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Winemaker Series –
\$62/month, 2 reserve reds
Collector Series –
\$112/month, 2 collectable reds
Artisan red–Winemaker red –
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CA Artisan red–IT Artisan red –
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CA Artisan white–IT Artisan white –
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CA Winemaker–IT Winemaker –
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Alternate CA & IT Winemaker Series –
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managed to produce agreeably smooth wine from Renaissance mountain grapes. From his experience in France, Gideon remembered the Madiran appellation, not far from Bordeaux, which produces a highly tannic grape called Tannat, prized during Gallo-Roman times and through the Middle Ages. During the time that Gideon was making wine in France, he became acquainted with the research of Madiran winemaker Patric du Courneau. Du Courneau scientifically explained various traditional oxygenation practices, such as racking, topping, and splashing wine so that it incorporates oxygen. He then created a process by which oxygen could be added to wine in precise amounts so that the winemaker could track precisely the correct amount for a given varietal.

Microscopic bubbles

As Gideon explains it, “Oxygen is added to the wine through a membrane that has microscopic holes in it. You regulate the oxygen through a dispenser, and you can regulate it to, say, two cubic ml of oxygen per liter of wine per one month. It’s very precise. It keeps creating microscopic bubbles of oxygen that are released into the wine. If you look at the surface of the wine, nothing comes to the top. It’s not even frothing, because all of it is completely absorbed into the wine. So you know that all of the oxygen that you dispensed into the wine was absorbed, which is very important, because that means that you are really sure of what amount of oxygen goes into the wine. If it starts bubbling on top, it means that you don’t really know how much was absorbed.

You’re in guess-land instead of being in a place where you know what’s happening.”

Monster tannins

“What happens is that as you keep following the wine and modifying the amount of oxygen that it takes, gradually these monster tannins start to move in the mouth when you taste them. What are called the green tannins, small molecules, which are bitter and very astringent with the astringency centered right around the lips in front of the mouth. As this oxygenation technique goes on longer and longer, the sensation of the tannins starts moving backward on the palate. So you start to feel it more on the roof of your mouth, and then on the sides and the top of the tongue, and then gradually it moves back and back. So the tannins go through phases, starting with what we call green or hard tannins, and then something like evolved tannins, and then eventually into melted tannins, in four or five phases.”

Despite the seeming complication, Gideon describes micro oxygenation as basically simple. “It’s a very advanced wine theory, cutting edge winemaking, because there are not very many people who have experimented with it yet. But as far as technology goes, it’s a low tech process.”

Despite a two and a half hour drive from San Francisco, any plans that you can make to visit this magnificent estate is worth the effort. As James Halliday says in his *Wine Atlas of California*, “I can only suggest you move heaven and earth to make an appointment, for you will see both when you arrive.” ■



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Winery of the Month



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August 2003

Just east of Sacramento, California’s state capital, the Sierra Foothill counties of Amador, Calaveras, and El Dorado have seen tremendous growth in both their numbers of citizens and wineries. In a sense, both winery and population growth has been stimulated by the same catalyst. Vineyard land has become prohibitively expensive in northern California’s coastal counties as has the cost of living, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. Businesses have enthusiastically relocated east to the Sacramento area, providing jobs for an increasing number of people, who can enjoy the area’s more relaxed pace and its affordable housing. Similarly, prospective winemakers have found Foothill vineyard land reasonably priced for new wine ventures. The Foothill counties are some of the oldest grape growing areas of California, dating back to the Gold Rush of 1849. Later, vineyards collapsed along with gold mining. But these gorgeous rolling hills have a track record for producing premium wine and, additionally, are within easy travel distance to the Sacramento urban center. Together population and winery growth have created a productive symbiotic relationship, one providing a local market and the other a valuable commodity. ➤

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Gideon Beinstock is the winemaker at Renaissance Vineyard & Winery.

Further away from Sacramento, Yuba County, also in the Sierra Foothills, has seen no growth in either population or wineries and today continues to be economically depressed, similar to what it was when its gold mining economy collapsed. The one bright spot in Yuba county is the Renaissance estate, which is bright to the point of dazzling. But so far, no other winery is willing to endure the county's isolation, despite the success of Renaissance and the county's long history of grape growing. Spanish explorers called the area Yuba, a version of the Spanish word *uva* or *grape*, after they found the fruit growing wild on river banks.

A fellowship of friends

In every way, Renaissance Winery is a unique venture. In 1971, the Fellowship of Friends purchased 1,400 acres of what must have been the cheapest real estate in California. With a membership of about 2000 people scattered in various countries, only a third of whom live near the estate, the group follows the teachings of two early twentieth century Russian philosophers, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. Members believe that they can achieve their spiritual potential through self-awareness and discipline and that art is essential to their pursuit of higher consciousness. Classical gardens with sculptured fountains, a performing arts building, a restaurant, as well as the winery and various other buildings are scattered on this spectacular estate, whose

dramatic bowl-like geography includes two hundred acres of vineyards, which climb steep slopes, rising to a 2,400-foot elevation. The views from the top of the bowl to the bottom enrapture the observer, but looking up to the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains, is equally awesome, their giant slopes seemingly close enough to touch.

Winemaker Gideon Beinstock

Winemaker Gideon Beinstock arrived at the Renaissance estate in the 1970s and helped to plant the vineyards. During the 1980s, he worked as a winemaker in France. Returning to Renaissance in 1990, he took over as winemaker in 1994. He has been able to cultivate a large number of grape varieties because the terrain is so various. A 600-foot difference exists between the lower vineyards and the upper ones, and the vineyards enjoy exposures to the north, south, east, and west. Some areas are open to the wind while others are protected. "What this means is that you can find side-by-side areas that do really well with extremely different grape varieties. I believe that Riesling does magnificently here, but there is no market for Riesling now. So we are producing a very tiny amount." The estate produces the principal Rhone varieties, such as white Viognier and Roussane and the reds Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvedre. From the Bordeaux family, the estate produces the white Sauvignon Blanc and the reds Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot. And during cool years, it produces even Pinot Noir.

Completely organic

Renaissance has always practiced sustainable agriculture with methods that impacted the soil as little as possible, but in 2000, the estate became completely organic although not certified. Because they have star thistle and poison oak in the vineyards, they were using herbicides. "I think that organic farming is more consistent with our way of life, and it's just common sense that as owners of land, we try to use methods that build the soil rather than destroy it. We could see that using herbicides over time was negatively affecting the soil. And achieving a good balance in the soil is essential for getting good grapes and for the long term health of the soil and of the vines." Since 2000, they remove both star thistle and poison oak by hand.

Too much of a good thing

Some of the highest vineyards in California, Gideon would initially have said that their altitude was too much of a good thing. As is common in mountain vineyards, the grapes are very small so that the ratio of skin to juice is high. From the skins, red wine takes its color, flavor, depth, and tannins, which contribute to that grainy, sometimes abrasive texture in the mouth. While all of these elements, together with acid, define the quality of a wine, tannins that are overly apparent can ruin the balance of the wine and mar the tasting experience. Since white wine is fermented without the skins, only red wine requires tannin management.

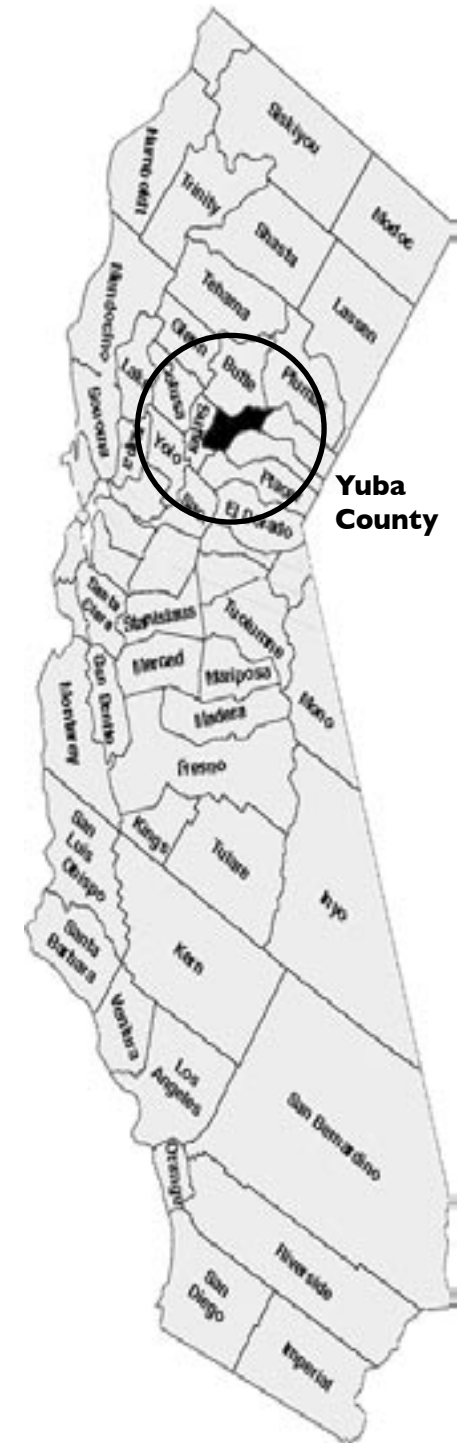
"I think that organic farming is more consistent with our way of life, and it's just common sense that as owners of land, we try to use methods that build the soil rather than destroy it."
—Gideon Beinstock

Something old & something new

Traditionally, winemakers have used various techniques to control tannins, ageing the finished wine being one of them. As red wine ages, the tannin molecules link up, grow

heavy as they aggregate, and eventually fall out of solution, becoming sediment at the bottom of the bottle. During the winemaking process, oxygen can mitigate the effect of tannins, so winemakers use various techniques to force air into the wine, for example moving it (racking) from barrel to barrel at intervals. During the last ten to fifteen years, winemakers have implemented new research on tannin management, as consumers began to pick up 750 ml bottles of wine for evening meals at the same time that they purchased the meal's ingredients. In other words, consumers had neither the time, space, nor the inclination to age red wine until it became pleasingly smooth. Additionally, Americans have a tendency to drink even red wine without food as they would a cocktail. In the absence of food, tannins are even more apparent.

But apart from ageing, none of the traditional techniques or even the newer ones



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