

Santa Maria valley produces distinctive Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot vines in this large planting at Rancho Sisquoc.



California Terroir:

A Sense of Place

By Wilfred Franklin

Photos: David Moore

Having worked as a wine maker in California and as an employee of an influential East Coast wine shop, I've been fortunate to witness the birth of new trends and styles before they even leave the wineries. When barrel tasting in musty cellars, ongoing conversations with old colleagues develop new twists, and new conversations begin. Traveling up and down California this summer tasting wines (beginning with the Hospice du Rhone event in Paso Robles and then all over the Golden State), I noticed several indicators of an emerging style that's only evident when tasting across the entire state or across a particular producer's entire offering.

Calling the style "new" is also a bit of a misnomer, because it is older than the wine industry in California, yet it is certainly unlike the majority of what is being produced in California these days – big, bold and powerful. It is a wine making style that begins to truly express *terroir*, that ambiguous, Zen-like term that encompasses the sum total of soil, topography, and climate. This "new" style isn't hidden under heavy, toasted oak and excessive *sur lies* (though there may be components of these winemaking techniques), but always allows pure untainted fruit character to show through. For some California producers, this is the Holy Grail of grape growing and wine making, and many, in my opinion, are closer than ever to discovering where the grail has been hidden.

Why has it taken so long for California producers to reach this point, if it is the stated goal of serious fine wine producers? Moreover, why has it taken so long, if it has been going on for years in European wine producing countries? Much like a fine wine, the story is nuanced, complex, and multi-layered.

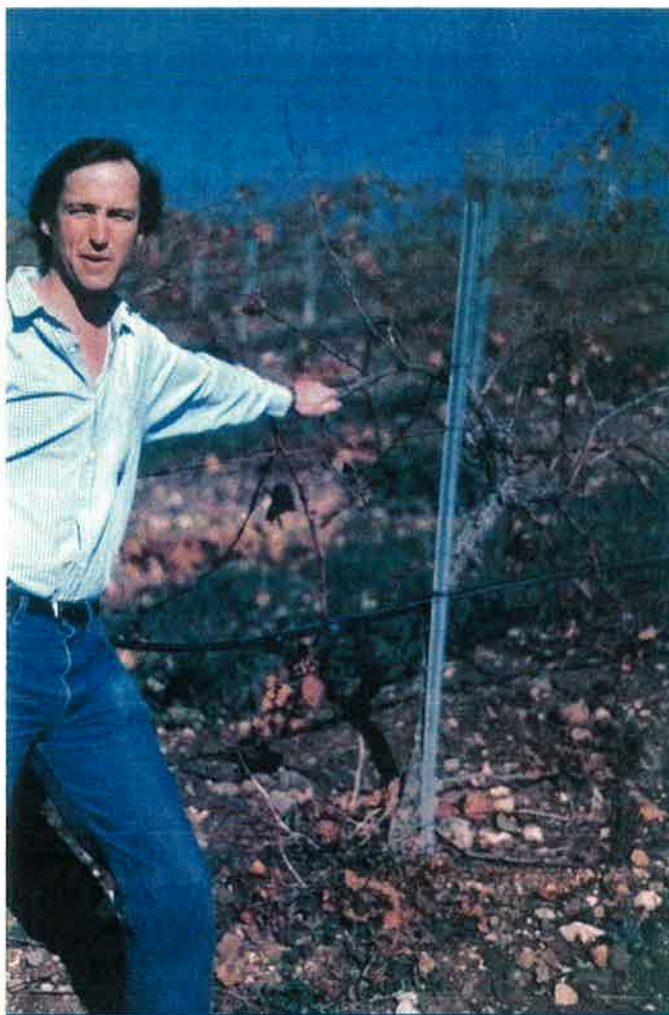
How We Get to This Point

It begins with a struggling California wine industry invited to prove itself to the world at a wine tasting held in Paris in 1976. The event—organized by wine merchant Stephen Spurrier and held at L'Academie du Vin in Paris—pitted Napa Valley and Santa Cruz Cabernet Sauvignon as well as Napa Valley Chardonnay against Bordeaux and white Burgundy from famous producers. To the surprise of the French and the rest of the wine-drinking world, the California wines took three of the top five rankings (including First Place) in the Chardonnay/White Burgundy category, and two of the top five rankings (again, including First Place), in the Cabernet Sauvignon/Bordeaux category. As in all competitive wine tastings, the richest and biggest wines came out ahead.

The repercussions of this tasting set a tone for the entire California industry and subsequently a growing New World industry. The rich, thick, fruit-driven style of these winning wines chiseled a model of taste that new American wine drinkers thought they should prefer. This, in turn, led California producers, seeing an opportunity to increase market share, to push the envelope of big, bold flavors. Soon, they expanded this style to varietals other than Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Blessed with thick rich valley soils and abundant good weather, Sauvignon blanc, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Sryah, Petite Sirah, and others were all cast in the same mold. This set in motion a “positive feedback loop” that continually pushed the system to bigger and bigger styles. Likewise, a generation of wine-drinkers, buyers, and makers grew up preferring this bigger style (habits create preferences and the habit of drinking big wine produces more big wine).

Accessibility and easy to read labels combined with a “Buy American” sentiment perpetuated these buying trends. Increased competition in a growing global market forced many family run estates to sell or grow to an economy of scale producing millions of cases a year. Where there once was a unique estate bottled wine with characteristics of a special locale, there now was a huge producer blending grapes from all over California to make a consistent, but homogenized product that could compete with all the new wine regions of the world.

Adding to the growing ubiquity of the “big, bold” style was the emergence of the “celebrity” wine critic. Once, a mere by-line in only the largest newspapers, critics, through the massive amounts of media marketing necessary to support the economic scale of large producers, were brought to the center of attention. Wine had become very lucrative and, through the new media frenzy, very



Steve Rasmussen in the Rincon Vineyard at the Talley Estate in the Arroyo Grande Valley. This vineyard is considered one of the finest sources for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in California.

fashionable. With fashion, came vulnerability to the whims and fancies of a new capricious market. Sadly, this market followed (and still to this day follows) the advice of only a few celebrity critics. This further drives vintners to produce wine to the critics' liking in hopes of attracting high scores and increased sales.

So, What's New?

As a Californian, my point is not to disparage these wines, only to point out that one size doesn't necessarily fit all. In fact, diversity is the spice of life and to lose sight of that for market share and notoriety is a shame. The important point is not that “big bold style” is bad, but rather that not all wines should be made in that style, particularly if they are to be unique and expressive of where they are grown.

“Place” and the expression of place in wine are evolving in California. Likewise, the palates of wine drinkers are evolving and developing. Here and there California wine makers are succeeding at old European grape growing and wine making styles that allow the subtleties of their location to be unveiled and wine

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drinkers are responding to the intrinsic value. The most discerning are finding qualities that were once only found in the older traditions of France, Italy and Germany. They are finding gems in the wines of Zaca Mesa, Edmunds St. John, Alban Vineyards, Calera and Unti Vineyards.

Even larger producers like Edna Valley Vineyards (where I was on the winemaking team) are beginning to move some of their wines in this new direction. Harry Hansen, the current winemaker at Edna Valley Vineyards was involved in clonal field trials of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay when he worked for Gloria Ferrer. These trials were designed to find new selections of vines to enrich the sparkling blends as well as their Pinot Noir offerings. During this experience Harry's vision of terroir based wines really began to solidify. Overseeing many different clones, he witnessed first hand how the lay of the land, the soil and the climate could be best expressed if vines could be properly matched to place.

But it wasn't until he took the position at Edna Valley that Harry could begin to put his vision to reality. When we tasted the results of his first Chardonnay vintage (2002) with two older vintages (1989 and 1999) the contrasts were striking. The 1989 and 1999 were made in the big, creamier style the winery became famous for. The 2002 shows a move to express the flinty, seashell soil of the Paragon Vineyards where 95 percent of the cuvee was grown. It is reminiscent of Saint-Veran with a certain flinty savory-ness, but unique in its own way. A hint of tropical pineapple and grapefruit intermingle with pure minerality that clearly says, "Edna Valley, up-lifted seafloor."

Mick Unti of Unti Vineyards in the Dry Creek region of Sonoma County is likewise crafting superb wines that not only achieve complexity and balance, but also convey the distinctive texture and spicy flavors specific to Dry Creek.

"It is not as simple as subscribing to a minimalist approach," says Mick, "the decision makers at a winery and vineyard must be aware of the qualities in their grapes that are specific to site and subse-



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quently make appropriate choices to encourage those qualities." He sites trellising and shoot positioning decisions among several that can veil unique qualities in a wine's final set of characteristics. Going further, Unti also said, "A minimalistic approach would be to prune and then leave the vines to carry whatever canopy and crop it could. But in our case this would lead to heavy canopies that would detract from balanced grape maturation. Dry Creek flavors and textures would be lost in the shadows."

The shadow of California's big, bold style is just beginning to lift. For the vast majority of large producers that blend grapes from many wide-ranging locations, this new style will never be a possibility. Many more will not be able to compete in a global market with their quality unless they succumb to the "international style" that California forged. But for small, quality-conscious producers with control of all aspects of the wine-making process, the goal of site-expressive wines is finally being realized.

The California wine industry has a long way to go before it can match its counterparts in Europe, which enjoy a several thousand-year head start. But without prohibitory laws such as exist in Europe, it is making up ground quickly. Until then, the best way to learn more about a wine's subtle expression of site is to visit large regional tastings like Hospice du Rhone in Paso Robles or San Francisco's annual Zinfandel Advocates and Producers tasting, where you can taste similar wines made in many different locations. Short of vacationing in California, stop by your local wine import retailer and start exploring wines of the Old World. Just make sure the wines are from small farmer/producers that have a vested interest in their special – *terroir*. **Z**



Wil Franklin recently moved to the Philadelphia Metro area from California's Central Coast, where he was assistant winemaker at Edna Valley Vineyards.

When he's not immersed in the wines at Moore Brothers Wine Company, he enjoys hiking and gourmet mushroom hunting in the lush deciduous forests of the East Coast.

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