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The Art and Science of Sourcing Fruit

Behind every great wine is a well-managed vineyard. In fact, most winemakers would agree that farming is the true foundation of winemaking. In our own vineyard, the steps we take in maintaining soil health, watering, pruning, training, cluster thinning, and harvesting are all geared toward growing the highest quality grapes possible. But only about half of our wines come from our estate; the rest are strategically sourced from other local vineyards. So how, then, do we decide which grapes to purchase? With an abundance of vineyards to choose from and other growers making the farming decisions, how can we be sure the crop will suit our needs?

The following stories of three partner vineyards whose fruit is featured in this month's club shipment provide some insight into our decision-making processes.

Wilderotter Vineyard, Shenandoah Valley

We have been making Barbera from Shenandoah Valley grapes since 2001. Our sources varied over the years, and in 2016 we found a grower who particularly impressed us. Seth's wife Nicole was working for Scott Harvey when she met Jay Wilderotter, who had stopped by with some clusters of Barbera grapes he had available for sale. Knowing we were looking for a new source, she tasted the fruit and was instantly reminded of our 2001 vintage, which was our favorite vintage to date. Not surprisingly, Wilderotter is found in the same part of the valley as our original Barbera source that produced the 2001 vintage. The fruit Jay brought was expressive, concentrated, and clearly farmed for top quality and the bright acidity for which Barbera is known. This is not always a given in winegrowing; some vineyards are farmed for a more modern style of Barbera that sacrifices the delicate pomegranate and floral notes in favor of a softer, rounder palate. Knowing what we could do with such fruit, Nicole urged us to give Wilderotter a try. Her instincts were spot on, and we went on to make Wilderotter Barbera every year from 2016 through 2020.

Karmère Vineyard, Shenandoah Valley

In 2016, we decided to expand on our earlier experiments with Rhone-style blends. With the thought of reserving our Estate Grenache as a pure varietal, we began cold-calling vineyards about purchasing grenache fruit for a GSM. Dawn Martella was the winemaker at Karmère in those days, and when she showed us the vineyard, we were instantly impressed by the quality of fruit and attention to detail. The vineyard was meticulously farmed, and it was clear that a lot of energy and love went into it. And it showed in the wine. We were so impressed by the Grenache from the vineyard that year, that the following year we purchased both Grenache and Mourvedre. Since then, we've continued to buy both varietals from Karmère whenever we make our Rhone blend.

Herbert Vineyard, Fair Play

Our experience with Herbert Vineyard predates our move to Fair Play. While exploring the region as a potential home for Cantiga, we visited Sierra Vista and had the pleasure of tasting a late-1990s vintage of John McCready's Herbert Vineyard Zinfandel. We were amazed by the lushness of the bouquet, the spice, and the classic elegance of the structure. If this region could produce such wine, it boded well for our own endeavors.

Frank and Beverly Herbert originally planted the head-trained zinfandel vines back in the 1970s, on a section of the old Meyers Ranch, making it one of the oldest surviving vineyards in El Dorado County. When we tasted that first fateful sip in 2001, McCready had been managing the vineyard for many years, and Herbert Zin was a regular part of his lineup. A few years after our introduction to Herbert Vineyard, the property was purchased by Marco Cappelli, an exceptional winemaker and friend. By then, we had bought acreage down the road from the Herbert Vineyard and planted our own estate vines. This opened the opportunity for us to begin contracting a block of Herbert grapes, which we have continued to do now for over twenty years.

Walking through the vineyard, the gnarled old head-trained vines, surrounded by unruly weeds, is a striking contrast to the meticulously trained and ploughed rows you see in, say, Napa. However, looks can be deceiving. Old head-trained Zinfandel is the most complex, interesting Zin, in our opinion. The "weeds" around the vines are in fact a crucial cover crop, and we love it for two reasons. Not only does it provide proof that the vineyard is free from nasty weed killers, but the mix of plants itself adds to the unique terroir of the fruit. A wild herb is found throughout the vineyard that we feel imparts a unique herbaceous spice characteristic.

Wines included in your shipment featuring these wonderful vineyards:

2020 Barbera, Sierra Foothills (Wilderotter Vineyard)

Harvest Brix: 25.6 pH: 3.46 TA: 8.40 Alc: 15.0% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases: 128 Aging: 3 years in mostly neutral European oak barrels

2019 GSM, Sierra Foothills (75% Karmère Vineyard)

Harvest Brix: 25.4 pH: 3.90 TA: 4.74 Alc: 14.9% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases: 250 Aging: 2 years in mostly neutral European oak barrels

2017 Library Zinfandel (Herbert Vineyard)

Harvest Brix: 25.3 pH: 3.49 TA: 7.09 Alc: 15.6% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases: 244 Aging: 3 years in mostly neutral European oak barrels

LIBRARY ADD-ON OFFERS:

We love to treat our members to rare golden oldies! If you are interested in seeing how our wines age, the following two library vintages are available to add to this month's shipment:

2016 Library Barbera (our very first vintage, 100% from Wilderotter Vineyard)

2016 Library GSM (our very first vintage, 50% from Karmère Vineyard)