
SHASTA-CASCADE WINERIES

BY STEVE AHRENS

I like wine. I used to know exactly what wines I liked. The operative phrase is, *used to*. In previous years, to make sure that I was getting a good bottle, I *used to* buy my wines only from what I thought of as good wine making areas. My wine prejudices led me so that I *used to* think good wines came from Napa or Sonoma or France. Since I didn't know anything about French wine, I *used to* buy what I knew, wines from Napa and Sonoma. Living the last thirty years a Shasta or Tehama County resident, I didn't even really know where in those two counties wine was produced.

All that changed three years ago when I tasted a wine I really loved and discovered that its grapes were grown and the wine was fermented, aged and bottled in the Shasta-Cascade viticultural area.

That bottle of wine got me thinking about how little I really knew about wine in general and good wine specifically. My prejudices were revealed. My wine horizons were expanded from a small anemic view of wine into a vast, healthier panorama. My thoughts, now, about wine continue to expand, but one thing I have come to believe is this: A good wine is any wine you or I really like. All those ratings, in *Wine Spectator*, *The Wine Advocate*, wine.com, *The Wine Enthusiast*, the *Friday San Francisco Chronicle*—I've learned they are accurate for a taster or a group of tasters, at the particular moment that they taste the wine, according to their own training and prejudices. Not only is the taste of wine time- and taster-dependent, it changes depending on whether the wine is offered with food, then what food, and, indeed, even the company one tastes with.

The wineries in the Shasta-Cascade viticulture area make a range of wines, both white and red, and within those wine offerings are wines to please most palates. Mike Boehlert is owner, vintner, winemaker at Lassen Peak Winery, and when I asked him if he was surprised at the quality of wines being pro-



Barrel tasting, New Clairvaux, Vina, CA

duced in our area, he said, "Not anymore. I think we're surprising a lot of people."

As Mike points out, "Only bad wine can be made from bad grapes. Bad wine can also be made from good grapes, but good wine can only be made from good grapes." Good grapes come from the right combination of soil, climate, weather, and viticulture care. That combination is what Napa, Sonoma, and France have, plus someone who knows the art and science of how to turn good grapes into that beautiful elixir we call good wine.

It turns out the Shasta-Cascade viticulture area has that same combination of soil, climate, and weather necessary to grow good grapes. Some twenty-six viticulturists work with vintners to turn those grapes into good wine.

Shasta-Cascade wineries are spread throughout the geographic area that runs from the Siskiyou south through Tehama County and west to the crest of the coast range. These wineries can be found in Vina, Cottonwood, Manton,

Shingletown, Redding, Weaverville, Hyampom, Trinity Center, Yreka and spots in between.

Greg Butler is president of the Shasta-Cascade Viticulture Association, a group whose purpose is to educate growers on best practices and promote the grapes grown and the wines produced in the area. He says interest in local viticulture is growing, fueled by a population growth of sophisticated retirees, by local businesses, wineries and others, and by Shasta College's viticulture program. The new Sanderson residential development, behind the Walmart Superstore in Anderson, is designed around vineyards. Vineyards already line the road into the planned development, and the development will center around acres of vineyards intended eventually to produce wine. Many wineries make their business presence known through tastings and products in local retail stores as varied as

the Raley's on Lake Boulevard, Liquor Barn, and Holiday Market in Redding and California Kitchen & Company in Red Bluff. Butler also pointed to the success of Vintner's Cellar, Dana and Alan Leard's franchise in Redding, where customers can "make [their] own quality wines," a burgeoning business Butler credits for whetting consumers' interest in the process and product of wine-making. Also fueling interest, courses at Shasta College range from wine tasting and wine pairing to viticulture and wine making; they create a reciprocal relationship with consumers, both creating and responding to interest in local wine and wine potential.

Butler points out that grape-growing in the region spans all interests. Butler himself grows grapes and produces wine for family use. Some of the oldest vines in the area, he says, date back to the mission era, varieties brought by Junipero Sera, used by the Catholic Church to make communion wines, and now sometimes cultivated for family use. Matson Vineyards is the oldest winery in the area, established twenty-three years ago. John and Linda Alger, of Alger Vineyards and Winery in Manton, use biodynamic methods of growing. Butler describes a two-acre lake on their property, full of trophy brown trout, which the Algiers don't fish. Instead, they pump nutrient-rich water from the bottom of the pond to irrigate their vines.

Butler expects that interest in the area's viticulture will only grow. He anticipates both expansion by current viticulturists and a lot of new interest.

I quizzed Roger Gerard, head of the culinary arts department of Shasta College, about the future of the wine business in our area, and he concurs. "Interest is growing. More grapes

are in production and more wineries are being opened. The community is more aware of what we have. As our community becomes more aware of the good wines in our own back yard, the more demand will increase." Tom Burnham, wine maker extraordinaire for Burnsini Winery, also notes the growth. He says, "We were the first bonded winery in Tehama County. That was in 2000. Now, there are five."

Viticulturists learn that good grapes are grown in our region. Common belief is that our climate is too hot. However, our geographic area is extensive and spans the range from valley floors to mountain slopes. The valley heat, says Butler, is much like the heat in the Tuscan region in Italy, and red and white varieties like Petite Sirah, Syrah, Zinfandel, and Cabernet Sauvignon grow well here too, as do Chenin Blanc and Viognier, which gets a unique character from our area. Aimee Sunseri at New Clairvaux Vineyards, keen to learn which varieties grow best here, makes wine from Albarino grapes, recognized as Spain's best varietal. Above 1500 feet, varieties like Gerwertzraminer and Reisling grow well. The wines that come from these grapes are pretty darn good, definitely worthy of consumption consideration.

So, my wine taste buds have come full circle. I still know what I like in wine, but that list is substantially longer than it used to be. There are also big blank spots on that list reserved for the wines I have yet to discover and add. I know that many of those wines I'll use to fill in the blanks on my list will come from grapes grown in the Shasta-Cascade viticultural area.

And by the way, that life changing wine—Burnsini's Petite Sirah. Try it; you might like it. 🍷

