



University of California Cooperative Extension:
El Dorado and Amador Counties



FOOTHILL VINEYARD NEWS

*A newsletter produced for foothill wine grape growers and grape industry by your local
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ISSUE #3 : THE MARKETING ISSUE

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“Differentiating the Foothills: Defining and Marketing What Can Set Us Apart” was the title for the marketing panel session I arranged for this year’s Grape Day, held June 5, and I am thankful to Bill Easton, Stuart Spencer and Mike Dunne for giving us honest and thoughtful presentations that left me (and hopefully some of you) energized to continue a dialog on how the foothills can step up to the marketing plate. In this issue I do my best to summarize these presentations

Lynn Wunderlich
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Bill Easton, President, winemaker and grower of Terre Rouge and Easton Wines located in Amador County, began the marketing panel presentations with a candid and insightful critique of how the Sierra Foothill region has been lagging behind other California grape growing regions with regard to marketing, and what we might do to close that gap. *The Sierra Foothills, having “sat on our laurels for too long” is often regarded as the “poor stepchild” of the California winegrape world, Bill said, and is frequently misunderstood.* This is due, in part, to our inland location. The wine magazine-business is “coastal centric”, Bill noted, and the foothill region lacks a great city to act as corporate headquarters with a large amount of capital in-flow or commerce to fuel where marketing publications prefer to be located, and consequently, prefer to write about. What the foothills does have, however, is the terroir to produce quality grapes and wines, whereas many other California regions are simply too fertile and have to manage the fertility to get where we already are (or have potential to be).

What makes a region great? Terroir, and knowing how to talk about it. Our terroir is responsible for more minerality in our whites, Bill said. European regions can create a romantic story for the U.S. market, because of their idealized mystique. But in order for one to know how to talk about quality, one needs to know what quality is. This means drinking other wines, and not just your own, Bill suggested. You need to develop a story for the gatekeepers, don’t make it too complicated or detailed but be accurate, and repeat it over, and over, and over and over....

Frame the terroir, with relation to soils, soil temperature, and the role of elevation. And negate the old talk, the dated and inaccurate information from the 1970s that is so often used to describe the foothills, still. Bill believes the Sierra Foothills has much more grape growing potential. There are 2.6 million acres in the Sierra Foothills, and maybe we haven’t seen all of the great grape growing spots yet, maybe we have just been growing in the easiest places. What we need to do, Bill said is grow varieties in areas that push our expertise.

With regards to **the “Foothill Rhone niche”**, Bill gave the following comments for several Rhone varieties:

- Grenache is a wonderful blending grape. For ageability, structure and color, you need other varieties.
- Mourvedre grows much like Zinfandel, and has a more upright growth habit. It is late ripening, but can take a little rain. Bill described Mourvedre as animated with a wild character.
- Syrah is still a tough sell. It can lose its personality if over-cropped, over watered, and may be best in coolest sites where the white pepper spice and violet flavors can come forward. Grow a lot of clones to add complexity to the palate in the vineyard.
- Viognier excels here and likes granitic soils. The problem is the vague “fruit bowl” character that can develop with improper care.
- Marsanne is a great blending grape, with more aromatics and an apple-quince quality.
- Rousanne is the most complex of the Rhone whites, and makes a good stand alone wine. It ages well and has a raisiny-nutty character.
- Grenache-blanc has low alcohol, and is crisp and quick to bottle, but doesn’t age well.

In addition to the Rhones, Bill mentioned that he feels Cabernet Franc has a good variety fit in the foothills, and has not seen its potential here. In general, Bill said, the varieties that ripen towards the end of the season tend to be the best, with the most aromatics. And blending may produce the best foothill wines, citing the notable Sonoma winery Ridge blends in with their famously regarded Zinfandels.

We need a new level of professionalism in the foothills, Bill said. He noted that a problem for the foothills is what he referred to as the “vernacular winery”, those that arise with no previous experience. The positive to that situation is the personal approach, but the negative can be flawed winemaking and cutting corners in vineyard management. For this situation, Bill suggested to start small, do the best job you can possibly do, and hire a consultant, even if only for a few hours a year. Is your wine style random, Bill asked? The winemaker should set a style for your wines in your winery, and the terroir of the grapes should determine that style.

Lessons learned from Lodi/Woodbridge: Stuart Spencer. Stuart has been the Program Manager for the Lodi Winegrape Commission for 9 years, and is responsible for directing their marketing and educational activities committed to raising the awareness of Lodi wines and grapes. He is also the winemaker for St. Amant Winery and has a vineyard in Amador County that specializes in Spanish and Portuguese grapes. Stuart gave an overview of the steps Lodi took to get where they are today.

Stuart began by saying the US wine market is the most competitive in the world, and in 1991 Lodi, decided to address this competition by forming a Commission to assess themselves. The Lodi region has approximately 750 growers with about 90,000 acres, and their grape crop assessment raises about \$1 million annually. The mission of the Lodi Commission was to enhance their profitability, and their goals were to expand the number of wineries in the region and to gain a higher retail price for their wines. To do this, they took a steady and step-wise approach.

1: The Industry. Stuart said the first thing they did was to define who they were trying to reach. With the goal of expanding wineries and building awareness of Lodi wines, they soon realized that they could have great ads, but what about quality? To give growers a sense of what their vineyard was doing, quality comparison-wise, they had “Lodi” wine made from small lots. They then formed the “Lodi Technical Tasting Group” that met regularly to taste the best wines of the world and see how their own wines compared.

How do you add value in the field? Lodi growers adopted a voluntary Sustainable Viticulture Program which utilized field demonstrations and implementation. The workgroup used a self assessment test that was very instructive for individual growers. How is this program taken back to marketing? With a third party certification by “Protected Harvest”, the LODI RULES label is used when 85% of the grapes from a certified vineyard are in the bottle.

#2: The Trade. The goal to improve or create the image of “Lodi” wines was really about creating a sense of place, Stuart said. Often this is just creating a reputation. Lodi ads were launched. To assist with public relations, judging can be a means to intersect with the industry.

#3: The Consumer. The goal is to get spending wine drinkers to Lodi. To do this, they realized that the winery association and growers were on parallel paths. And they partnered with the city to launch a Visitor’s Center. Good relations with county planners allowed for this partnership, as the county recognized the value of their local industry.

Stuart’s suggestions:

- “Sierra Foothills” is the grower’s brand.
- Quality and image are essential. It is critical to exceed people’s expectations.
- Need to collaboratively work together to promote the “Sierra Foothills”. This takes leadership.
- Work the market.
- Get involved as individuals. But you need to look at the broader experience.

A media perspective: Mike Dunne of the Sacramento Bee. We were very fortunate to have Mike Dunne, food and wine writer for the Sacramento Bee newspaper, as our last speaker for the marketing panel. Mike summarized his talk on marketing foothill grapes and wines by giving us ten “tips”; provided below with his permission. Thanks Mike!

"Eureka!" Just Doesn't Do It Anymore, Or ...

Ten Ways to Let the World Know You've Found Gold in the Mother Lode

10. Know the media. Read the newspapers and magazines and watch the TV programs you want to entice up here. Ask yourself: Where do we fit in to their coverage?

9. Keep your Web site current. As soon as you enter a wine in a competition or release it, post its technical specifications and suggested retail price.

8. Save your press releases for when you really have something to say. A gold medal in a wine competition doesn't qualify. Nor does a rave review from Robert M. Parker Jr.

7. Think of what sets you apart. You all have stories to tell. What excites you about what you are doing? Use that excitement to draw attention to yourself.

6. Be honest and forthright in your dealings with the press, even if the topic is momentarily embarrassing. If you're candid, reporters remember.

5. Personalize your story at every opportunity. Make an emotional connection with your anticipated audience. Wine enthusiasts want to know what drives you.

4. Try this exercise: Encapsulate your brand's core values into three words. Disney: Fun family entertainment. Starbucks: Rewarding everyday moments.

3. Do more marketing collectively. Organize thematic tastings to which only media and trade are invited. Have growers and winemakers available to answer questions.

2. Consider some kind of multi-county event to bring more attention to the entire Sierra foothills. How about a wine auction to benefit some group serving the foothills? Say a box-lunch sale that would pair regional restaurants with regional wineries?

To most effectively promote your wines, multi-county teamwork is crucial. Until you start to think of the Sierra foothills as a single appellation, you aren't going to make the best use of your resources. One of the more effective wine-marketing people in the country is Jim Tresize, executive director of the New York Grape & Wine Foundation. Over the past 20 or so years Tresize has persuaded the vintners of such far-flung and disparate regions as Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley and Long Island to think of themselves as a single unit. He's done it in part by keeping everyone on point with a catchy slogan: "Diversity is our strength, unity our power." When you look at all the varietals grown in the foothills, all the sub-appellations and all the characters up here, you know you don't lack for diversity. All you need now is unity.

- Mike Dunne, The Sacramento Bee, June 5, 2008

