

Wine Journal

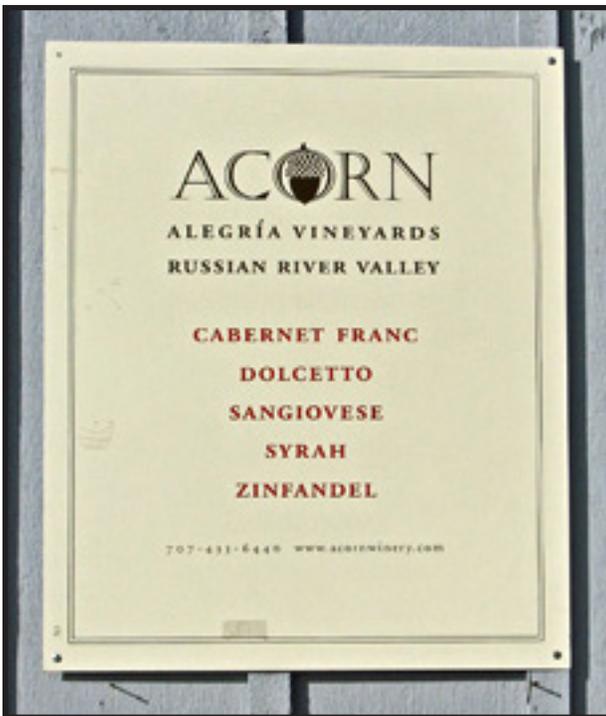


by Ken Zinns

After taking a few wine courses through UC Extension in the early '90s, Bay Area architect Ken Zinns developed a serious interest wine. Ken has been touring and tasting wines for nearly 20 years, and has come to love not only the wines, but also the people behind them. Ken's interest in wine is more than passive, and he's been working at several urban East Bay wineries since 2001, and is the assistant winemaker for both Eno Wines in Berkeley and Harrington Wine in San Francisco.

Tuesday - December 31, 2013

Acorn Winery



It's often tough to visit wineries on the day of New Year's Eve – some are closed for the day and many more shut down early. At Jane's suggestion, we were able to make an appointment for that morning at Acorn Winery, located just off of Old Redwood Highway in Russian River Valley, a short distance south of Healdsburg. We overshot the small entry drive at first, but quickly made our way back. We headed up the drive and around a corner, parking in front of a modest wooden winery building next to the vineyard. Acorn is run by Bill and Betsy Nachbaur, and is known for producing field blends – different grape varieties planted together in the vineyard and then picked and fermented together.

Betsy was loading cases of wine into their SUV when we arrived – they'd gotten a rush order to be delivered that day. Bill came by and just had time to say hello before he drove off to make the delivery. Once that was done, Betsy welcomed us inside the building, where we sat down at a long table next to windows that overlooked "Acorn Hill,"

where part of the vineyard is located. This was an informal and relaxing setting, and Betsy proceeded to tell us about the vineyard, winery, and wines while pouring us Acorn's current releases.

Bill's family grew up in the Bay Area, and his family has roots in Sonoma County going back to the 1860s. His background is in law, and he had a career as an attorney in Washington DC and San Francisco. Betsy grew up on the East Coast, and worked there in public policy and banking. She told us that while she and Bill were living in the Washington DC area they were able to drink many great wines, thanks to their business expense accounts! Eventually, Bill decided he wanted to make a change in his life – he wanted to be able to spend more time outdoors, and with his increasing interest in wine, he liked the idea of growing grapes. After moving back to the Bay Area, he took courses on viticulture from noted instructor Rich Thomas at Santa Rosa Junior College. At the same time, he began searching for a vineyard site and in 1990, he and Betsy purchased their 32-acre property, which already included an old vineyard.

Bill and Betsy named their vineyard Alegría, which means happiness or joy in Spanish. And the Acorn name came both from the oak trees on their property and from their being a small winery out of which

big things can come – just like an acorn. For the first few years that Bill and Betsy owned Alegría Vineyard, they sold all of their fruit to other producers, but they began making their own wine in 1994, with their first release being a Sangiovese from that vintage. Betsy soon joined Bill in their new winery business, where she handles sales, marketing, and administration. They built their small winery building in 1995 and they've lived in a house there since 2003. Most of the wine is actually made at Mauritsen Wines in Dry Creek Valley – Clay Mauritsen is Acorn's consulting winemaker, though Bill remains very much involved in both the winemaking and particularly in the farming of Alegría Vineyard. About 70-80% of Acorn's sales are direct to consumer, and they schedule lots of tasting appointments – Betsy was even taking appointments for New Year's Day while we were there. Acorn typically produces 7-8 different wines each year, and total annual production is around 3,000 cases.

Alegría Vineyard is situated in relatively cool Russian River Valley, located less than a mile from the river itself. Although it's in the warmer northern end of the appellation, Betsy noted that the diurnal swing at the vineyard can be 35-40 degrees, from the fog that often tempers the heat of summer days. Soil is alluvial loam and clay loam with some volcanic soil and river rock. As mentioned, there was already a vineyard on the property when Bill and Betsy bought it, with the oldest section of vines dating from 1890. Betsy said that the older vines were in good shape when they took over the vineyard, and that most of the fruit had previously been sold to Gallo. Like many old vineyards in the area, theirs was interplanted with a number of red grape varieties, and Bill liked the idea of continuing the old tradition of making field blends from these grapes. Bill added more vines over the years, with 27 acres now planted. The vineyard is farmed sustainably, using mostly organic methods – they've never sprayed their vines with insecticides.



The vineyard currently has around 60 grape varieties planted, and not even all of them are winegrapes. They range from the familiar (Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Zinfandel) to varieties not often seen in California (Blue Portuguese, Petit Bouschet, Plavac Mali) to the downright obscure (Khir Ghulaman, Liatiko, Ramaily). A complete list of all the varieties grown at Alegría Vineyard can be found on the Acorn website. Bill and Betsy sell around a third of their fruit to other wineries – customers have included Ridge, Rosenblum, Rock Wall, and Stryker Sonoma among others – while keeping the rest for their Acorn wines.

All of Acorn's wines are field blends from their estate vineyard, and Betsy noted that farming is more key than winemaking for these wines, though of course both are important. Even though a few of the Acorn bottlings are over 90% of a single grape variety, Betsy feels that their wines represent place more than variety. The vineyard has a number of distinct blocks, each with their own mix of grapes, and they are all farmed a bit differently. The old 1890 vines are about 78% Zinfandel, along with other red varieties that were often interplanted with Zin at that time – their block includes 10% Alicante Bouschet, 10% Petite Sirah, and small amounts

of Carignane, Trousseau, Sangiovese, Petit Bouschet, Negrette, Syrah, Plavic Mali, Tannat, Muscat Noir, Peloursin, Béclan, Mataro, Cinsaut, and Grenache, plus white varieties Palomino and Monbadon. Sangiovese vines were added in 1950 by Americo Rafanelli (of the well-known local wine family), who owned the vineyard at that time. Some of Bill's more recent plantings include Cabernet Franc planted with small amounts of Merlot and Petit Verdot, Syrah planted with Viognier, and Dolcetto planted with Barbera and Freisa.

Betsy poured our group tastes of all of Acorn's currently-available wines, and in an interesting comparison, she had us sample most of the wines both from freshly-opened bottles and from bottles that had been opened the previous day and re-corked (but not gassed). The tasting notes here are from the freshly-opened bottles – as you might expect, the wines from bottles that had been opened the day before were a bit smoother and somewhat less fruit-forward, yet still showing fine vibrancy. All of the Acorn wines are reds, with the exception of the first one we tried, their Rosato. Like many of the winery's field blends, the composition of this dry Rosé-style wine changes from year to year – the 2012 vintage is made from seven grape varieties, mostly Zinfandel and Syrah. Two pink-skinned varieties, Einset and Suffolk, were skin-fermented, while the juice from the other grapes – all early picks specifically for the Rosato – was left in contact with the skins for up to 24 hours before pressing. Fermented in stainless steel drums, the wine was then aged in older oak for three months.

The first of the reds we tasted was Cabernet Franc, co-fermented with a little Merlot and Petit Verdot. This is one of the cooler-climate Cab Franc sites you'll find in California, and it's no surprise that the fruit has attracted other producers – Bailiwick and Ryme currently buy some. Bill planted the Cab Franc vines in 1991, and because of the cool site, he used a split canopy trellis to increase sun on the fruit zone and help tone down the overly green, herbaceous character that this variety can sometimes display. Next up was Sangiovese – a field blend featuring seven Sangio clones plus 1% each Canaiolo and Mammolo from a block that Bill planted in 1992 (Bill used budwood from

Tasting Notes: Current Releases

Acorn 2012 Rosato, Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 40% Zinfandel, 33% Syrah, 11% Sangiovese, 8% Petite Sirah, 6% Einset, 1% Cabernet Franc, 1% Suffolk. Light pink/salmon color, featuring red fruits, spice, and fresh herbs on the nose. Medium-light bodied with a bright mouthfeel and clean finish.

Acorn 2010 Cabernet Franc, Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 96% Cabernet Franc, 2% Merlot, 2% Petit Verdot. Medium purple color, this showed dried herbs, wild berry and plum fruit, and touches of black pepper, spice, and sweet oak. Medium weight on the palate with good structure and youthful tannins – needs time to develop but quite promising.

Acorn 2011 Sangiovese, Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 98% Sangiovese, 1% Canaiolo, 1% Mammolo. Medium color, with intense bright cherry aromas along with spice, earth, and vanilla/oak notes. Medium-light bodied with vibrant acidity and moderate tannins, nice.

Acorn 2010 Syrah, "Axiom," Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 98% Syrah, 2% Viognier. Dark purple color, lots of spice along with blackberry, a touch of black pepper, and hints of flowers and sweet oak. Medium-bodied, with fairly grippy tannins on the finish.

Acorn 2009 "Acorn Hill," Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 54% Syrah, 44% Sangiovese, 1% Viognier, 0.5% Canaiolo, 0.5% Mammolo. Medium purple color, displaying a bigger vanilla/oak element plus plum and black cherry fruit and spice. Richer texture with good structure, this had a slightly stony mineral note on the palate, finishing with big but refined tannins.

Acorn 2009 Alicante Bouschet, Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 98% Alicante Bouschet with 1% Petit Bouschet and 1% Grenache. Dark color, this had intense ripe dark berry fruit, spice, and a woody oak component. Big and mouthfilling, with a chewy tannic finish.

Acorn 2011 Zinfandel, "Heritage Vines," Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 78% Zinfandel, 13% Alicante Bouschet, 7% Petite Sirah, 2% other varieties. Medium color, with spicy raspberry and plum aromas, with touches of pepper, earth, and sweet oak. Medium-bodied and fairly restrained in style, this finished with moderate tannins, nice.

Acorn 2010 "Medley," Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley. 44% Syrah, 26% Cabernet Franc, 6% Cinsaut, 3% Zinfandel, 3% Sangiovese, 3% Dolcetto, 1% various Muscat varieties, 1% Mataro, 1% Merlot, 1% Petit Verdot, 11% other varieties. Medium-dark color, this featured dark fruits, spice, with notes of chocolate, earth, and flowers. Medium-full bodied with the structure for aging, and fairly big but refined tannins on the long finish, nice.

the 1950 Sangiovese vines for this planting). Like all of the Acorn reds, the Sangiovese was fermented with both native and cultured yeast and was aged in both French and American oak (the Sangio, "Acorn Hill" blend, and Zin also get some Hungarian oak). Most reds see around 25-35% new oak, though a couple of them are aged in less than 20% new barrels. Both the Cab Franc and Sangiovese were among my favorites of the Acorn line-up.

The "Axiom" Syrah was next, with three Syrah clones co-fermented with 2% Viognier. Following this was the "Acorn Hill" – a "Super-Tuscan" style blend led by Syrah and Sangiovese, the 2009

vintage that we tasted was only the second that the winery has produced. Made from selected barrels of the field-blended Sangiovese and Syrah, the "Acorn Hill" was aged in barrel for 21 months and in bottle for an additional two years before release. Betsy told us that the 2009 Alicante Bouschet was a "one-off" bottling of that variety, made because Acorn did not have enough Zinfandel left to make their own bottling that year after heavy October rains wiped out most of their Zin fruit. The Acorn "Heritage Vines" Zinfandel actually includes 18 different grape varieties from the vineyard's interplanted 1890 vines. A bit riper than the other Acorn wines (most of them are under 14% alcohol), the Zin was still bright, expressive, and elegant.

The final wine in the Acorn line-up was the "Medley" – this field blend is meant to highlight the vineyard, featuring up to 40 grape varieties. Most of these are included in very small quantities, from test plots of different grapes that Bill has planted. The blend is different each year, with the goal of showcasing the best of the vineyard in each vintage. The 2010 that we tasted was 44% Syrah, 26% Cabernet Franc, and 6% Cinsaut, with the remaining varieties all comprising 3% or less of the overall blend. Over 20 of the varieties for this wine were picked and co-fermented, while the rest were blended from barrels of the other field-blended wines. This was an intriguing and complex wine where no one grape variety stood out. Following the "Medley," Betsy went back once again to the Rosato, and it was interesting to see how our perception of that wine changed from our earlier sampling – she feels that tasters often don't give full due to the first wine tasted. The one Acorn wine we didn't try during our visit was their Dolcetto, which was sold out. The most recent 2010 vintage was a field blend of 92% Dolcetto, 5% Barbera, and 3% Freisa.



I'd tried Acorn's wines a few times in the past, but this was my first visit there. Betsy was a fine host for our group, and she gave us an enjoyable and educational presentation of the Acorn wines. Although Betsy had only met Jane before, she picked up quickly that we were all pretty wine-savvy and tailored her presentation accordingly. I'd say the style of the Acorn wines strike a good middle-of-the-road balance – they're lively and food-friendly, with plenty of flavor and body while keeping ripeness and alcohol in check. And though the oak was apparent in most of the bottlings, it showed good balance with the fruit and other components of the wines. The Cab Franc, Sangiovese, and "Medley" blend were my favorites of the current line-up, with the "Acorn Hill" and Zin not far behind. This was a fun visit, and it's worth setting up an appointment with Betsy and Bill at Acorn if you're in the area.