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Sierra Foothills Demonstrate White Wine Potential

Annual Grape Day promotes varietal innovation

by Jon Tourney



Winemaker Mark McKenna of Andis Wines, grower Ron Mansfield of Goldbud Farms, and winemaker Mari Wells Coyle discussed experiences growing and producing white wine varieties at Foothill Grape Day.

Murphys, Calif.—Demonstrating that the Sierra Foothills American Viticultural Area (AVA) can produce a diversity of grape and wine varieties beyond its reputation for robust reds, a panel of Foothill winemakers and grapegrowers presented their experiences and a tasting of white wines at Foothill Grape Day 2012, held June 7 at Ironstone Vineyards in Calaveras County.

The annual Grape Day is organized by the University of California Cooperative Extension's Central Sierra office; serving the counties of El Dorado, Amador, and Calaveras; and moderated by Central Sierra viticulture advisor Lynn Wunderlich.

White wine varieties represent less than 10% of the AVA's total wine production based on 2011 data for

tonnage and planted acreage. The panel discussion, titled “What’s WHITE Hot?” was intended to show area producers the potential for both alternative and traditional white varieties as a way to diversify their portfolios and to attract new consumers.

UC Davis viticulture specialist Dr. Jim Wolpert said, “Only 10 varieties comprise 80% of the varietal wine business, but that is slowly changing.” He noted that the availability of more Mediterranean white varieties and clones from Foundation Plant Services (FPS) at UC Davis offer new opportunities. In recent years, Foothill growers have planted Albariño, Verdelho, Vermentino, Fiano, Greco di Tufo and non-traditional white Rhone varieties.

Wolpert suggested a list of criteria to consider in selecting varieties to plant: bud break not too early and ripening not too late (to avoid spring and fall frosts), rot should be manageable, fruit set reliable and yield acceptable.

Producers advised to experiment and adapt

Amador County winemaker Mark McKenna of Andis Wines encouraged producers to try new things and not be afraid to modify or even redefine varietal style and character. He advised, “Don’t try to make other peoples’ wines. Look to others for inspiration, but don’t try to fit a round peg in a square hole, make the wine and see what you can do with it.”

McKenna said, “Experiment, experiment, experiment. If it worked out once that’s great, but continue to work hard and creatively.” He suggested trying different winemaking techniques, different fermenting methods and equipment, and trying new yeasts.

He believes taming alcohol levels in Foothill whites is critical and advised picking earlier than traditional thinking suggests. McKenna provided samples of the Andis 2011 Sauvignon Blanc and 2011 Semillon from Amador that have respectively rated 93 and 92 points from *Wine Enthusiast*. The grapes for each were picked at 22° Brix and the wines were bottled with 12.9% alcohol. “By getting alcohol out of the way, regional climate and *terroir* will come through,” he said.

McKenna observed, “Given the diversity of our microclimates and elevations, from the Sierra slopes to the border with Lodi, I don’t think there is anything we can’t grow.” He concluded, “This is an exciting time for our region to evolve enologically and creatively.”

Vineyard consultant and grower Mark Skenfield operates Vinescapes in Calaveras County. He discussed his experience working with Sauvignon Blanc in a diverse range of Foothill locations and adapting it to each site with different rootstocks, trellis systems, and irrigation and nutritional inputs. “I grow Sauvignon Blanc in different conditions, at different elevations, and it’s proven to be successful in a number of locations, but it demonstrates that we have to make adaptations in our management and winemaking styles as we move forward in planting new varieties,” Skenfield observed. [Click for guide to enable.](#) CLOSE

Chuck Hovey has made wine in Calaveras County for more than 30 years and currently produces wines for the Stevenot label, for Gianelli Vineyards in nearby Tuolumne County, and his own label Hovey Wines. Hovey provided a sample of 2010 Gianelli Estate Vermentino with a pH of 3.25 and 13.4% alcohol. After producing it for five vintages, he said it does best with stainless steel fermentation, and harvest requires good timing. “Pick too early and it can be too green and tart, but if picked too late it can be too flabby,” he explained. Optimum picking provides crisp, orange blossom and grapefruit flavors that go well with seafood.

Hovey also produces a barrel-fermented Chardonnay from the Gerber Vineyard in Calaveras County that sells most of its Chardonnay to Rodney Strong Vineyards in Sonoma County. Hovey has produced Chardonnay for 30 years and firmly believes there is a place in the Foothills for good quality Chardonnay production. Making a general observation about the AVA, he said, “We’ve come so far in the last 10 to 15 years. We’re at a critical mass, and we need to continue to raise the bar.”

Riesling and Rhones

Madrona Vineyards winemaker and vineyard manager Paul Bush focused on Riesling that his family has grown in a 3,000-foot elevation estate vineyard near Camino in El Dorado County since 1974. Grapes are picked at different times and ripeness to produce three different styles for bottling—dry, off-dry and a late-harvest dessert wine with Botrytis. He offered a sample of the 2010 Dry Riesling that highlights its tart acidity with a pH of 2.95, but balanced with floral and honey characters.

Bush said, “I think Riesling has a great future in the Sierra Foothills, not just in cooler, higher elevations, but I think it will work in many soils and climates in the region if managed properly and harvested at the right time.” Riesling is susceptible to Botrytis, but it tends to bud later than other white varieties and is resistant to powdery mildew.

Madrona takes pride in experimenting with different grapes, growing 27 varieties on 70 acres of vineyards. White wines comprise 35% of the winery’s 12,000-case annual production. Madrona also produces Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, Moscato Giallo and a Rhone blend called “Melange” with Marsanne, Roussane and Viognier. Bush said millennial wine consumers (ages 21-31) are interested in trying new varieties, and they don’t tend to have brand loyalty. “These different varieties provide a good introduction to the winery and help bring millennial consumers into our tasting room, where we can educate them about the diversity in our own vineyards and about the Sierra Foothills,” Bush explained.

Ron Mansfield has been a grower and vineyard manager since 1980 with Goldbud Farms in El Dorado County, where he focuses on Rhone varieties. He grows grapes on 160 acres in a variety of soils ranging in elevation from 1,200 to 3,400 feet, with 25% of the vineyards planted to white varieties.

He listed several factors that would make a Foothill white variety “hot”: The grapes must grow well at the vineyard site; there should be a market for the variety; it should have unique flavors to provide a niche; it

must produce favorable maturity numbers; it must be put in the right winemaker's hands, and some media buzz helps. He discussed seven Rhone whites he believes have the best potential for Foothill production:

Viognier: Does well on granite and clay soils and has good aromatics.

Roussanne: Nutritional and water status need to be watched closely, and it's sensitive to mildew. Can be harvested at low sugar—21°-22° Brix.

Marsanne: Can be a prolific producer and grow in all soil types, has moderate acidity and mineral character.

Rolle (Vermentino): Does well in granite and clay soils. It's getting a lot of interest, and more is being planted. Acidity is important at harvest.

Grenache Blanc: Can grow in all soils. Can stand on its own or be blended, important to watch acidity.

Picpoul Blanc and Petit Manseng: Mansfield will harvest his first crop for wine this year from these varieties that he admits could be two longer-shots.

Mansfield manages the estate vineyards at David Girard Vineyards in El Dorado County. Mari Wells Coyle has been winemaker at Girard since 2004, producing Rhone varietals and blends. She provided a sample of the 2010 Coda Blanc, a blend of Roussanne, Rolle, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc and Viognier. The grapes were all harvested at the same time at an average of 21.9 Brix and co-fermented, all in stainless steel.

Coyle has worked with grapes picked as low as 20° Brix. They can produce good wines, and in some years, this avoids the risk of fruit degradation that can occur during hot spells in September. "Even though we don't wait and wait for flavors to develop, we can get very good wines, and we see varietal characters show up during fermentation," she observed. She concluded, "Having a white portfolio is good to show our market that we have more diversity in our products and to overcome the perception that we (Foothill wineries) just produce big, overripe reds."

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