

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

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Last week, we continued our virtual tour to another small winery in California. I left you with the allure of Unti Winery and Vineyard, a family-owned and operated winery in the Dry Creek Valley appellation in Sonoma County.

A reader asked how I came upon this gem, amongst the hundreds of small wineries in Northern California. My wife and I had visited George and Mick Unti by happenstance in the late 1990s.

I had become enamored with Zinfandel wines from Northern California. On one of our many trips to California wine country, we decided to immerse ourselves in one of the sweet spots for producing Zinfandel. We focused on Sonoma County. We were able to meet and share wine with the folks who had dirt under their fingernails, the dirt of the true essence of their wines. It was exhilarating. During that trip I developed an ardor for the Dry Creek Valley and two wineries: Unti and Bella Vineyards.

When my wife and I found ourselves heading to Sonoma County again last year to seek out small wineries, Unti was at the top of our list.

In the late 1990s, the small tasting counter at Unti was in the equally small storage warehouse in the middle of the vineyard. Zinfandel was king then; today it plays an important but less dominant role at the winery. This is not a function of Mick Unti's diminished passion for the grape, but rather his expanding love of French and Italian grapes.

The philosophy of the father and son team has evolved over the quarter century of living the family dream. Savoring one of his latest releases in the new stand-alone tasting room, the family's selection criteria for planting grapes became clear. Anchored in their Old World heritage and a sustainable approach to nurturing the land and climate of their 60 acres of vineyards, Mick energetically states his mindset: “Which grapes and wines do we love that can viably be grown in our local terroir?”

The expression of the Unti wines is in their genes. You can sense their heritage in palpable ways. George's Tuscan-style home; the entrepreneurial passion that is not consumed with popularity or

branding – it’s for themselves and if others appreciate it, they’re more than happy to spread their passion and their wines.

Here’s an insight into Mick’s focus on which grapes to grow and how to sell them. I asked Mick about his wine club, the lifeline of other small wineries with limited distribution means. “I don’t have one. Yes, I probably should have a subscription club, but it’s more intimate to send our current releases and offerings to our email customer list for their non-obligatory consideration.”

His passion is evident and comes through in every description and narrative of a particular wine. In conversation, his pride and commitment to the Unti winery and philosophy is at times effusive, other times a subtle understatement. “We identify the grapes to grow based on the affinity of our favorite grapes for our environment,” Mick explained. “Yet we’ve experienced the many trials and tribulations of a small winery.”

The European grapes grown at Unti are a classic example of American proclivity for experimentation. Why not grow Barbera grapevines, grown almost exclusively in the Piedmont region of Italy? Why not experiment with Picpoul grapevines, grown in Southwest France?

And the results are stunning.

The driving element that influences grapevine plantings is Mick’s preference for acidic wines. This led to the Unti decision to supplement Zinfandel plantings with those of Sangiovese, Barbera, Aglianico, Mourvedre, Grenache and Syrah. Then, in 2004, in his “constant pursuit for high-acid wines,” Mick decided to plant white varieties. Today, he gushes about the Unti expression of Fiano, Verdicchio, Grenache Blanc and Picpoul plantings. I am not aware of any other winery that vinifies such an expansive panoply of grape varieties.

The Untis have experimented with numerous grape varieties. Consumers benefit from George and Mick’s diligence and perseverance over a quarter century of passion. I encourage you to experiment. Join their mailing list today. I have.