



Merry Monks

Wine Club of Cantiga Wineworks



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Nature versus Nurture

Dear Club Members,

In winemaking, we continually weigh the influences of *nature* versus *nurture*. Indeed, this timeless anthropological debate is just as applicable to wine grapes as it is to human beings! To what extent—and in what ways—are the characteristics of wine grapes, and the resulting wines, pre-coded by genetics? Conversely, to what extent are they shaped by their environment, farming practice, and ultimately, the winemaker?

During our past 20 years of making wine, we have come to know intimately the innate characteristics of the grape varieties with which we work. As well as growing our own grapes, we have worked with many other vineyards and observed the influences of microclimates and winegrowing practices. As winemakers, we have always kept a very light touch and allowed full expression of the personalities of the grape varieties and vineyards.

It has been our observation that in the case of many wines on the market, the “nurture” influence of the winemaker is much more heavy-handed. In these cases, the wines are further separated from their varietal character. The voice of the grape is muted. This is not a criticism, it is merely an observation—but it does illustrate the importance of winemaking choices in shaping a wine. To help you to better understand the nature-nurture dynamic in winemaking, we will attempt to isolate the innate characteristics of our featured wine varieties from the stylistic features over which winemakers have control. Additionally, we will explain the ways in which our wines depart from the trends in modern Californian winemaking. Hopefully, after reading this, you will be able to observe for yourselves the influence of the farmer and winemaker as nurturers.

In your summer club shipment, we offer three wines made from three different grape varieties. All are grown in vineyards located within the historic Meyers Ranch and are farmed using similar techniques, by the same vineyard manager. One is a sneak preview of an upcoming release, one is a current release, and one is a rare “Library Wine.” We have applied our minimal intervention, non-malolactic winemaking technique to all three. We will therefore use these three wines as the focus for our discussion of character and style.

Included in your spring shipment:

2015 Syrah, Baby Rattlesnake Vineyard (Pre-release)

Harvest Brix: 26.4 pH: 3.82 TA: 5.30 Alc: 15.4% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 225 Barrel age: 3 years in mostly neutral European oak

Varietal Characteristics: This elegant, “noble” variety is known for its deep color and firm tannins. It has a range of flavors, from smoke, bacon, herbs, red and black fruits, white and black pepper, to floral violet notes.

Terroir and farming influences: Our Syrah from Baby Rattlesnake Vineyard, like other locally grown Syrah farmed for quality, leans toward black fruit and chocolate characteristics. Spice can be prominent in some cases, but not to the same degree as we see in Australian-clone Shiraz. In our climate, we tend to see more unwieldy tannins and softer acidity than our Petite Sirah.

Winemaking influences: Most winemakers age Syrah in a high percentage of new oak barrels, imparting smoke and vanilla tones as well as additional tannin. There is also a tendency to leave residual sugar to mask the harsh tannins that the wine exhibits in its youth, and to further soften the mouth feel through malolactic fermentation. In contrast, we prefer to make more of a French-style Syrah by retaining its natural acidity through our non-malolactic technique, fermenting it until fully dry, aging it in mostly neutral barrels to showcase its deep, vibrant fruit characteristics, and letting it rest for several years to soften the abundant tannins. This new vintage, included in your shipment, is still young but is unfolding beautifully. You can either enjoy it now or put it into your cellar and see how it blossoms in a few years.

2014 Petite Sirah, Estate (Current release)

Harvest Brix: 25.3 pH: 3.55 TA: 6.93 Alc: 15.0% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 147 Barrel age: 3 years in mostly neutral European oak barrels

Varietal Characteristics: Known in some parts of the world as Durif, Petite Sirah is known for its inky color and rich, full-bodied flavors of blackberry or blueberry, chocolate, plums and black pepper.

Terroir and farming influences: Grown in the Sierra Foothills at high elevation and farmed for low yield and high quality, this grape has excellent structure (balanced acidity and tannin). The fruit profile in this situation is closer to blackberry than blueberry. The grape is not overly tannic as it can be in hotter climates, and it is more perfumed and floral than spicy.

Winemaking influences: Petite Sirah has historically been dismissed as a “peasant wine”—overly muscular and lacking in elegance. Most wineries use it as a blending wine, as it lends color and tannin to wines lacking in those areas. When produced as a varietal wine, it is often picked overripe and made into a sweet, huge beast of a wine. However, Cantiga and a number of other wineries have recognized that when farmed and crafted for quality, it can produce a stellar wine on its own. Because of our non-malolactic technique, our Estate Petite Sirah has wonderful acidity and is very food friendly. We have also learned that it ages beautifully. We typically release it after six years, by which time the tannins have softened to a velvety texture. It has outstanding aging potential—even our earliest vintages keep improving and developing new complexities!

2011 “Library” Zinfandel, Herbert Vineyard (Reserved for Wine Club)*

Harvest Brix: 26.8 pH: 3.33 TA: 7.50 Alc: 15.0% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 239 Barrel age: 3 years in mostly neutral European oak

Varietal Characteristics: Although Zinfandel varies in character depending on where it is grown, its predominant characteristics are lush, raspberry fruit, bright acidity and spice, and high levels of alcohol. Its body can vary from light to full, depending on climate and growing methods.

Terroir and farming influences: For years, we have made Zinfandel exclusively from Herbert Vineyard, although in our earlier years we purchased fruit from Amador County. In the Foothills, where Zinfandel is king, lush, raspberry fruit shines through in this variety. We also have experience with Lodi Zinfandel. Lodi’s old vines, heavier soil and warmer climate tend to produce fruit with softer acidity, jammy fruit and abundant spice. Depending on how and where it is farmed, Zinfandel can vary in intensity. Over-cropping or over-watering can lead to pale, lackluster fruit. During the unfortunate heyday of white zinfandel, crops tended to be heavy and lacking in color and intensity.

Winemaking influences: Our Zinfandel is the wine that probably contrasts with the modern trends more than any of our other wines. First and foremost, we do not blend this grape—what you see is what you get. Virtually all other Zinfandels we have tasted have been blended with Petite Sirah. The tannin and color you find in most modern Zinfandels do not come from the Zinfandel grape, but from Petite Sirah! Secondly, our Zinfandel is true to the grape in its fruit and spice characteristics (bright raspberry and subtle anise). In contrast, most winemakers imbue a smokiness and spice profile that come from heavily toasted oak barrels rather than the grape itself. We would argue that our pure approach to Zinfandel makes it the most food-friendly of our wines!

**Our Ambassador of Oenos club will receive a bottle of 2010 Library Zinfandel, as well as three bottles of 2011!*

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www.cantigawine.com