

A Nichols Worth of Wine

February 2009

In the Shadow of Giants

A long, long time ago there was a land called Napa Valley - wait, it's still called Napa. Or as the locals now refer to it, the "*Valley*." At the time, remember, this was way, way back in the late 1960's and early 1970's, there were a number of upstart wineries known as "boutiques." This marketing moniker was meant to distinguish small producers who made less than five thousand cases of wine a year, from the BIG wineries, which at the time numbered only a few dozen.

Before mega-mergers, hostile takeovers, and Wall Street acquisitions, retiring business moguls in search of a simpler life crossed the Golden Gate Bridge into the promised land of Sonoma and Napa, and took up a life as gentlemen wine farmers. Emphasis on "gentle." These American wine pioneers weren't dreaming of fame and fortune, most had already "made it."

No, they just wanted to make small amounts of high quality wines. They planted their vineyards, or bought grapes from long-time local growers. They built small cellars and bottled a few cases of their favorite varietals. Some even managed to sell a little to area restaurants and grocery stores.

Then something happened. Americans returning from European vacations discovered the pleasures of drinking wine. In turn, these nuevo-oenophiles shared a glass or two with their spirits-drinking neighbors. Boutique wineries, besieged by burgeoning demand seemingly overnight became BIG wineries.

The likes of Joe Phelps, Jack Cakebread, Tom Jordan, Mike Grgich and Chuck Wagner found themselves at the crossroads of commerce. Grow the brand, sit in the rocker on the back porch and watch the vines grow, or cup their ear to the growing whispers of curiosity expressed by industrial-sized suitors.

Many chose to grow the brand, and grow they did! In the ensuing decades, the term "*boutique*" all but disappeared from wine vocabulary as small wineries grew by buying the vineyards of small grape growers, happy to sell off the back forty for fantastic sums. Bigger wineries began buying the really big wineries and before long, billion-dollar corporations, many who had no experience in the beverage or agriculture business, arrived in wine country by limo and private plane, attorneys, accountants and blank checks in hand.

And so it continued - for a time. Fortunately, many of the original cast of characters continued to make great wine, just more of it. A lot more of it. Some of the "suits" (Wall Street winemakers) focused on shareholder sentiment and their annual bonuses, cranked out a sea of Madison Avenue plonk. It mattered little. By this time America had discovered their new drink of choice. Then something happened. Again. Fast forward to the new millennium and a new generation descended upon the wine scene. They were young, wise and wine savvy. Defiantly opposed to

mavericks of millions of gallons of wimpy wine, they demonstrated a fierce determination to show America, and the world, “boutique-style” wines could again rise from the ashes.

There was only one small problem. They had holes in the pockets of their jeans. Passionate and persistent, a lack of vineyards or a state-of-the-art winery would not deter this new band of grape gypsies. They begged and browbeat premium growers for a ton here and a ton there. They tapped their parents retirement accounts. They cajoled friends and maxed out credit cards to buy the minimum amount of equipment required to produce a few hundred cases of wine. But where?

They had only to look across the pond and adopt a French model, albeit with a dose of American ingenuity. In the mid-1990’s, a handful of Bordeaux anti-establishment winemakers with limited resources and a desire to make very untraditional Bordeaux style wines in a more international style broke away and began producing “*vins de garage*,” or garage wines. Dubbed “*Garagistes*” by the French press, this rank of rebels turned out infinitesimal amounts of artisan wines that caught the attention of Robert Parker and interest skyrocketed along with demand and prices.

Back on our shores, this new breed of *garagista*’s, most of who were absent a house let alone one with a garage, found the next best thing, Industrial Parks. Large, cheap rents, open space, easily accessible for transporting grapes in and bottled wine out, these suburban depots became the address on many new labels. Not exactly conducive to conducting tours and minus the glamour of traditional brick and mortar wineries, these wine warehouses nonetheless served the purpose. They became home to some of the most exciting wines ever produced. Stylistically, they typically are hand-crafted, terroir-driven, fruit forward wines made with minimal intrusion, most often organically, and in very limited quantities.

You’re not likely to find many of these wines on the shelves of your local merchant. Most are sold only through the *garagistas*’ website or in restaurants close to the “winery.” Wine Spectator <http://www.winespectator.com> reviews hundreds of wines every month, many producing only a few hundred cases a year, but not all the wines are technically made in a garage. You’ll have to do further research from there and you pay an annual subscription fee to access their site.

Some of the best free sources for locating these petite producers, is by visiting the following websites and then contacting them directly.

The Wine Garage @ <http://www.winegarage.net/>
Garagistewine @ <http://www.garagistewine.com/>
Ferry Plaza wine Merchant @ <http://www.fpwm.com>

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce