

Vineyard Vignettes

A behind-the-scenes glimpse of wine making in the North Bay

By Laura Hagar Rush
Photographs by Duncan Garrett

ACORN WINERY/ALEGRÍA VINEYARDS

Wines: Zinfandel, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, a Syrah blend, and a blended red

Planted acres: 27

Cases: 1800

Employees: 2

Contact: 12040 Old Redwood Highway, Healdsburg
707-433-6440 • www.acornwinery.com



Bill Nachbaur, owner of Healdsburg's Acorn Winery and Alegria Vineyards

When Bill and Betsy Nachbaur bought 31 acres south of Healdsburg in 1990, the prize of the property was the old Zinfandel vineyard, a mix of 100-year-old Zinfandel vines, with a sprinkling of Petit Syrah, Alicante Bouschet and nine other varieties. The exuberant variety of grapes in the old Zin vineyard inspired them to plant three new field-blend vineyards based on Sangiovese, Dolcetto and Syrah. The Sangiovese vineyard contains Sangiovese from seven different clones, plus a small planting of Canaiolo Nero and Mammolo

Toscano, grapes so rare in the United States that Nachbaur had to petition the Tax & Trade Board before he could list them on his label. The Dolcetto vineyard contains 94% Dolcetto, an Italian grape from the Piedmont region, plus Barbera and Freisa. The Syrah vineyard also includes Viognier, Cinsaut and Mourvèdre.

The Nachbours called their vineyards Alegría, which means happiness in Spanish. In 1996, they founded Acorn Winery, a boutique winery devoted to premium field-blend wines. Each year, the Nachbours select 25% of their crop for their own label. They sell the rest to other wineries: Rosenblum buys their Zinfandel, Russian Hill and Lost Canyon buys their Syrah, and their Sangiovese goes to Coyote Canyon.

Located at the northern end of the Russian River Valley appellation, Acorn Winery isn't much more than a few small, industrial-style farm buildings, located among vineyards along an unmarked dirt road. The main building houses both the winery

and the Nachbaur's home. Open for tastings by appointment only, Acorn makes old vine Zinfandel, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, a Syrah blend called Axiom and a blended red called Medley. Bill Nachbaur oversees all the winemaking, though much of the hands-on action happens at other locations with the help of several different consulting winemakers.

This year has been a banner year for Acorn's Zinfandel. Acorn's 2000 Heritage Vine Zinfandel won a Gold Medal at the 2003 San Francisco Chronicle Northern California Wines Competition and a Gold Medal/Best of Class at the New World International Wine Competition. *Wine Country Living* called it "gracefully complex, with cinnamon and citrus accents mixed into rich red fruits." Aged on 83% American oak, Acorn's Heritage Zin is crushed at Rosenblum Cellars, under Rosenblum winemaker Jeff Cohen. Cohen and Nachbaur taste and blend together, with the help of Acorn's consulting winemaker Alison Green Doran. Acorn's Sangiovese and Syrah are crushed and aged at Russian Hill, under winemaker Patrick Melley, with Nachbaur and Doran consulting. Their lively 2000 Sangiovese, with its rich mix of violets, cherry and smoke, earned a Silver medal at the 2003 Chronicle Wine Competition. (The wine's appealing violet character is due to the field-blend planting of Mammolo, which means violet in an Italian dialect.) Nachbaur does the hands-on winemaking for the Dolcetto and Medley, which are crushed and aged at Acorn. Their easy-to-like 1999 Dolcetto won a Gold Medal/Best of Class at the 2001 West Coast Wine Competition.

Acorns sells a third of its wines to restaurants and retailers, a third at the winery and a third out of state on the Internet. Like other members of Consorzio Cal Italia, a group of California growers specializing in Italian wine varieties, Nachbaur is chagrined by the public's lack of knowledge of Italian varieties. "It's taken longer for these things to catch on than I'd hoped," he says. "People aren't as adventurous as I might like, but usually, if people try these wines, they really like them because they work so well with the kind of Mediterranean-California cooking that most people are doing these days."





The vineyards and new tasting room at Calistoga Cellars.

CALISTOGA CELLARS

Wines: Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel, Merlot
 Planted Acres: 24
 Annual Cases: 5,000
 Tonnage: 80 tons
 Employees: 2
 Contact: 3080 Foothill Blvd., Calistoga
 1-888-393-WINE • www.calistogacellars.com

Roger Louer likes to say that he's just a farmer, but the man behind the creation of Calistoga Cellars is a wheeler-dealer par excellence. He had to be to pull together the far-flung, 35-person partnership that made this award-winning new winery possible. Louer, who has a degree in agriculture from Iowa State, is no stranger to the wine business. He owned the wine distribution company Grape Empire Wines in the 1970s and actually purchased a vineyard, now called Louer Family Vineyards, in St. Helena in 1985. After working in real estate for awhile, he moved back to Wisconsin to grow apples and cherries. It was there that he came up with a new and intriguing way of financing the winery that he had always dreamed of building in the Napa Valley. Knowing how difficult it is to find investors for wineries, Louer decided to tap into Napa Valley's allure as a vacation getaway. For an investment of \$30,000, Louer offered investors not just the cachet of being partners in a premium Napa winery, but the opportunity to vacation at the property as well. Louer brought several friends and family members in on the deal, and they brought in more friends and colleagues.

Louer searched for more than a year before finding Blossom Creek Acres, a lovely 12-acre property just north of Calistoga. The property had an elegant, Victorian-style farmhouse with fabulous views of Mt. Saint Helena, and vineyards planted to Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot. The partnership bought the property in 1996. Three years later they purchased a 14-acre parcel next door and planted Cabernet, Zinfandel and Merlot. Because of escalating land prices and the success of Calistoga Cellars at several important wine competitions, the winery's initial investors have seen their investment almost triple in value. The company recently sold another 10 shares for \$85,000 each to finance the building of a new winery and tasting room, which opened this September.

Louer says that having partners spread out across the United States has been key to the winery's national distribution network.

"We call our partners ambassadors for the winery," says Louer. "They're like having salesmen in every state. Our partners are the sort of people who go out a lot, and wherever they go, they ask for our wine. In fact, our philosophy has been that we only go into states where we have partners because they really help pull the wine through distributors."

Calistoga Cellars produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel. Their Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot are all estate grown. Until their new vineyards mature, the winery is currently purchasing Cabernet and Zinfandel grapes from other Napa growers, including Louer Family Vineyards. Crafted by consulting winemaker Barry Gnekow, their rich and layered 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon was a surprise winner in the over-\$25 division of the San Francisco Chronicle Wine competition this March, snagging Double Gold and Best of Class. Made with grapes from Louer's vineyard, this \$26 Cabernet beat out several \$70 wines. In the future, Calistoga Cellars plans to make two Cabernets, their Louer Vineyards Cab and a new estate Cabernet. The winery is doing well with other varietals as well. Calistoga Vineyard's Zinfandel, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc have been racking up gold, silver and bronze medals around the state.

WHITE ROCK VINEYARDS

Wines: Bordeaux Blend, Chardonnay
 Planted acres: 36
 Annual cases: 3,000
 Tonnage: 3-3.5 tons per acres
 Employees: 7
 Contact: 1115 Loma Vista Dr., Napa.
 707-257-7922 • <http://whiterockvineyards.com>



Bordeaux-trained Christopher Vandendriessche is the winemaker at his family's White Rock Vineyards

There is a lot to be said for focus—for choosing to do just one or two things and doing them very well, year after year. That's what the Vandendriessche family has been doing at White Rock Vineyards for the last 15 years. They make just two wines: Chardonnay and a Bordeaux blend which they call Napa Valley Claret. (Claret is the traditional British term for a blended red wine.)

White Rock Vineyards has a long history in the Napa Valley. The original White Rock Vineyards was founded in 1870 and operated as a vineyard up until the early sixties. Claire and Henri Vandendriessche purchased the 64-acre property in 1977. In 1979, they planted Chardonnay in the cool, loamy bottomland, and Cabernet, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot on the hillsides. The Vandendriesses made a commitment early on to use no pesticides in their vineyard. To avoid the use of herbicides, their vines are spaced widely enough to allow a tractor passage, and they



White Rock Vineyards

also hand hoe each vine. In 1989, they dug a series of caves in the rock of the eastern hillside. Their entire winery—fermentation tanks, barrel room, bottle storage, labeling area—is located inside the caves. Their son Michael is the vineyard manager, and their other son Christopher, who has a degree in enology from France's Bordeaux University, is the winemaker.

"Complexity" and "balance" are the key words for White Rock wines. The 1999 Napa Valley Claret is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon with 19% Cabernet Franc, 7% Merlot and 2% Petit Verdot. The grapes are picked and fermented separately, then blended. The claret is aged 22 months in the barrel on 30% new French Oak and a year and a half in the bottle. Noting the claret's intensity, distinctive cedar quality and earthy currant flavors, *The Wine Spectator* chose White Rock Vineyards' 1999 Napa Valley Claret as one of this year's

outstanding California Cabernets for \$50 or less.

White Rock Vineyards Chardonnay is equally complex and impressive. *Wine and Spirits* gave the winery's 2000 Chardonnay 89 points and noted its "cleanly stated pear and peach flavors." White Rock uses three different Chardonnay clones—a California clone and two Dijon clones—which are picked and fermented separately before blending. Christopher Vandendriessche does a partial malolactic fermentation by allowing a small percentage of the Chardonnay to go through full malolactic fermentation in the barrel before blending with the rest. At harvest, the grapes are picked in small boxes and hand-sorted. The Vandendriesses do whole-cluster pressing with their Chardonnay to preserve the delicate fruit flavors. Their Chardonnay spends one day in the tank to let the sediment settle out, then it's moved to French oak barrels where it stays until it's bottled. Their Chardonnay is barrel-aged for 10 months and then bottle-aged for another 8-10 months—a practice that Christopher sometimes has to explain to California buyers who are used to a faster turnaround.

"It takes time for Chardonnay to develop and for the flavors to come together. I would not want to sell a Chardonnay that hadn't aged for that amount of time, though a lot of wineries do. That's a pity because the wine doesn't taste anything like it's going to, and that's too bad for the consumer," says Christopher. "Sometimes even restaurant people question me on this. They look at me like, 'What? Couldn't you sell that last year?' They want you to bring them the wines that you bottled last week, but we won't do that. The difference in quality is just too huge."

White Rock Vineyards is open by appointment only (something they're strict about), but you can find and often taste their wines at the Sonoma Wine Shop in Sonoma and other select wine stores in the North Bay.

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MAYO FAMILY WINERY

Wines: Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon
Planted acres: 20
Tonnage: 50 tons
Annual cases: 5,000
Employees: 2
Contact: 13101 Arnold, Glen Ellen
707-938-9401 • www.mayofamilywinery.com

Successful North Bay Realtor Henry Mayo didn't plan on starting a winery when he purchased a part of the old Keiser Ranch estate in 1984. But six years later, after heart surgery, he reassessed what he wanted to do with the rest of his life and decided, with his wife Diane's support, that he wanted to open a winery. Located in a cool pocket valley at the foot of Mt. Sonoma, the Mayo's Laurel Hill Estate was too cool for red wine grapes, so they planted Chardonnay. Five years later, he released his first commercial vintage, and Mayo Family Winery was born. Mayo called his son Jeffrey back from a real estate career in Southern California to manage the winery. Mayo Family Vineyards has expanded year-by-year ever since, and now makes a broad range of single-vineyard designate wines from a handful of carefully selected vineyards around Sonoma and Napa counties.

"All we really care about are single-vineyard wines. That's all we make," says Jeffrey Mayo. "Any wines over \$30 made in a world-class area almost always come from a single vineyard where, for some reason, the soil, the climate, the farmer and the vines conspire to make superior wines. If you have good grapes and a farmer who doesn't over-crop in an area where the grapes fully



Wine tasting at Glen Ellen's Mayo Family Winery

ripen without ripening too early, then you've won a big part of the battle."

Though the Mayos only make 5,000 cases a year, they make an astounding variety of wines. They make two estate Chardonnays, a regular and a reserve from the Laurel Hill Vineyard. They do two different styles of Syrah, a northern Rhone-style from the Page-Nord Vineyard in Napa and a fruitier Shiraz style from the Hanna Vineyard in Alexander Valley. Their two Cabernets are equally distinct: their Napa Ranch Cabernet is big, dark and extracted while their Los Chamizal from the Sonoma Valley vineyard is more elegant and restrained. Their three Zinfandels—an Old Vine Zin, an Old Vine Reserve and a Zin Port—come from the Ricci Vineyard south of Healdsburg. They also make a vineyard-designated



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patrons, all on a by-appointment-only basis. The property is owned by Robert Benevides, Burr's longtime friend and business partner. When Benevides bought 16 acres of manzanita-covered benchland in Dry Creek Valley in 1976, Burr immediately recognized the property's potential as prime vineyard land. At the time, Dry Creek was just emerging as a grape-growing region. In 1986, Burr planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc on his friend's property. He produced his first vintage in 1990. Burr, who was able to taste his vineyard's first Cabernet in the barrel, died before it was bottled.



Robert Benevides, owner of Healdsburg's Raymond Burr Vineyards

In 1998, Benevides brought in John Quinones, a well-known winemaker from Lyeth Estate and Clos Pegase, who had recently started a winemaking consulting practice serving small, ultra-premium producers. Quinones, who owns Diamond Back Vineyards in Mendocino with his partner Cathy Del Fava, says he loves making wine from this particular vineyard. "It's an awesome site," he says, "and it produces great grapes. I've worked at a lot of vineyards— from Paso Robles to Mendocino, in Napa and Sonoma—and there aren't a whole lot of places that have the potential that this one has. Most of the vineyard is on a really steep slope (you can't even get a permit to plant on slopes like that anymore), so we get great drainage, great sun exposure. And the vineyard has great soil composition, basically great terroir."

Quinones is of the "great wine is made in the vineyard" school of winemakers. "There's not a lot you can do if you don't have great fruit," he says. "But if you do have great fruit—and at Raymond Burr we do—the winemaker's real job is not to screw it up."

Raymond Burr produces 1,800 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon,



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600 cases of Chardonnay and 440 cases of Cabernet Franc. The wines are all estate grown, but they're crushed at Michel Schlumberger, and barrel-aged and bottled at the Sonoma Wine Company. Their 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon has a big beautiful nose, full of pepper and spice. Despite 1998's reputation as a poor year for California wines, Raymond Burr's 1998 Cabernet collected gold medals from the 2001 and 2002 Chronicle Wine Competition and the 2001 San Francisco International Wine competition. The 1998 Cabernet contains 9% Cabernet Franc. For the 1999, Quinones kicked the Cab Franc up to 15%, enhancing the wine's already spicy, nutmeg profile. The vineyard also produces a 100% varietal Cabernet Franc, which sells out every year, and a delicate, paler-than-straw Chardonnay redolent of pear and honeysuckle.

The vineyard has a small, unpretentious tasting room, filled with Raymond Burr memorabilia: his Emmys, old movie stills and a law degree from MacGeorge College of Law granted to him as the star of "Perry Mason." The expansive wooden deck overlooking the south-facing Chardonnay vineyards has a lovely view of Dry Creek Valley and would make a great place to while away the afternoon hours chatting with friends and drinking wine.

LAMBORN FAMILY VINEYARDS

Wines: Zinfandel

Planted acres: 8

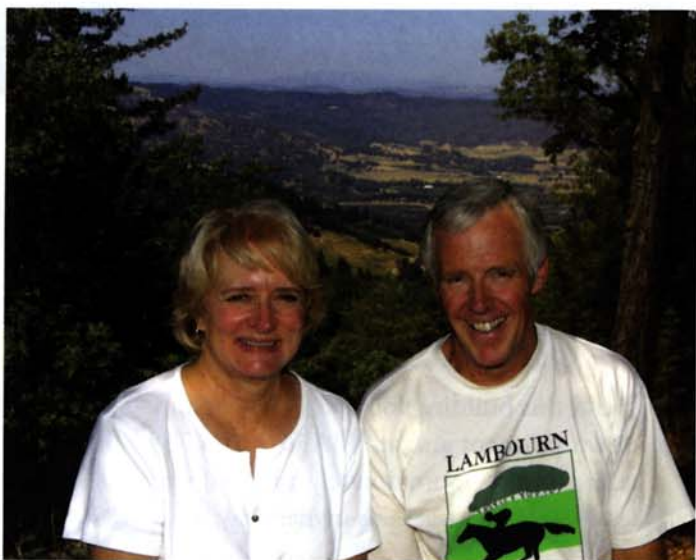
Annual cases: 1,100

Tonnage: 13 tons

Employees: 2

Contact: 1984 Summit Lake Dr., Angwin

707-965-1107 • www.lamborn.com



Mike and Terry Lamborn, owners of Lamborn Family Vineyards

Perched on a windy, redwood-studded promontory at the top of Howell Mountain, Lamborn Family Vineyards produces only one vintage per year: a premium Zinfandel. Their steep, eight-acre property is blessed with deep, red volcanic loam soils and an unusual mezzo micro-climate that is 10 degrees cooler during the day and 15 degrees warmer at night than the floor of Napa Valley. With dizzying 1,000-foot drops on three sides of the property, the vineyard produces a classic, balanced Zinfandel, brimming with ripe red fruits like cherry, raspberry and strawberry.



Lamborn's distinctive spice and peppery qualities deepen as it ages. Like most Howell Mountain wines, Lamborn Zinfandel takes longer to soften up in the bottle and longer than average to open up in the glass. But it's well worth the wait. Neither a zany fruit bomb or elegant to the point of austerity, Lamborn Zinfandel is charming, warm and approachable—much like the vineyard's down-to-earth owners Mike and Terry Lamborn.

Founders of a Bay Area trucking company who found their way into winemaking almost by accident, the Lamborns planted their first Zinfandel vineyard in 1981. (Mike's father, who lives across the lane, put in Zinfandel a few years before.) The Lamborns chose Zinfandel because they suspected it would do well in the red, rocky soil at the top of the mountain. They also knew that a nearby property had produced one of the first great American Zinfandels—a field-blend Zinfandel that, in 1900, had captured a gold medal at the World Expo in Paris.

"It's a good thing no one told us when we were starting out that we didn't have the credentials to be grape growers," says Mike Lamborn. "We didn't have degrees in agriculture or chemistry or enology. As it was, we just forged ahead, learning as we went." The Lamborns do much of the handwork in the vineyard—pruning, suckering, training and hedging. They use contract labor for some of the heavier work and also have a viticultural consultant and a top-flight winemaker. Lamborn's winemaker, Heidi Peterson Barrett, is well known for her work with Cabernet at small prestigious venues such as Screaming Eagle, Showket and Amuse Bouche. She's worked with Lamborn since 1999. Lamborn is the only Zinfandel she handles.

In 1999, Mike Lamborn installed a new quadrilateral, split-canopy trellising system to open up the interior of the vine to more sunlight. As a result, he's gotten more thorough ripening than ever before and has had fewer problems with the botrytis and mildew that often plague Zinfandel's thick clusters. The Lamborns have recently done some interplanting with Zinfandel clones that will introduce darker fruit flavors of blackberry and blueberry to future vintages. In 1999, at their winemaker's urging, the Lamborns planted four acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. They expect their first small vintage of Lamborn Cabernet this year and plan to release it in 2007.

Lamborn sells 40% of its wine direct over the Internet and the rest to retailers and restaurants. Lamborn doesn't have its own tasting room, but you can taste Lamborn Zin at the Napa Wine Company, where the wine is custom-crushed and bottled, or at Artisan Wine Tasting on Highway 29.