Similarly, H.W. Crabb, the original owner of To Kalon Vineyard in Napa, sold an array of cuttings that he had imported (his favorite being “Crabb’s Black Burgundy,” which has now been identified as Mondeuse). Our Oakville Farmhouse Vineyard, which lies catty-corner to To Kalon, is nearly 20% Mondeuse Noir. Drummond and Crabb are just two examples of how certain varieties moved outward in a diaspora like fashion from nurseries.

Randomness: Nursery stocks were not necessarily well controlled, nor were the cuttings passed between neighbors. For instance, Drummond advertised Petite Sirah, Alicante, Beclan, St. Macaire, and others that have been found in vineyards in Sonoma. But what about the random Castets vine (another of Bordeaux origin) we have found at Bedrock? My guess is that it was included in the original cuttings from France and propagated accidentally as another variety or slipped into cuttings being sold as another variety.



What does a field-blend look like? Find below vine maps of two blocks at Nervo Ranch in Geyserville, which is a good representation of many of the vineyards we work with.



Each square represents a vine position. Between the two blocks, there are over 15 varieties. In one Negrette (Pinot St. George) is the dominant variety, while in the other Zinfandel plays the lead role. However, these two varieties are supplemented by Mataro, Cinsault, Carignan, Grenache, Trousseau Noir, Abouriou (early Burgundy), Valdigue (Napa Gamay), and white grapes such as Palomino, Muscadelle, Sauvignon Blanc and French Colombard. Importantly, note the light pink squares with the red “YZ,” and the black squares with the white “X.” YZ represents younger vine Zinfandel that was interplanted as vines died out and the X indicated a vine position where there is no longer a vine. As “varietal specific” wines became more important in the 1960s, it was quite common that interplanting was done with Zinfandel, which has had the effect of making most vineyards less diverse over time. However, those that were not interplanted with something were usually torn out for lack of productivity. An exception to this rule is Pagani Ranch, which is still in the ground despite most blocks missing at least 45% of the original vines.

Up until its sale, the Nervo Winery made California Burgundy and most of the varieties present in the vineyard match those mentioned as far back as the 1890s by Eugene Hilgard, the father of UC Davis, as ones making up “Burgundy” plantings in California.

Nervo is just one example. Each vineyard we have mapped (and it should be noted that Mike Officer is usually my partner in crime and the master of vine maps) is different and has its own unique story to tell. This makes for a ridiculously fun winemaking and viticultural challenge and hopefully something delicious and singular for people to enjoy.

Lesson over. Onto the wines!!



2014 Compagni Portis Heritage Wine: Dry-farmed, this field-blend of Gewürztraminer, Trousseau Gris, Roter Veltliner, Riesling, Chardonnay, and others was planted in 1954. Organically farmed in cahoots with Phil Coturri, it is one of the most interesting old white vineyards I have ever seen. The 2014 is my favorite bottling of this wine since the 2011, with the naturally rich and explosively exotic Gewürztraminer being balanced by the higher acid and later ripening Trousseau Gris, Riesling, and others. In making the wine, 50% of the fruit is destemmed and skin soaked for 4-5 hours to pull more perfume from the grapes, while the other half is whole-cluster pressed to ensure more delicate texture.

2014 Alta Vista Gewurtzraminer: Our first bit of crop after several years of rehabbing this amazing vineyard which we found abandoned in 2012. Originally planted in the 1940s, this vineyard is dry-farmed at just over 1000' in the Moon Mountain District AVA overlooking Sonoma Valley. Unfortunately we only got to make about 60 cases of this perfume dragon, so it is wish-list only for everyone.

2012 Cuvee Karatas White Wine: We have been sitting on this one for a year and a half. Though it is often hard to read the tea leaves that are cellartracker notes it did seem that many people opened earlier incarnations of this wine expecting it to be more like New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, or something of the type, and then were surprised to find a baby beast of a wine in need of some age to tame the rough age. As a result we decided to hold onto this one a bit before release. Although to be perfectly honest, we love this so much we don't even really want to sell it. Based around the oldest Semillon left in the New World at Monte Rosso Vineyard, the wine also includes some perfumed Sauvignon Blanc. Barrel fermented and aged for 18 months. This is a rich white wine full of fig, honey, stone fruits and a trace of tobacco leaf, balanced by nice acidity and freshness thanks to the SB.

2014 Old Vine Zinfandel: We like to think of this as the gateway drug to Bedrock. Beyond this, it is perhaps the most important wine we make. It is widely available, and as such, acts a bit like the winery's business card—we want it to carry the density, fruit, freshness, and spice that we look for in our single-vineyard wines. It is also an invaluable tool for our work in vineyards and in the winery. Several vineyards we work with are “reclamation” projects of sorts—beautiful old vineyards throughout California that have been disrespected by poor farming and cultural practices. We are now showing them the TLC they deserve, and as they climb the qualitative ladder towards potential vineyard designation, we have a great home in the Old Vine Zinfandel. This year's cuvee features the first intensely perfumed fruit from Esola Vineyard in Amador County, the vineyard the Ridge “Shenendoah” bottlings were based around for many years. In addition, it is made up of Nervo Ranch in Geyserville, Sodini Ranch on Limerick Lane, Casa Santinamaria Vineyard in Sonoma Valley, Bedrock Vineyards, and a barrel here and there from other favorites (Papera, Teldeschi, Pagani Ranch, etc.). As much as I love the 2012 and 2013, I prefer this slightly more perfumed iteration of the wine. With a healthy decant this should provide good drinking pleasure in the near term, but I am pretty convinced that like the 2011, 2012, and 2013 before it that it will age gracefully for over a decade. It's a lot of Zinfandel (and mixed black) goodness!



2014 Evangelho Heritage Wine: Many of you have heard us wax rhapsodic about Evangelho Vineyard and its ancient vines, own-rooted in beach sand on the banks of the Delta. Having made this vineyard for four years now (and starting to pick the 2015 yesterday), I am amazed by the unflappable consistency of the vineyard. Though it might shade darker or lighter in any given vintage, whenever we taste through the wines blind in the cellar, Evangelho screams out. For me it is the contrast between the bright acid and low pH of well-farmed CoCo fruit along with the fine tannin profile from the sand that separates it from most of our other vineyards that are derived from coarser, more volcanic soil. I love this 2014, a field-blend of Zinfandel, Carignane, Mataro, Palomino, Alicante Bouschet, and Mission. As always, decant well if drinking in the near term!

2014 Pagani Ranch Heritage Wine: Pagani is Pagani, deservedly considered one of the greatest old vine vineyards in California. That said, 2010 it got singed by the screaming heat of late August. 2011 was good but a challenging year in the cool site, and the 2012 is a dark beast of wine but perhaps lacking some of the gracefulness we desire in our efforts. However, the 2013 was one of the best wines of one of the best vintages we have had and the 2014, though early, is easily one of the best wines in our cellar from the vintage. In both the '13 and '14, the wines are incredibly dense, but there is a lightness in the perfume and weight. Pagani will never be Fred Astaire (that might be Evangelho), but in its best incarnations has a fair amount of Gene Kelly.

2014 Carlisle Zinfandel: One of the great joys of our existence is getting to share fruit with mentors and friends such as Mike and Kendall Officer (Carlisle), Tegan and Olivia Passalacqua (Kirschenmann), and Jake and Scot Bilbro (Limerick Lane and Gibson Ranch). The camaraderie and friendly competition makes all of our wines and farming practices better. 2014 is the second year we have had the opportunity to buy some fruit from Mike and Kendall's amazing vineyard in the Piner/Olivet area of the Russian River Valley. The wine has what I like most in wines from this part of the world: opulent fruit and a beam of clarifying acid that lifts the wine.

2013 Lorenzo's Heritage Wine: Lorenzo's Heritage Wine comes from John and Caterina Teldeschi's amazing dry-farmed vines on the Dry Creek Bench, a vineyard my family has worked with for almost three decades. The wine is named for Lorenzo Teldeschi, John's grandfather who planted many of the vines at the turn of the last century. Composed of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Carignane, Valdigue, and Cinsault (called Black Malvoisie in Dry Creek), this is almost always one of the most age-worthy heritage wines we make (the 2008 is drinking beautiful now and the 2009 is just coming into its drinking window). The 2013 is no exception and I expect it to be one of the monuments of this amazing vintage. Give this one a few years and a decant and it is going to be pretty amazing.



2013 Weill a Way Mixed Blacks: Weill a Way is always an outlier for us, as it comes from a young, “modern” vineyard with tight spacing and devigorating rootstock. The upside is that we can take the vines back to one cluster per shoot to ensure ripening in a site that would normally be considered too cool to ripen Zinfandel and the assorted Grenache, Tempranillo, Mataro, Alicante Bouschet, Petite Sirah, and others that make up the wine. The result is a wine that is pretty darn rich, full of black fruits and spice. This is one of the more straightforward wines in the release, but it will offer a lot of near-term enjoyment for those looking for a nice mouthful of layered dark fruit.

2013 Griffin’s Lair Syrah: Every year I struggle to write about Griffin’s Lair. Maybe it is because it is too close to the heart (a wine from the vineyard made by Pax Mahle in 2002 made me want to come home from the East coast to make wine), maybe it is because Joan and Jim Griffin farm it so thoughtfully and perfectly, maybe it is because it has a bad-ass name, who knows. Maybe it is just when a vineyard resonates so perfectly you don’t want to market it for fear of it going away—like not telling anyone the perfect girl who was out of your league gave your upper thigh a warm squeeze during study period in the library (we were all so lame in high school, I should have squeezed back!). I adore the 2013 in all of its exotically feral, Syrah wonderfulness—I think it might be the most complete wine we have made from the vineyard.

2013 Montecillo Cabernet: 50 year old Cabernet, planted at 2200’ in Nuns Canyon, dry-farmed— are you f’ing kidding me?! If you had told me a few years ago that a vineyard like this still existed, I would have said you were crazy. The vineyard, which was the backbone of the Kenwood Artist Series wines for a long time, lies a mere 848 yards from the Napa County border. I don’t say this to boast of its provenance but more to highlight one of the vexations of the current California industry. If a vineyard of this quality was planted 900 yards away, the owner would likely be getting paid upwards of \$10k a ton, rather than getting less than 25% of that (prior to Turley, Arnot Roberts, and us becoming clients) because it is in the Sonoma Valley appellation. Most importantly, I feel like we found the grail when it comes to old-school, mountain Cabernet. This wine is elegant, intense, tannic, and will be long-lived. I never really thought Bedrock would have the chance to make a wine that would even be able to come to the same dance with the wines from Mayacamas, Kenwood, Togni, Corison, and Laurel Glen that defined my expectations for old-school, age-worthy wines of class, but this vineyard has us doing the shim-sham and scuba diver in the halls.

Cheers,
Morgan Twain-Peterson
