

## Industry Roundtable: Legends

Three iconic winemakers reveal the stories behind their success

Lance Cutler

**Lance Cutler** has been a working winemaker in Sonoma County for 35 years. He has been a contributing editor for *Wine Business Monthly* for more than 10 years. His unique perspective on winemaking has led to our Industry Roundtable series and our Varietal Focus series. Lance is also the author of four books including *The Tequila Lover's Guide to Mexico*.

**THE IDEA FOR THIS** roundtable was to collect three iconic winemakers, plunk them down at the table and see what happened. We wanted to know why they had selected the particular variety or varieties for which they had become famous. We wondered about which winemaking practices they had embraced and which ones they had tried, but abandoned. That would be enough.

Once we sat down, I realized that this was a roundtable unlike any other. There was no heated interchange of ideas, no real give and take. Instead, each of these winemakers would tell their story, uninterrupted by the others, whose rapt attention was palpable. They patiently took turns, reveling in stories that were parallel but individually unique. Sitting at the table, it seemed as if they were veering off on wild tangents that had nothing to do with my questions, but then I realized that each of these gentlemen had made history, and they were telling it in their own way and in their own words as they best remembered it.

**Paul Draper** has been winemaker at **Ridge Winery** since 1969. It's where he pioneered vineyard-designated wines and championed Zinfandel as a classic varietal. He has been a staunch advocate for cool-climate sites, traditional, natural winemaking and the importance of terroir. For decades he has been one of California wine's finest ambassadors, both in the United States and abroad.

**Josh Jensen's** unwavering belief in the importance of terroir and limestone soils for Pinot Noir led him to the Gavilan Mountains where he used traditional Burgundian winemaking techniques to make **Calera Wine**, one



Paul Draper

Josh Jensen

Steve Edmunds

of the first great California Pinot Noir producers to ever be compared to French Burgundy.

**Steve Edmunds** went from being a retail wine buyer to California's earliest and foremost proponent of Rhône varietals. His **Edmunds St. John** wines have championed the concept of ripe fruit at lower sugars and delicious wines at lower alcohols. He convinced growers, almost single-handedly, to embrace Rhône varietals, and now grapes like Grenache, Mourvedre, Roussane and Viognier are part of the California winegrowers' lexicon.

### *How did you get started and why did you start with the varieties you did?*

**Paul:** It all goes back to the '60s. Bordeaux was it. There was tremendous availability of those wines, including the first growths at very reasonable prices. To a degree, Americans could understand Bordeaux as opposed to Burgundy. Whether it was the vintages or the individual domaines, Burgundy was much more difficult to understand. You could sit down with your friends with some of the top growths when the new vintages arrived,

and people could actually recognize the differences between the chateaux. It allowed you a framework for understanding wine that Burgundy didn't seem to offer. Tasting great wines at affordable prices became my greatest education as a winemaker.

I had been tasting California Cabernets from the '40s, '50s and '60s. I had the great fortune to try a number of wines made right after Prohibition ended. I tasted most of the **Inglénooks** from 1934 to 1939 and **La Questa**, which was one of the highest-priced Cabernets in California from the 1890s

to the start of Prohibition in 1920. I tasted their 1936 and the more famous 1938. That '38 was of the quality of a great vintage of Bordeaux in terms of complexity and depth. I had not seen that kind of quality again in California from the 1940s through the 1960s.

The guys at Ridge had heard me lecture on our Chilean wine venture with my partner, **Fritz Maytag**. They offered me the winemaker's position at Ridge. They were making Cabernet and Chardonnay from vines which were replanted in the '40s on the Monte Bello property they had purchased in 1959. I tasted their 1962 Cabernet, their first commercial vintage, and their 1964 vintage. Here I was, tasting 1962 and 1964 Monte Bello from guys who had never made wine before in their lives.

Literally, they had picked the grapes, put them through a small crusher/stemmer into an open-top tank, put a submerged cap grid on top and came back each weekend. They added no yeast or anything else. They pressed when it went dry, mixed free run and press together and put it into barrels. In the spring, it went through malolactic on its own. They racked it once every six months for three years and then they bottled it. So here was this '62 and '64 that compared to those great California wines of the '30s and to me were better than anything I was seeing at that time in California.

These guys had done nothing and look what they had made. I realized they didn't get in the way with winemaking technique, so it had to be this piece of ground. I liked the guys and their families. I realized if I accepted the job, I would have the chance to make something really good. That's how I joined Ridge. I joined Ridge for Cabernet. That's all I knew. I had heard of this thing called Zinfandel, but at that time I'd never had a decent bottle.

**Josh:** Growing up in the little town of Orinda, I got exposed to wines by my Dad's dearest friend, Dr. **George Selleck**, who was a great wine collector. He was a friend of **Professor Amerine** at **UC Davis** and the then small, post-World War II wine community based in San Francisco. He had me sniffing and tasting wines when I was 13 years old. He was my first wine mentor. By the time I was 21, I had tasted all of the great Bordeaux, as well as the great red and white Burgundies.

I went off East to college and got more interested in wine as the years went by. I went to grad school at **Oxford**. Forty years later when I met **Jean Michel Cazes**, I told him that back in those Oxford days we would go off to dinner at these little restaurants, and **Chateau Lynch Bages** was our favorite wine. Jean Michel liked the idea that Lynch Bages was something that college kids could afford.

In the meantime, all of my friends were in medical school and law school, getting degrees and starting their careers, but none of those appealed to me, nor did anything else. I just kept getting a longer and longer list of jobs I was rejecting. Finally, about the time I was 25, I had been living in Europe for about five years, and I thought to turn the question around. What turns me on? What's exciting? I had to conclude that it was my love of wine.

So I went to Burgundy and knocked on the door of the most famous winery there, whose wines I'd been able to taste with Dr. Selleck, **Domaine de la Romanee-Conti**. I picked grapes there for 10 days in 1970. The following year I met **Jacques Seyesses**, who had started **Domaine Dujac** in 1968. I picked grapes there in 1971.

I came back to California determined to find what my Burgundian mentors told me was the key ingredient, which was limestone. The Côte d'Or in Burgundy is a 30-mile long limestone ridge. All of the great vineyards are



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planted on the east-facing flanks, downhill from the ridge at the top, so they have different aged limestone debris that had eroded and washed down the hill over thousands of years.

Back in California, I met with geologists and went to the **State Bureau of Mines** office. They said they had bad news because there wasn't much limestone in this state. It is mostly granite and other things. I bought their geologic maps, which were not soil maps. They showed potential quarry sites. I looked at these maps carefully with a magnifying glass all over Napa County and found zero limestone. I looked all over Sonoma County. . . zero limestone.

I also knew you needed to be somewhat close to the ocean, which was the big air conditioning unit of our state. If you were too far inland, it would be too hot, especially for Pinot Noir. If you were too close to the ocean, you wouldn't get your grapes ripe. I spun my wheels for just over two years and eventually concentrated my search on San Benito County, which is where we are located. There was some limestone, as well as dolomite, which is limestone's first cousin.

In the meantime, a mutual friend had introduced me to **Dick Graff** at **Chalone**. Their vineyards were planted on limestone-derived soils called calcareous soils. I had a similar experience to Paul's at Ridge. I tasted Chalone's one barrel of Pinot Noir from the '71 harvest. I realized it could be done here; literally, it could be done. The vineyard property I bought, in 1974 after 2¼ years of searching, was 18 miles north of Chalone in the same Gavilan Mountains and about 600 feet higher in elevation. It averages 2,200 feet above sea level.

**Steve:** I got into the business in 1972 in the retail end of things. As Paul mentioned, it was a time that you could find all of the great French wines in abundance from numerous vintages for really cheap money. At that time, there weren't many California wines to be had by comparison and not much that was particularly compelling. I spent about 12 years as a wine buyer for a number of different stores, and I made some homemade wines at that particular time.

I kind of witnessed the explosion that happened to the California wine business in the early to mid-70s. Early on, most California wineries made everything from soup to nuts. They made Chablis, Burgundy, Chianti and Rhine wine. They would also make Zinfandel, Cabernet and Pinot Noir, Champagne and Port. In the mid-70s, California was finally recovering from the disaster of Prohibition. It also started producing wines that people needed to pay attention to. That all came to a head in the famous Paris tasting in 1976.

Suddenly, California wineries started focusing on Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, maybe with a bit of Sauvignon Blanc. Pinot Noir wasn't yet discussed in polite company. Nobody was having too much success with it. After a while, I got the feeling that wine wasn't as interesting as it used to be. After a while, there were just too many of the same thing. I felt California wine was becoming less interesting than it had been. It seemed like everyone was trying to make the same wine. I felt California had the potential to make really interesting wines, but it didn't have to be all Cabernet and Chardonnay.

Because I didn't own my own wine shop and worked for other people, I got burned out. At the end of the '70s I took a hiatus from full-time employment. I took care of my kids and managed the household while my first wife went back to work as a jeweler. Then I became a mailman. Things changed, including that I was no longer with my first wife. The woman I took up with, who is my wife now, said, "You don't want to be a mailman for the rest of your life. Why don't you think of something you really want to do?"

It was like Josh was saying. What I really wanted to do was some wine-making in California that other people weren't doing. I spent the most of the

beginning of 1985 drawing unemployment checks and tasting wine, trying to think about what kind of wine I really wanted to make. Again and again, I found myself coming back to wines from the Rhône region

of France and the wines of Northern Italy. Given the fact that I had no chance of owning land and planting vines, due to a lack of financial resources, I had to figure which of these wines I might be able to make. The grapes I knew I could find and purchase were Grenache, Mourvedre and Carignane.

One night, my wife and I went to **Chez Panisse**, which was just around the corner from where we lived, and I tried a **Qupé** Syrah. I tasted that wine and thought, "This is it! You can really do this here." Pretty much at that moment, we decided to go ahead and do this.

Then it became a question of finding good fruit sources. I knew I could get Syrah from the place **Bob Lindquist** had gotten his. I found access to some Grenache from **Marston Vineyard** up on Spring Mountain. Most importantly, I found a small planting of 60-year-old Mourvedre at the **Brandlin Vineyard** on Mt. Veeder. The vines were dry-farmed on a south-facing slope, a ridiculously good site for Mourvedre.

I had made wine as a home winemaker but never with the mass quantities of the grapes that we took in that year. For the most part, with the Syrah and the Grenache, I was totally winging it. There was something going on with the Mourvedre. The grapes were so beautifully farmed that they were like jewels in your hand when you picked up a bunch of them. In the fermenter, the smell was really extraordinary. I was foot stomping the grapes, wearing a pair of shorts, and the feel of the must against my skin made me feel that the grapes were telling me, "Just pay attention. Don't worry and it will all work out." That's what happened. We made really good wine from those grapes.

It made me think, "I'm a winemaker but what am I really doing here? I didn't go to Davis. I have no formal wine training. I understand that I need to keep everything really clean, and I need to make sure that once the wine is pressed off and goes into barrel that I don't let any air get in there." But that is kind of like standing back and letting the wine make itself. Anybody could do that. It was an important question to me: to figure out what kind of active role I could play that would ensure that the grapes would realize their greatest potential.

Interestingly, the next year the Mourvedre from that vineyard became almost instant legend. Everyone who tasted it seemed to have a jaw-dropping experience. **Kermit Lynch** brought **François Peuraud** from **Domaine Tempier** in Bandol to taste in early '87. He tasted everything in the cellar, and I never saw his stone-faced expression change at all. Then when he tasted the Mourvedre, he stopped and smelled the wine for a long time. His head came up, and his eyes kind of rolled, and he took this deep breath and let out this sigh and said, "*La terre parle*," which means "the earth speaks." The whole room let out a cheer.

It was such a signal moment for me. This was the important thing. There was something in those grapes that was there to be discovered or revealed or somehow coaxed along. Really, my job was just to pay attention to what the grapes were trying to tell me and make sure that nothing got in the way of that wine finding its way into the bottle.

### *How did you devise your winemaking techniques?*

**Paul:** You need to understand that by 1933, there was virtually nobody who knew how to make wine because for those 13 years of Prohibition no one was doing it. In 1933, some wineries brought back people who had been



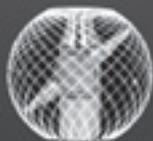


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making wine before Prohibition forced them to retire. So from 1933 to 1939, these people were making wine using the same traditional methods they had in the past. Not everywhere: **Louis Martini**, who had started after Prohibition, was basically using the modern winemaking techniques being developed at UC Davis.

These other guys had been trained in traditional winemaking, and from the 1880s on in California those techniques were making very good wines. In those days winemaking was international. There was no question that the way you made fine wine was to use *vinifera* grapes and the techniques used in Europe, techniques that evolved over hundreds of years of practical experience.

One of the tastings we did was with Zinfandels from the 1930s. The **Fountain Grove**, the **Larkmead** and of course the **Simi '35** were terrific at 40 years of age, but they all had tons of sediment in the bottle. When we got to the '41 Martini, it was squeaky clean. It had no complexity. You could pour it out and the bottle was clean. For me, that was what UC Davis had brought to the industry.

What I became convinced of, starting with that Martini but even the wines of the '50s and '60s, was that those wines weren't as complex and didn't have the depth of the great wines that had been made by more traditional methods. I had to find out how to make those wines. I found a book called *The Wine Press and the Cellar: A Manual for the Winemaker and Cellar Man* by **Emmet Hawkins Rixford**, the owner of La Cuesta. It was first published in 1883. He told you what to do in both the vineyard and the winery day by day. I couldn't find anything like that at Davis.


He referred to a Bordelaise writing in the 1870s named **Raymond Boireau**. I read French by then. So I had the book from Rixford, and then I had even more detail from Boireau. That's what I used in Chile and then at Ridge. Today we have incredible equipment, much gentler than what they had in the 19th century, but those techniques used by 19th century California and Bordeaux winemakers are what we do today at Ridge. We have not moved on. Bordeaux and California have.

We don't use room temperature evaporation or reverse osmosis. We don't use modern additives. We will use additions if they are needed, but we use the ones that have been used for at least 100 to 200 years. Everything we do to the wine at Ridge is on the label now: since 2011 in the U.S. and 2012 internationally.

In the mid-'60s at Ridge, the partners started to look for grapes to purchase because they had so little production from that Monte Bello Vineyard. While they replanted more of the abandoned parcels, they had to somehow support the costs. They looked all over for quality Cabernet, but only young fruit was available. At the base of our mountain, they found a small 19th century Zinfandel vineyard that was no longer being cared for. In 1964 **Dave Bennion** asked the owners if he could prune those vines and purchase the grapes. They agreed. I made that Zinfandel in 1969, and I had never had a good Zinfandel. This stuff was incredible. So in my first year at Ridge, I developed a second love, which was Zinfandel, but I came to Ridge focused on Cabernet.

Monte Bello Ridge is all fractured limestone. People say that they taste the limestone in our wines. I don't know about that. Our vineyard is between 1,400 and 2,700 feet. Our summer nights are very cool. We have high acidity. We think the cooler climate has more to do with the character of the wine than does the minerality—although that minerality is a component. Our 24-hour period during the growing season is as cool as Bordeaux, but colder at night and warmer during the day. Consequently, we have much better acidity than

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Bordeaux has. Our yields are much lower because our soils are so poor.

**Josh:** A lot of what I did was to look at what Chalone was doing at the time. We planted on St. George rootstock, used 6x10 spacing, had trellis wires, cane-pruned and drip-irrigated, which was quite new then. I had notes from my time at Romanee Conti and Dujac where I would pester every winemaker I could find and drove them crazy with questions, writing the answers down in my little spiral notebook. I brought most of that information back, and shared that information with Dick Graff.

Dick had written two very seminal articles with **Andre Tchelistcheff** about French oak barrels and how they were made and which forests they used. He started importing those barrels from France. He imported barrels primarily from the **Sirugue** cooperage. He once had been invited to lunch at the Sirugue's family house. Madame Sirugue brought out a dozen plump, gorgeous escargots Bourignon. Dick pounded them down, so she asked if he would like more, and she brought him another dozen. He downed those and was full, but it turns out the escargot was only the first course. His heart belonged to Sirugue after that.

So, I basically just copied what Chalone was doing. Chalone had 18 vines that years earlier had come from buds brought in from a top vineyard in Burgundy. I wanted to make sure I had the real McCoy because everybody agreed there was a lot of crap—meaning poor quality so-called Pinot Noir plant material—floating around in California. Even Washington, D.C., the primary government regulator of our industry, was lax. At that point, they were allowing Napa Gamay to be sold and labeled as Pinot Noir.

To me, that was the ultimate nightmare. I would do all of this work, look all over California for limestone, finally find this place with no water and other issues, and then if I planted crappy Napa Gamay I wouldn't have a prayer of making the great wine I aspired to make. I wanted to make sure we had true Pinot Noir, so I got cuttings from Chalone that I knew were the real deal. That was all I wanted.

If the cuttings had come from Chambertin, I didn't think my wines would taste like Chambertin. If they came from Pommard, I didn't think our wine would taste like Pommard. All I wanted was to have a fair chance, by using the true, potentially high-quality Pinot Noir plant material. We used St. George rootstock throughout, mostly because that is what Chalone was using. Our site is cooler than Chalone and receives more rainfall. We have low yields, and I think that contributes to good quality.

**Steve:** For me, sourcing grapes was the major issue. That first year's Syrah from Estrella River was not being farmed well, and it was being managed worse. The grapes we got in 1985 made decent wine but only at 10.5 percent alcohol. They really weren't ripe. I was convinced I couldn't rely on the vineyard manager, so I had to find a new source of Syrah. I also knew that the little bit of Mourvedre I was getting was not enough to make a decent amount of wine, so I needed to find more of that.

I set out to find people who could grow grapes for me. I visited a lot of people in Sonoma County when someone suggested I contact **Steve Hill**, who was up in Sonoma Valley growing Syrah for **Kenwood Winery**. They had been using it in their red table wine program but were discontinuing that program. I got a hold of Steve and signed on to take fruit from the Durrell Vineyard, which pretty soon after that came to be regarded as one of the best Syrah vineyards in California. It was the Shiraz 1 clone from Davis, but it was on AXR-1 rootstock.

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The wine that Syrah produced absolutely blew my doors off. I couldn't have imagined what an eye-opener it was. Even when it had just started to ferment, it was blowing off aromatics and smelled like it had already been in wood. It was smoky, and the whole winery smelled like Parma ham. It was amazing, but it became apparent pretty quickly in talking to growers around Sonoma and Napa County that nobody wanted to grow this stuff for me. They knew they could grow Cabernet Sauvignon and make way more money off of it. When I told them I would pay the same price for Syrah that they were getting for Cabernet, they countered by saying if I got hit by a truck, they'd have no place to sell the grapes.

So, hearing that a lot of the French winemakers who had visited California found the foothills very interesting, I made an appointment to visit and was introduced to **Ron Mansfield**. It was 1988, and at that time, Ron primarily ran his own orchard company near Placerville called **Goldbud Farms**. He had planted some experimental grape varieties just to see what might do well up there. He said he would sell me Syrah and that if I liked it, he would graft the other rows over to Syrah for me.

I took the grapes and made a barrel of this **Fenaughty Vineyard** Syrah, and it smelled like Côte Rotie. I asked Ron to graft over the vines to Syrah. That same spring the **Perrins** from **Beaucastel** had come. Jean Pierre loved my first Mourvedre; and when he tasted the Fenaughty Syrah, they proclaimed it had a salty character. They were already looking to plant here in California and were searching for the right site, which eventually turned out to be in Paso Robles, but I think those two wines convinced them that California could make formidable Rhône-style wines.

I started working with Ron, and I have been working with him ever since. He has gradually become more and more of a grape grower than an orchard guy because grapes have become more lucrative than apples, pears and plums. Then he became a wine grower. He actually took me to France in 2002 because he wanted to have a close look at what they are doing over there. He has been willing to plant Vermentino, Grenache Blanc, and he was the only guy in California I could trick into planting Gamay for me. He is planting all kinds of things up there that no grower would touch in 1985 or 1986.

### *How are you making your wine?*

**Paul:** It was those two books that gave me a basis in winemaking. They both gave directions on what to do day by day. It was very simple and basic, but mostly about stepping back and not getting in the way of the grapes.

From the very beginning we used the natural yeast, destemmed and handled the fruit as gently as possible. We hand-selected in the vineyard so the grapes were really clean. The yields were very low. Fermentations started within three days and have ever since. I use natural yeast philosophically because winemaking is a natural process. With wine, it is a matter of guiding that process, being a mentor, being a parent and bringing up this child—keeping it on the straight and narrow, keeping it off drugs and not letting it go wrong, if you can help it. But you didn't actually make it. It's really overseeing the process, and the more experience you have watching this process the more intelligent you can be with your guidance.

Initially, we were using a grid to hold down the cap. You'd place the grid on top, about 3 or 4 inches under the juice. Then you would nail some short



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pieces of 2-by-4s to the open-top oak tank to hold it in place while the grapes fermented. One great thing was that you had this juice surface with virtually no skins so your volatiles stayed low, and you got this very gentle, steady extraction. We used that with Cabernet and then with Zinfandel. I backed off on using it with the Cabernet very early because there is so much tannin in Cabernet that you need to be more in charge of the extraction. With submerged cap, it was all happening naturally, but in those years where seed tannins are really expressive and coming out, you might miss it and end up with some overly extracted wine before you knew what was happening. So with Cabernet we started pumping over for better control of those tannins.

For years, the majority of our Zinfandel was submerged cap because Zinfandel is not a highly tannic grape. That long, steady submerged cap was good. Depending on the year, we still do a quarter or as much as a third submerged cap on our Zinfandel. We never used those big pumps to blast the cap because that diminishes all the nuance and complexity. We would pump-over, but spray or irrigate with gentle, rudimentary inventions of our own doing.

From there, we'd go to barrel for malolactic, which was all natural with no inoculation whatsoever. In Chile, I had met a French winemaker whose family owned a small chateau in Bordeaux. I asked him about the history of barrel-aging wine. He had done his thesis at the **University of Bordeaux** on oak aging and had referenced a study done on the spectacular 1900 Bordeaux vintage. They used all of the first growths and put two oak barrels from each of the six different regions in each chateau. The wines were in the barrels for three years before bottling. They blind tasted all of the wines every year, first in barrel and then for seven more years in bottle.

In the 19th century, Bordeaux had access to oak from all over the world because Bordeaux was a port city. None of the top growths used French oak. In the 19th century, Baltic oak was their favorite. In this experiment of six different regions, the three favorites were Baltic: Riga, Stettin and Lubeck. The fourth favorite was *quercus alba*, American white oak. Fifth favorite was Bosnian. The least favorite in all of the chateaux was center of France.

My friend told me if I air-dried rather than kiln-dried, and I coopered correctly so the toast level was right and so on, then I should have something that was as good, or better than French oak. Having tasted the quality and character of the '62 and '64 Monte Bello aged in neutral oak, I was concerned that if I used French oak, I would be making imitation Bordeaux. I decided to use American oak. How the barrel is made is very important. You have to select the oak carefully and air-dry it and learn which coopers can make good barrels consistently. Our American barrels work beautifully with our wines.

**Steve:** My winemaking hasn't really changed much since 1988 and 1989. Steve Hill taught me how to walk a vineyard until I know if the fruit is ripe or not. That takes practice and time. I count on what my nervous system tells me to determine the point at which the flavor in the fruit is at a peak. Somehow my body comprehends it better than my ability to articulate it. The acidity in the fruit can focus the flavors and integrate what is there. If you get beyond a certain point, that integration starts to come apart. I feel

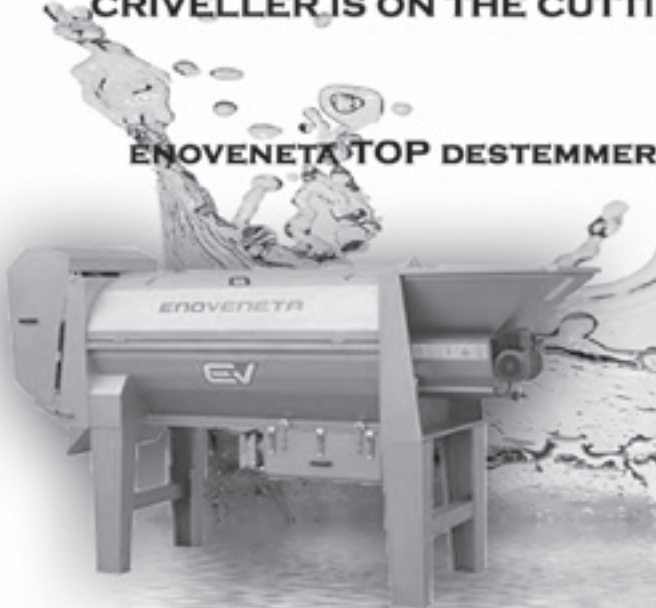




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very confident in basing a picking decision on tasting fruit repeatedly over a period of several weeks before I pull the trigger.

The one measurable, quantifiable component, and one I pay really close attention to, is pH. I think if the vines are farmed properly and they are in balance, and the grower knows what the hell he is doing, then the pH moves in a predictable way.

Another event was important to my winemaking. In 1989 I was invited to a tasting in Chicago with **Robert Mayberry**, who wrote a book about the wines of the Rhône. He spent summers living in the Rhône, and he knew all of the growers. He knew exactly what they had planted and what kind of ground they had and what their winemaking regimens were. We did a tasting of Côtes du Rhône village wines: Wines made in a style that emphasized freshness. We were tasting wines from the previous 1988 vintage all the way back to '73 and '74. All of those wines were still very fresh and very lovely. They were not stereotypical, big, oxidized, high-alcohol wines. They were really beautiful wines.

One of the things I was recognizing, especially for the 1988 wines, having just gone through the 1989 harvest at home, was that the primary fruit aromas in these French wines corresponded to some of the aromatic character of the grapes I was working with. I started to really question whether there was any benefit, at least with the grapes I was using, with putting wine into a barrel for a length of time.

California grapes get so ripe compared to grapes in a northern European climate that freshness is a critical issue. I feel like when I started to bottle my wines before the grapes from the next vintage got picked, I started liking the wines I was making a lot better. Over time I found that those wines age forever. I have wines from 1989 and since that are still fresh and have 15 to 30 years to go.

I think this is less a matter of acidity and more a matter of energy, which I correlate with pH. That is strictly intuitive. There is no scientific basis for it, but I think it is true. You can take red grapes, especially Syrah where the pH at picking is 3.1 or 3.2; and as you start to ferment that stuff, it will glow in the dark. It's like an energy source. I'm kind of extrapolating from that. The wines are never heavy or overweight. It is not atypical for me to pick Vermentino and Grenache Blanc under 22° Brix and have fabulous flavor development, really good structure and great acidity. The wine just pops. It's fun to drink.

One of the reasons I love working with Gamay is that it is a high acid grape to start with. To me, it always produces its very best wines at low alcohols. To make sense out of it in California, it only makes sense to plant it somewhere that is cool enough so you won't get more than 13 to 13.5 percent alcohol. That wine is always picked below a pH of 3.3, and I never go through malolactic with it. It makes a light wine with a tremendously energetic expression. It has beautiful fruit, and I defy anybody to tell me it's not ripe.

**Josh:** We use traditional Burgundian winemaking methods, by which I mean native yeast, whole cluster and punch-down only. Each day's picking becomes a separate fermentation lot and barrel-aging lot, which we blend at bottling when we might select out certain parts. We combine press and free run wines automatically because trials we've run to keep them separate didn't impress us. So, we'll press into a tank, let the wine settle for 24 hours and rack into French oak barrels. From day one, and it has never changed, 30 percent of our barrels are brand new for each of our now six single-vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noirs and also our Mt. Harlan Chardonnay.

We've gone to not racking the wines at all. In the beginning, 1978, we racked about three times a year. We've evolved to a single racking in the '80s, until now we don't rack at all. That change in methodology is not Burgundian.



They rack barrel to barrel. Currently, we put the wine in the barrel and it stays there for 16 months if there is not a problem. If there is a problem, then we move it and clean it up. More than 90 percent of our single-vineyard wines are in their individual barrels for the entire 15 or 16 months.

Our decision to not rack is based on why I call Pinot Noir the “especially” variety. Almost any general platitude you can say about winemaking, you can then add, “and especially Pinot Noir.” Racking removes some color from wine, especially Pinot Noir, but Pinot Noir is inherently color-deficient from the starting point. Racking also removes some of the middle palate flavors. Another general wine rule is that filtration removes some middle flavors and some color, especially Pinot Noir, so we have never filtered any of our Pinot Noirs, even our entry-level Pinots.

One change we’ve made is to do less fining. From day one, we’ve fined our Pinots exclusively with fresh egg whites. In the early ’80s we’d use five or six per 60-gallon barrel. Now we use between three-quarters and 1¼ egg whites per barrel. It’s used more for clarification and mouth feel as opposed to tannin removal. It adds a bit of polish.

You know, looking back on things, the main difference between wineries when we got in the business and now, is that now most wineries are like us. In the old days, U.S. wineries made all types of wine under one roof: everything from red, white and pink to sparkling, Port and Madera. We don’t do that. We are specialists. We focus on a single variety or a couple of varieties, instead of trying to make everything under the sun.

**Paul:** If you have access to a fine vineyard, one that shows distinctive character and quality, you have a chance at fine wine. With fine fruit you can watch over the natural process rather than “making” the wine. Fine fruit does not need modern additives, but each individual wine does need its minimum effective level of SO<sub>2</sub> to consistently show its distinctive quality.



It was an overwhelming and humbling experience to be present at this roundtable. The room was filled with living, breathing California wine history, and the respect the winemakers held for one another was profound. Between them they had close to 120 harvests and had made thousands of fantastic wines. While each person’s story was different, every one of these iconic winemakers began by tasting great wines from all over the world. They all embraced traditional winemaking principles and techniques, and they worked to produce their wines as naturally as possible.

It is easy to venerate these illustrious winemakers but what I liked best was their sense of humor: the way they laughed with each other and joked about themselves. Another thing I appreciated was that they loved to drink wine. We had wine with lunch, wine on the porch after the interview and then more wine with dinner. Maybe what makes wine so magical is that those of us who make it love it so. [WBM](#)



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