



Wine for Normal People

January 19, 2012

Acorn Winery: The Seed of Something Different and Mighty in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma



Have you ever stepped into a place and felt like you were in the living room of a dear friend's home? Where the people, who you've never met, made you feel like you've known them for years and that they care about you, about what you think, and about how comfortable you are? It's rare to find this anywhere, let alone in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma...unless you go see Betsy and Bill Nachbaur, owners of **Acorn Winery**. Add insanely good wine to the mix and you've got one of the most fabulous, differentiated places in Sonoma.

After you've tasted all the Pinot, Chardonnay, Zin, and Cab your mouth can handle, go to Acorn for something no one else has...Cab Franc, Dolcetto, and what's called "Field Blends" (a

bunch of complementary stuff grown together, picked together, and fermented together to make heavenly wines) and a family feel you won't get anywhere else.

I made an appointment here at the urging of some **Facebook fans**. When we drove up, the tasting room was full (it only holds about 10 people) and Betsy, harried but enthusiastic, hurried out to tell us that she was running late. We got to poke around in the vineyards outside and after the other



group finished (Betsy does the hospitality at Acorn and treats everyone like they are the most important person in the world), MC Ice and I sat down with Bill and Betsy to taste through their amazing line of wines (all reds, so if you're a white wine-only person you may need to opt out) and talk about everything under the sun. Betsy and Bill are smart, insider-outsiders in the wine community (in a **REALLY GREAT** way) and have *perspective*.

What do I mean by perspective? The Nachbours have had a life outside of wine so they know there's more to the world than just Sonoma and Napa (there are some industry folks who I think



have no idea that there is a world outside California Wine Country). Bill was a lawyer in San Francisco and Betsy had a high powered job in business. They loved wine, so in 1990, Bill gave up law and devoted himself full-time to a new venture -- he and Betsy purchased Alegría Vineyards, a property that had been planted with grapevines since the 1880s but was in sore need of care and love. They saved what they could of the old vines and then planted another 17 acres of new stuff, mostly of single varieties to have something different from the heritage vines, which included more of a hodge podge.

For the first four years they sold all their grapes and then decided to make their own wine in 1994.

ELIZABETH, WINE EXPERT FOR NORMAL PEOPLE



Hi! Welcome to Wine For Normal People. I'm a wine educator, a consultant, a Certified Specialist of Wine, and a Certified Sommelier with years of experience in the wine industry. But, more importantly, I'm a normal person who loves wine! My goal is to share my observations and make wine easy, accessible, and interesting to people who like it. Enjoy and please write me: [elizabeth\(at\)winefornormalpeople\(dot\)com](mailto:elizabeth(at)winefornormalpeople(dot)com) or find me on Facebook or Twitter @NormalWine. To find out more about my wine consulting and tastings, please visit www.winefornormalpeople.com.



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In 1996 the first Sangiovese was released. Today they still sell 50% of their grapes to other high end wineries. They only make 3000 cases of their estate-grown wine. They crush their grapes off site so the operation at Acorn (named because they are small but produce something magnificent: acorn to oak) is largely about farming.

This isn't a corporate place. It's not slick. Betsy and Bill work their asses off farming, making wine, delivering wine, and hosting guests. It's their second act in their careers and they LOVE what they do -- Alegría means "joy" in Spanish, and that's what they feel about farming and making wine. Bill isn't formally trained in wine. He's a really, really smart guy who read books and experimented and figured out how to farm, how to make damn good juice, and he worked with Betsy to learn how to have a business in a crazy industry that probably made no sense from a legal/political/business perspective. The Nachbours are fast learners.



Acorn's focus is different from everyone else's in Sonoma, especially in the Russian River Valley where ever place peddles its Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, which after a while can taste very "same-y." The vineyards aren't perfectly manicured. Bill works with nature and farms the old school way -- using mostly organic techniques and letting the vineyard express itself. Their "thing" is field blends. Letting complementary things grow together make it easier to cultivate the grapes and create unique wines. This method also honors the history of the Italian immigrants who settled in Sonoma, spreading their winemaking tradition. Acorn's wines stand out both because they are made from grapes that virtually no one else is cultivating and because they are freaking delicious.

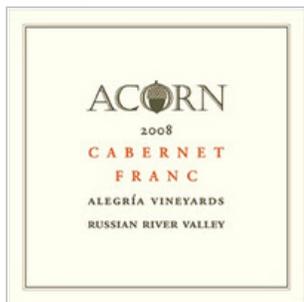


I don't know if it's because they are originally East Coasters (from Connecticut) or whether they are not so entrenched in wine that they are really well-rounded, but these are some of the most interesting, kind, passionate people I've met in Sonoma...EVER. I love the story, I love the wines and I can't recommend this place highly enough. It's for normal people.

And so, let's get to the lineup...

Wine #1: 2008 Cabernet Franc, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, California

Price: \$30



Alcohol: 13.5%

Color: The wine was a crimson color with a touch of brown. I always think Cabernet Franc is kind of like the color of mud, with plums thrown in. This one was spot on!

Smell: EXACTLY what I think of when I think of Cab Franc -- earthy, like decaying leaves and tea, with some black cherry and floral notes.

Taste: Earthy, with cherry and licorice flavors and much fuller than I expected. It had great acid and nice mouth-drying tannin but had enough fruit, earth, and nutmeg/cinnamon spice to keep it interesting. Complex, delicious and would be terrific with earthy food like mushrooms or steak au jus.

Drink or Sink: Drink. What a way to start a tasting. This wine was outstanding. It surprised me. I expected that it would be a little like green pepper (Cab Franc sometimes has that note) or overly

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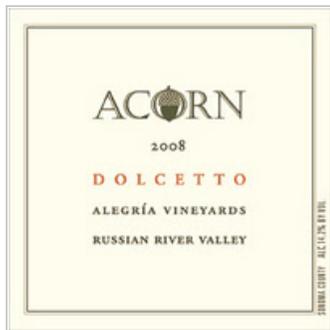
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fruity (some from Sonoma are) but this was Cab Franc done right -- earthy, spicy, fruity, floral. Great wine.

Wine #2: 2008 Dolcetto (dole-CHET-oh, a grape native to the Piedmont region in Northwestern Italy and rarely found in Sonoma, so this is really cool!), Russian River Valley, Sonoma, California

Price: \$30



Alcohol: 14.1%

Color: A pretty ruby color with thick legs from the 14% alcohol (thick legs = higher alcohol).

Smell: Light cherry with cooked cherry (like the inside of a pie) and a touch of cinnamon. There were some coffee and raspberry smells too that were delicious and different for a Dolcetto. The smell is a little deceptive -- it doesn't reveal the blast of flavor your about to get when you sip the wine.

Taste: Black cherry and cherry pie filling or raspberry jam with cinnamon. This was like a raspberry, mocha cake! The wine tasted like cinnamon French toast stuffed with raspberry preserves. A little bit of tangerine flavor played against the mocha to make it like an orange chocolate truffle. The wine is soft feeling and a little buttery in texture.

Drink or Sink: Drink. I'm a huge fan of Dolcetto. This one was complex, delicious and even better than many of the watery, bitter versions from Italy.

Wine #3: 2008 Sangiovese, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, California

Price: \$28

Alcohol: 14.2%

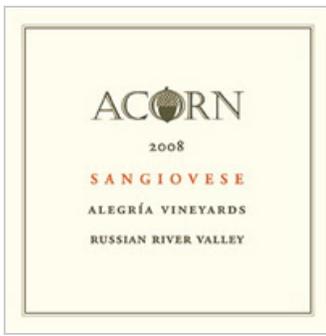
Color: Looked like cranberry juice -- ruby with just a touch of orange to it. Sangiovese tends to get a little orange/brown quickly in the winery and this one had that kind of color. I liked seeing that lighter shade because when Sangiovese is too dark, it's usually the case that the winery left the grape on the vine too long and it ends up tasting too jammy and fruity and loses its earthiness, which is what I like in the grape.

Smell: Typical Sangiovese smells like red cherry with a good hit of rustic, dirty, dusty scents. This held true to form, but was a bit more on the fruity side than the earthy one. The wine smelled like licorice and had a great spice component from the Hungarian oak barrels, which Bill said suited Sangiovese perfectly. I agree!

Taste: Similar to the Dolcetto, the wine had a cherry pie filling flavor -- baked cherry and

cinnamon flavors. There was a little bit of black pepper and some kicked-up-dust-on-a-country-road flavor. I loved the texture -- some nice mouth-drying tannins but the contrast of spice, earth, and fruit was the real homerun.

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Muscadet (1)
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Napa (20)
navarra (1)
Nebbiolo (1)
New Zealand (6)
Old World (2)
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Organic (6)
Perrin Reserve 2007 (1)
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Petit Verdot (1)
Pinot Grigio (5)
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Pinot Noir (25)
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Drink or Sink: Drink. This isn't a fruit bomb but it has a ton of subtle flavor. Very different from Italian Chianti in that it was fruitier and had more spice to it (the Italian version tends to be very earthy), still this would be amazing with pizza. I brought a bottle home and can't wait to have it with the Neapolitan pizza from my favorite local place.

Wine #4: 2007 Axiom Syrah, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, California

Price: \$33

Alcohol: 14.4%



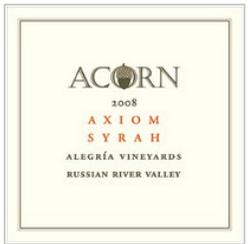
Color: SUPER dark -- this was essentially black in color and had super thick legs that stained the glass. I expected a lot of flavor out of this wine -- dark wines usually = fruit bombs.

Smell: Spot-on for a Syrah. Juicy, ripe black plum, with a huge hit of black pepper and cinnamon. There was a peachy, honeysuckle thing going on from the touch of Viognier used and some salty, earthy, woody scents that made this wine so complex.

Taste: YUM! Rich, full, fruity and peppery, this was a flavorful wine but not so overwhelming that you couldn't have it with some food off the grill. GREAT wine.

Drink or Sink: Drink. I love a good Syrah and this one fits the bill. Rich, spicy, earthy, this is a knockout. I can't wait to have it with something off the grill -- the fullness of the fruit with the spice and smoke will be insane with the char/grilled flavor.

As an aside, we tried the bottle Betsy had just opened against the one she had from the previous day. I think the one from the day before was more complex, and I'd recommend you decant this wine for an hour or so before drinking it so it really shows its stuff.



Also, we tried the 2008 version of the Axiom. It was similar in color, and it was also 2% Viognier, but I found it much more floral -- like gardenias and carnations. It was a little more earthy smelling than the 2007. It

tasted far smokier, and more like earth and blackberries. I actually liked the 2008 better than the 2007 because it was so complex and powerful. Great wine.

Wine #5: 2008 Heritage Vines Zinfandel, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, California

Price: \$35

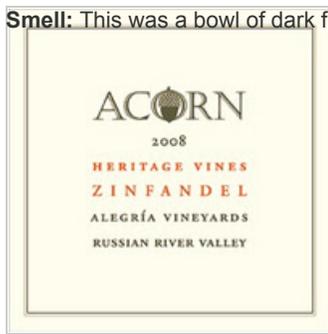
Alcohol: 15%

Grapes: This is a field blend, so it bears mentioning that although 82% of this is Zin, the remainder includes 8% Alicante Bouchet and 8% Petite Sirah and the rest is a mix of 13 other grapes!

Color: Darker than many Zins (thanks probably goes to the dark Petite Sirah for that!), the wine was garnet colored with a brown rim. It had 15% alcohol, so the legs were super thick and dripped down the glass oh-so-slowly.

Red Blend (5)
 Rhone Blend (6)
 Rhone Valley (1)
 Rhône Blend (1)
 Ribera del Duero (2)
 Riesling (16)
 Rioja (2)
 Rose (6)
 Rosso di Montalcino (1)
 Rutherford (1)
 Safe Bets (1)
 Sancerre (2)
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 Sauternes (2)
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 Taurasi (1)
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Smell: This was a bowl of dark fruit -- prunes, raspberry, and blackberry. It was a little bit of a cilia singer -- you could smell the alcohol, but the burn was tempered by the black pepper and clove smells that warmed it up.



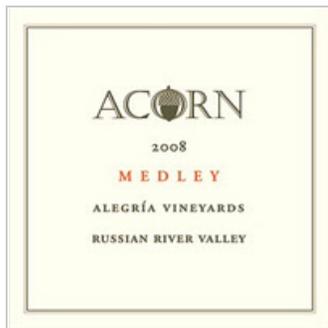
Taste: The wine tasted warm and brandied. It was just like it smelled with fruit and black pepper, and clove. It was powerful, fruit, and spicy. This was clearly Zin, but the other components added spiciness and raspberry flavors that were delicious.

Drink or Sink: Drink. This is a real showpiece for Acorn. A powerful Zin with tons of flavor -- fruit and spice, but more elegant and interesting than a lot of the Zins from Sonoma. Just what Zin should be. I think Zin should always be made as a field blend -- it makes it so much more interesting!

Wine #6: 2008 Medley, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, California

Price: \$38

Alcohol: 14.2%



Grapes: This is a different blend every year, that reflect what's in the vineyards. This year it is 33% Zinfandel, 31% Cabernet Franc, 23% Syrah, 3% Cinsault, 2% Muscat, 1% Merlot, and 7% other grapes.

Smell: This was a cool wine to smell -- so different. Oranges, plums, and honey jumped out the glass. There was a black tea smell too and a little bit of black cherry. The fruit, the spice, the honey combined with licorice and earth made this wine heady.

Taste: Flowers, plums and tobacco with some licorice and honey wowed my mouth. The Medley had great mouth-drying tannins and mouthwatering acid. It was so interesting and delicious, and the finish went on and on.

Drink or Sink: Drink. The Medley is knockout! It makes me wonder why more producers don't try this old fashioned method of field blends. What a unique wine! I've never had anything like this from Sonoma and I loved it.



If you can't tell already, I'm a huge fan of **Acorn** and of Bill and Betsy. Such great wine and TOTALLY for normal people. This is not a place for snobs, it's for nice people who want to sit down with the owners of a winery, learn a thing or two and drink great stuff.

Betsy and Bill, I applaud you both and thank you for making great wine and having no hubris about it. Salt of the earth people! Go see them!

Posted by Wine For Normal People at 2:52 PM 

Labels: *Cabernet Franc, California, Dolcetto, Sangiovese, Sonoma, Syrah, Zinfandel*
