



DRY CREEK VALLEY - A STUDY IN DIVERSITY

by Lou Preston

Dry Creek Valley is much more than a place that grows grapes. It is the dynamic interaction of its inhabitants with both fixed and ephemeral assets like soils and climate and history that have as a common thread the production of wine. To understand Dry Creek we must speak of its people, climate, soils, and of course the grapes and wines produced here. To discover the special character of Dry Creek we should also look for underlying factors that make the Valley unique.

THE PEOPLE OF DRY CREEK

The first impression one forms of the inhabitants of Dry Creek Valley is likely to be a mixed one, an apparent lack of consistency in origin, although one does get the impression that a lot of last names end in the letter "i." It is true, of course, that many of the important contributors to the Dry Creek wine scene are Italian, and I confess that it makes for a pleasingly romantic notion that our benchlands are reminiscent of the rolling hills of Piemonte or Toscano and were thus a magnet for eager young adventurers from the fields and factories of Italy in the early part of this century. But in fact the Pedroncellis and Teldeschis, Stefanis and Rafanellis were not the first farmers or vintners here. If you browse among the tombstones up at Olive Hill Cemetery, you will find many of the earliest tenants who arrived here in the 19th century have names like Patronak, Patten, Glaser, Reilly, Bourdens and Petersen--good English, German, Irish, French and Danish stock.

The demographic intrusion of the last 20 years into Dry Creek is a most exciting one. It brings into juxtaposition with the traditional farmers many professionals of varied backgrounds bringing to bear new tools and passions: computers, geology, European oak, chemistry, microbiology, cellular phones and email. But most of all they bring a worldly knowledge of wine. This 20th century paraphernalia has found a comfortable home here because it is not applied indiscriminately in the UC Davis mold, but with the sensitive touch of passionate individuals who have adopted grapes and wine and Dry Creek as their first love. A partial list of those winemaking newcomers in the 1970s would include David Stare, who reinvigorated winemaking in the Valley with his Dry Creek Vineyard, plus Bill Kreck - Mill Creek Vineyards, Lou Preston - Preston Vineyards, Charles Richard - Bellerose Vineyard. It was newcomers such as these who had the vision to seek appellation status for Dry Creek Valley (granted in 1983).

A new tradition is evolving here with the Mexican families in the Valley. Yesterday's pruners and pickers are today's equipment operators, vineyard foremen, tasting room hosts and cellar supervisors. These men and women will surely be among tomorrow's vintners and growers.

And we must not underestimate the women of Dry Creek. Always a significant factor in grape growing and winery ownership here, women play an increasingly important role in wine production; among the most talented winemakers today are Phyllis Zouzounis of Mazzocco and Julia Iantosca of Lambert Bridge.

So pioneers, Italian renaissance, transplanted professionals and Mexican families. Men and women. We work and dream together to protect and project Dry Creek Valley Winegrowing.



THE CLIMATE OF DRY CREEK VALLEY

If you ask any vintner anywhere about climactic influence on his wines he will talk about warm days and cool nights. I will do that too, but gently persuade you that our weather has “better” warm days and cool nights for growing grapes than any other.

The two primary determining factors in Dry Creek are fog and proximity to the coast, and both speak to the location of Dry Creek Valley. Approximately 70 miles north of San Francisco Bay and 20 miles or so from the Pacific Ocean, Dry Creek Valley obviously has a marine climate influenced by those two bodies of water. But it is more complex than that due to mitigating factors of distance and topography. We are far enough away from San Francisco that we are on the northern edge of fog intrusion. And our proximity to the ocean is tempered by the intervening coastal hills breached by the Russian River some distance to the south, and only occasionally by local tributary streams.

In northern Sonoma County fog gathers at the mouth of the Russian River and on the Santa Rosa plain which stretches toward San Francisco Bay. When weather conditions are right, which is frequently during the summer in Dry Creek Valley, there will be an afternoon breeze out of the south that heralds the evening’s intrusion of fog. If you stand on the Valley floor at 3:30 most afternoons you can almost smell San Francisco Bay. But the actual impact of that fog which lingers in our Valley is varied and often short-lived. The gradient of Dry Creek is sufficiently steep that at 7:00 in the morning the Dry Creek Store at mid-Valley may be shrouded in gray, but the upper Valley will be in bright sunshine. Additionally, what fog we get typically burns off throughout the Valley by 9:30 a.m. or 10 a.m. By contrast you can look across the hills separating us from Geyserville in Alexander Valley and see a continuous band of fog--as if it forgot to take a left turn at Healdsburg as it moved upstream. What this all means is that Dry Creek Valley warms up earlier in the day and reaches higher average temperatures than almost all the other growing areas in Sonoma County.

To elaborate on the second condition, although we are close to the coast we are shielded from the persistent daytime cold of the Pacific Ocean by our local hills. But those local creeks and gorges that slice through the coastal hills form a conduit for cold air at night causing temperatures to drop dramatically to the low- to mid-50’s.

So, warm days, cool nights, a region II by the books, but more complicated than that. Jammy rich and ripe wines, crisp, fruity and balanced finish. Warmer in the north, cooler in the south, all adding up to a lot of grape-growing flexibility. Dry Creek Valley truly does have a “more” perfect climate.

THE SOILS OF DRY CREEK VALLEY

When you talk about soils in Dry Creek Valley, you have to talk about more than dirt. There is a pattern of land usage--that is, man interacting with soils--that plays an important role in our viticultural personality.

I am not a geologist but I will report to you what the experts say, which is that Dry Creek Valley is a product of uplifting and folding of Pacific tectonic plates, exposing old marine material. It is a potentially active geologic area, having its own earthquake fault running the length of the Valley. There is no volcanic activity here, and the soils are the result of varying degrees of wearing down of the uplifted and folded material. The soils are relatively unstable;



there has been a lot of movement of the actual creek bed and erosion of hillside soils over time. You can easily see the high level of large aggregates (gravel) and small alluvium deposited throughout the Valley.

The profile of the Valley itself is rather narrow. The official statistic of “16 miles long and two miles wide” is misleading as it is measured from ridge to ridge, end to end. The practical growing zone of the Valley is much narrower, making for quickly changing slopes, a high percentage of bench and hillside soils relative to the Valley floor.

Within this narrow profile of varied terrain, ownership patterns developed early that gave each farm family access to the creek, the source of water for crops and domestic use. The homes were located back from the creek and convenient to the two main roads in the Valley which parallel the creek above high flood level. And most of the parcels included hillside acreage back even farther from the creek because it was cheap; because it was there. If you look at parcel maps from the late 1800's you will see these long, narrow land holdings stretching back from Dry Creek. And you can still see it today: the typical grape grower's land traversing many soil types as it stretches from creek bottom to distant ridge. We all have many soil types to contend with. We all tend to be very experimental and flexible about what we grow to optimize those soils.

When you look at a modern soils map of the Valley it will appear like a patchwork quilt run amok; so many types, such abrupt changes. A description of a few of the Valley soil types is appended to this summary. It is not an inclusive list, but those mentioned are fairly typical of the soils found throughout the Valley in the opportunities and challenges they represent.

THE GRAPES AND WINES OF DRY CREEK

Dry Creek Valley is going through a period of transition and vinous self-examination that reflects its dynamic demographics and varied resources. We are all familiar with and happy about the established viticultural traditions here. Zinfandel is the most important one dating back to pre-Prohibition times and one that offers us both spicy wines and spicy stories. Sauvignon Blanc is a relative newcomer, but one that settled in quickly for being very distinctive in flavor, yet very comfortable in balance.

But we do not rest on our laurels. It is the other grapes that present a challenge and offer an opportunity in Dry Creek. Exciting new and rediscovered traditional grapes are the object of intense vineyard experimentation and tempting new wines in Dry Creek Valley. Are we Italian again with San Giovese and Barbera; or are we French with Rhône varieties such as Syrah, Grenache, Cinsault and Viognier? We have been both those before, so we certainly can be again.

Dry Creek Valley is on the move; we continue to redefine and rediscover ourselves in the pursuit of some of the world's tastiest wines.

SUMMARY

Despite its diversity of people, climate, soils and wines, there is a unifying thread in Dry Creek Valley. We are all farmers here at heart, and we make wines that taste good and are fun to drink. That is what the wine industry should be about.



SOME SOURCES AND RESOURCES

Addendum to "Dry Creek Valley - A Study in Diversity"

Illustrated Atlas of Sonoma County, Reynolds and Proctor, Santa Rosa, 1898
Lake Sonoma Master Plan, Army Corps of Engineers, San Francisco, 1979
Soil Survey of Sonoma County, Soil Conservation Service
Harry Bosworth, Owner and Director, Olive Hill Cemetery, Geyserville
John Clendenen, Clendenen Vineyard Management, Healdsburg - Soils
Lou Preston, Preston Vineyards, Healdsburg - Poetic License
Charles Richard, Bellerose Vineyard, Healdsburg - Dry Creek Valley Appellation
Claire Rithner, Curator, Healdsburg Museum, Healdsburg

Charles Richard and Bellerose Winery are no longer here. (That facility is now Everett Ridge Winery, owned by Jack and Anne Air.) And Claire is not curator at the museum any more.

DRY CREEK VALLEY SOILS - A PARTIAL LISTING

Valley Bottom Soils

YOLO: "Well drained loams underlain by recent alluvium...these soils are on alluvial fans and flood plains." *You can grow anything on these deep fertile soils: hops, prunes, wheat; and that has all been done. It is also very good for white grapes which are more tolerant of vigorous growth and are compatible with a bit of the resulting herbal flavor.*

CORTINA: "Excessively drained, very gravelly and sandy loams...these soils are on channeled stream bottoms." *These soils can produce wines with intense character, but you must be careful to avoid desiccation of the grapes.*

MANZANITA: "The Manzanita series consists of moderately well-drained gravelly silt loams that have a heavy clay loam subsoil...They are on alluvial fans and river terraces...subsoil is gravelly clay loam..." *This soil has limited rooting depth and thus somewhat limited production. It is suited to white or red grapes.*

Mid-Terrace Soils (These are colloquially referred to as "Dry Creek Conglomerate")

CLOUGH: "The Clough series consists of moderately well drained gravelly loams that have a gravelly clay subsoil. They are in the valleys along and above stream and river channels...on undulating slopes...slopes of 2% to 9%..." *This is Zinfandel country.*

Hillside Soils

BOOMER: "Well-drained loams that have a clay subsoil... (substrata of) fractured rock and gravelly clay loam...on mountainous uplands (and) along the hills on the west side of Dry Creek..." *This has very limited production capacity but with care and small crops you can grow fine red grapes.*

Descriptions extracted from Soil Survey of Sonoma County, Soil Conservation Service, Santa Rosa. *Comments by Lou Preston.*