

You heard it through THE GRAPEVINE
“Continuous experimenting results in instinctive behavior.”

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Over the course of this column the past few weeks, I've engaged you on exploratory trips to California wine country that my wife and I have enjoyed. The genesis of these trips over the past year was our desire to discover those fine Northern California wines rarely found on the East Coast.

There, a growing legion of winemakers is at the forefront of the movement towards small producers whose wines are sold to ardent followers exclusively via tasting room purchases and subscription mailing lists.

This week I continue revisiting our journey.

The passionate winemakers who produce these small quantities of highly acclaimed wines may be stakeholders in small parcels of land or may have access to highly sought after grapes. Regardless of the source of the raw ingredients, the end product is crafted in a meticulous and passionate fashion.

Our trips have focused on the means by which we found these artisanal winemakers and visits to their wineries. In every instance they were pursuing their passion for wine, living the dream of having their name on the label of a bottle of wine, thus expressing their passion to the world, and inviting fellow wine lovers to share their intimacy with the grapes and locales in which they pursue their dream.

I've also gushed of the natural beauty and bounty of Northern California in comparison to the appeal and allure of Western European wine regions.

Over the course of these recent columns, I've regaled you with our adventures in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. This week the focus once again is Sonoma County.

Ensnared in the Carriage House accommodation at the Belle de Jour Bed and Breakfast just outside of Healdsburg in northern Sonoma County, my wife and I were sampling a local winemaker's bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, generously offered to us by inn owners Tom and Brenda Hearn. This astounding wine exemplified the underlying basis for our trip. We never heard of the winery, the wine is not shipped to the New York retail market and only the locals have access to the bottlings.

This provided an auspicious basis for mapping our winery visits for the next day. Having come in from the 1,500 foot elevation and crashing waves along the Sonoma Coast the previous day, our next pursuit of artisanal wines would take us deep into the Dry Creek Valley floor, just outside Healdsburg. This sub region is noted for a variety of wines, notably Zinfandel.

We arrived at Unti Winery and Vineyard just as the gentle fog was lifting off the valley floor and a gentle breeze was wafting through the vineyards. We met with Mick Unti, who owns and operates this small winery with his dad, George. Since its inception in 1997, Unti has garnered a reputation as an outlier.

The Untis are a living legacy to the early Italian settlers who labored in the local vineyards, seeking the grape varieties most compatible with their land. Their Italian heritage and inherent preference for European grapes - and the ubiquitous Zinfandel – has led them down a path of constant experimentation.

George began as a home winemaker in 1990, living his dream of owning a vineyard and producing his own wine. He ambled along until 1997 when Mick, fresh off a stint as a winery sales manager, joined him. From the beginning, their approach to wine making was simple: “Which grapes and wines do we love that can viably be grown in our local terroir?”

In all, eleven grape varieties are under management, including five Italian, five French and the ubiquitous Zinfandel. Seventeen wines are produced, including six blends. The Unti mission? Mick is effusive in his response: “To synthesize my enthusiasm for European wines.”

Next week: We walk the land and sample the wines.