

WINE BUSINESS MONTHLY

September 2015 • \$5.95

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Varietal Focus: *Rosé*

Winemakers Vary Varietals and Techniques to Achieve Stylistic Goals

PLUS:

Selecting the Best Pump for the Winemaking Task
Saxum's New Tanks: The Tank is the Terroir
Mark Greenspan on Uneven Ripening in 2015

Product Review:

New Guide for Online Shopping Carts

Winemaking Trials:

Closure Consistency in Sauvignon Blanc
Takeaways from Testarossa Winery's Barrel Trials

winemaking

sales & marketing

Varietal Focus:
Rosé 18
Lance Cutler



A Wine Pump Primer 42

Pumps for moving juice, must and wine

Curtis Phillips

Wine Trial:

Closure Consistency on Sauvignon Blanc 48

Results of a sensory and chemical analysis performed on 2011 Sauvignon Blanc by researchers at UC Davis, presented at the 2015 ASEV Annual Conference

Erin Guenther

Tin Council Committee Created to Promote Benefits of "Pure Tin" 50

Erin Guenther



Case Study: Concrete Tanks 52

Amphora-style tanks crafted using a winery estate's own rock to add coolness factor

Cyril Penn



Wine Trials: Cellar and Vineyard Trials at Testarossa 54

Long-time Testarossa winemaker discusses oak, soil and whole-cluster experiments

Laura Ness

grape growing



Ready... Set... No! 62

Poor fruit set plagues coastal California

Mark Greenspan

Indicators of Soil Quality in Viticulture 66

Part 2: Soil Biological Properties

Bibiana Guerra

The Size Game 70

A look at the benefits and downfalls of choosing smaller wholesale partners

Liza B. Zimmerman

Retail Sales:

Off-Premise Wine Sales Up 72

In conjunction with the Varietal Focus this month, we look at what is happening with Rosé in off-premise sales and in direct-to-consumer shipments

technology & business

Industry Roundtable:

Strong Lending Environment for Wineries Spurs Greater Bank Competition 74

In our annual survey of leading lenders to the wine industry, bankers' optimism about continued wine sales growth and steady, low interest rates suggests greater loan opportunities.

Michael S. Lasky



Product Review:

Online Shopping Carts 84

Theresa Dorr

departments

month in review 4

news 10



what's cool 14

Semi-automatic Stretch Wrapping for the Small Winery

An affordable solution for strong load containment

Bill Pregler

people 98

advertiser index 102

jake lorenzo Uber This 103



winemaker of the month 104

Adam Henkel, winemaker, Crown Point Vineyards, Santa Barbara, California

Laura Ness, author, Cellar and Vineyard Trials at Testarossa, page 54

“Conducting as many trials as possible each harvest, across a variety of factors, gives winemakers a better chance at discovering just the right twist or set of tweaks that can make the wine even better the following year.”

Linda Trotta, winemaking consultant, A Wine Pump Primer, page 42

“Centrifugals work well, particularly with automated pump-over systems. For manual pump-overs I tend to use air diaphragms. My experience in both cases has been that they are good work horses and result in minimal shearing of any skins or seeds that may get into the system.”

Justin Smith, winemaker, Saxum Winery, Concrete Tanks, page 52

“I love the concept of using our rock in the vessels. I think it’s something that adds that extra coolness factor.”

Lance Cutler, author, Varietal Focus: Rosé, page 18

The one thing all of these rosé producers seemed to share in common was that making rosé allowed them to use grapes or techniques that might not have led to great red wine.

Bill Brosseau, winemaker, Testarossa, Cellar and Vineyard Trials at Testarossa, page 54

“Sometimes the barrels that are a bit more edgy or tense tend to be late bloomers, as I call them,” - Bill Brosseau talking about Barrels in Laura Ness’ article

Adam Beak, managing director, Bank of the West, Strong Lending Environment for Wineries Spurs Greater Bank Competition, page 74

“If you’re not making money at the premium end of the wine business now, it’s probably got more to do with your business model than the wine market. Overall, our wine clients are absolutely going to be more profitable.”

Wine Trials: Cellar and Vineyard Trials at Testarossa

Long-time Testarossa winemaker discusses oak, soil and whole-cluster experiments

Laura Ness

Laura Ness is a wine journalist, columnist, travel writer, food and wine reviewer (*Gayot.com*) and wine competition judge. Ness enjoys writing about wines with character and the characters who make them. She writes for many industry and consumer publications and is a frequent contributor to *WineOhTv.com* and *WineFoodExplorer.com*.

EXPERIMENTS ARE THE BEST way to learn: look at the careers of Ben Franklin and T. A. Edison for starters. One learns the most by trial and error, and Testarossa Winery's long-time winemaker, Bill Brosseau, is no stranger to the concept. He has more experiments going on than many drug companies, one thinks, walking through the old caves filled with a myriad of barrels from just about every forest in France and in every conceivable permutation that is of interest to the viticulture expert turned winemaker. Brosseau grew up in California in his parents' vineyards just next door to the Pinnacles, in the wilderness near Chalone—a storied viticultural area made famous by the adventures of Dick Graff and Phil Woodward back in the 1980s. This expertise in vineyard management serves him well in selecting the more than two dozen sites that have come into the Testarossa portfolio since the beginning of his 15-year tenure at the now 40,000-case winery.

Decisions about how to handle a given site are made after careful cellar trials, involving picking dates and use of oak. Hundreds of these trials are done yearly, with the assistance of a growing production staff, presently at 11, including enologist Bill Snyder and laboratory technician Ashley Howen. Recently, I was invited to sit in on a series of cellar trials, including oak choices for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from several vineyards, along with soil trials, where different aspects of a vineyard were put under the microscope by isolating picks from separate blocks. They keep track of all their trials on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. There were a dozen of us tasting, including winery owner Rob Jensen, folks from marketing, sales, production, the tasting room and even the CFO, who wanted to know how much all these new barrels were costing.

The following is a summary of some of the trials at Testarossa.

Soil Trial: 2014 Sierra Madre Chardonnay

This trial came about because Brosseau noticed a distinct change in soils in the same block of this vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley, with the south being a mix of sand and loam and the north slope being really sandy, with a tendency to ripen more slowly. Brosseau was encouraged by the vineyard manager to pick the entire block of a piece, but he decided to wait for physiological ripeness on the north section.

The south portion was picked on August 22 at 23.7° Brix, and the north trial was picked a week later on August 29 at 24.2° Brix. They were aged in the same kind of oak yet could not have been more different. The south pick was hedonistic in nature, filled with ripe fruit going to tropical, with pretty floral aromas and flavors that ran the gamut from rich ripe peach to juicy apricot with lemon zest and lemon thyme. The acid was a wild ride.

The north pick, in contrast, offered up aromas of flint, honey, pineapple and



LAURA NESS

Bill Brosseau, winemaker at Testarossa Winery

scotch, with a noticeable salinity that ran through the very complex palate. This was a more intellectual wine, with distinct minerality, good texture and acid, and flavors of dried apricot, lychee and Humboldt Fog goat cheese with that layer of ash.

Brosseau said he will probably continue to pick these areas separately for the complexity they bring.

“I have to admit the difference was much greater than expected, and also the hedonistic favorite was split one versus the other,” Brosseau said. “As I continue to ‘tune’ the wine, I seem to fall back on looking at cues the vineyard gives me, as well as what the vines are telling me. Now having done the final blends, each side of the block gave an interesting nuance that we were

Cellar and Vineyard Trials at Testarossa



able to craft separately and align them gracefully at blending time.”

Oak-a-Rama: 2014 Fogstone Chardonnay

The second trial involved 2014 Fogstone Chardonnay, all picked at the same time but processed in different cooperage with different toast and aging regimens. This vineyard, located in the Santa Lucia Highlands, is relatively new to the Testarossa program and came online in 2011. They’ve typically used two-year aged barrels but are now leaning towards the three-year program. Brosseau is also experimenting with four-year as California enters the fourth year of drought.

The following barrels were sampled with the group:

Cadus Tronçais Med Extract: This was the most subtle of the four, with a creamy, pastry-like aroma and a very pretty balance of texture and acid with the slightest hint of oak on the finish.

Francois Frere VSG, MT, 3-year: Fierce oak influence in the nose is followed by secondary aromas of lemon cream and yeasty bread dough. The flavors are like toasty brioche, very polished but extremely oak on the finish. As I predicted, this was the group favorite.

Taransaud Pure, 3-year: This was a new one to Testarossa, and it had rather distinctive aromas of butterscotch pudding and ripe pineapple, followed by flavors of mandarin, guava and mango, with a surprisingly flinty and outspoken finish that struck me as nasty. It was one of Rob’s favorites.

Francois Frere, VSG, MT, 2-year: Hints of Earl Grey tea and peaches made this a little more appealing, and the flavor came off as tame, even-keeled and generously textured throughout, with a hint of peach skin on the finish that was not obliterated by oak. This one placed second in votes.

“Sometimes the barrels that are a bit more edgy or tense tend to be late bloomers as I call them,” Brosseau said. “While we tend to use judicious amounts of Francois Frere barrels, it is always neat to have a spice rack of other barrels to help shape the palate of the wine naturally. The Taransaud Pure T showed great promise from past renditions of this cooper. I do remember not being wowed by it at this tasting; but after a couple of months, it has really hit its stride.”

Two Picks: Rosemary’s Vineyard Pinot Noir

Jensen had been trying to secure fruit from Rosemary’s Vineyard, which is not far from Rincon in the Santa Maria Valley, for years from the Talley family and had consistently been turned down. Brosseau was finally able to secure a section for the 2014 vintage. Typically, the entire 2-acre vineyard, which is all clone 667, was picked at the same time, but Brosseau noticed that there were sufficiently apparent microclimates that were affecting physiological ripeness. He chose to pick the more vigorous and hotter section first, on August 28 with the Brix at 24.7°. Cooler weather subsequently set

in, allowing for more hang time on the remaining block, which was brought in on September 16 at 26.3° Brix. Both lots were done in neutral oak, allowing pure fruit expression, and both were unfiltered when tasted.

The first pick bore distinct herbal aromas, and was bright, energetic and slightly stemmy with dark currant, brown sugar, rosemary and thyme accents, an altogether intriguing wine. The latter pick was more subtle in its aromatics, which was a surprise, and the wine, as a whole, appeared to be a big baby, with chunky, chalky tannins and not much in the way of fruit. Counterintuitive, to say the least. Brosseau considers this a problem he can address by leaf pulling, hastening ripeness without the need for longer hang times, which clearly didn’t do much for the fruit.

“With a vineyard with such a storied background, I have to admit I was a little stressed about picking the site at perfect ripeness,” he said. “The more I visited the vineyard as harvest drew closer, I realized that there were about three different ripening zones.”

Fortunately, in collaboration with Kevin Wilkinson, the vineyard manager, Brosseau said they did a surgical pick. “Boy, that wine has turned out to be a beauty. While the second batch was not quite as opulent, I was glad we waited as the seeds were still green and would have had a wine severely out of tune. Now the second time around, I have a greater sense of when to surgically pick the blocks and not get stressed out.”

2014 Soberanes Francois Freres New Oak Trial

The next trial was on to five different permutations of Pinot Noir from the Soberanes Vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands, planted and owned by Gary Franscioni and Gary Pisoni. The fruit was brought in on September 19 at 26.9° Brix, and it was, according to Brosseau, a big crop, which he opted to let hang a while longer, producing a noticeably extracted and intense outcome.

Nevers Noble Grain, M+: This barrel allowed the red fruits to come through—they were really bright, energetic and filled with zippy acid. This was by far my favorite.

Medium Tight Grain, MT, 3-year: Pretty aromas of baked plum tart were very appealing here, and were followed by a mouthfeel that was pretty, sassy, generous and delivered good tension.

Tight Grain, MT: This came off as more vegetal and slightly closed in the nose, and on the palate, the fruit struggled to work through the powerful oak.

Darniers, M+: With slightly tarry aromas, this one had exacerbated flavors of sarsaparilla and left a very significant impression of toasty oak on the finish.



Keegan Mayo, assistant winemaker for Testarossa, evaluates a Pinot sample

Cellar and Vineyard Trials at Testarossa

Very Tight Grain, MT, 3-year: Here, the aromas were of lifted bright plum and raspberry, but were assertively overpowered by the aggressive oak. However, there was a hint of tension that made it interesting.

“While talking about where specifically in France oak is sourced from is not that exciting for the average wine connoisseur, I find it to be,” Brosseau said. “I had never lined up so many forests in one vineyard before, and it really confirmed my theories of flavor and aromas. It also emphasized why I continue to lean toward the very tight-grain forests, which give the most respect to terroir, aroma and flavor. Certainly, if style or conditions present themselves, the more open grain can be very well paired. At the end of the day, the personal preference of the vintner/owners really drive which grain size/flavor strategy they hope to achieve. For us, it is respecting the terroir while producing some tension in the wine for age-worthiness.”

Soil Trials: 2014 Brosseau Vineyard Pinot Noir

This trial consisted of four samples of 2014 Pinot Noir, all Mount Eden Clone, from the same block, but four distinctly different soils. All were picked at different times and were very early to finish fermentations. The tannins were pretty abundant across the board. The surrounding vegetation at this vineyard is wild sage and chapparal, which was quite apparent in the wines.

Sample 1: Clay and limestone, good soil tilth. August 19, 24.4° Brix: Aromas here were of roasted beets and cranberries, and the flavors were concentrated dark raspberry and chocolate, with a soft palate yet good energy.

Sample 2: Hard granite and limestone. August 19, 22.5° Brix: This was extremely Burgundian, with screaming aromas of earth, fern, chapparal and sweet licorice. In the mouth, it was grippy, intense, loaded with currant and sassafrass and oozing acid and extreme tension.

Brosseau said the vines here are quite stressed. It shows.

Sample 3: West-facing slope of decomposed granite; looks like grapenuts. August 28, 23.8° Brix

Aromas on this lot are very pine foresty and fern-laced. In the mouth, it was very smooth, offering up lush cranberry and cherry and a very satisfying finish. This wine is deep and reflective: a wine to contemplate and enjoy with like-minded company.

Sample 4: Saddle top, no rocks; soft, deep soils. September 3, 23.6° Brix

This wine is all about the aromatics, carrying assertive vegetative influences across the board. You can really smell the chaparral and wild sage, and the mouthfeel proved assertive, with flavors of clove, basil and oregano.

“While my harvest team was about to wage mutiny on me for this experiment, I sure am glad we separated out the different terroirs in this block of Pinot Noir,” Brosseau said. “The block is laid out much like the estates in Burgundy, where the topography is quite dynamic in a short range of land. I really wanted to see the impact of specific terroir from adjoining terroir. I would say most of the soil shares the same chemistry. The large difference is the physical texture and water-holding capacity. This experiment really confirmed to me that tense soils give tense wines with tense tannins. Open and softer soils give softer wines. I know that seems really basic, but that is what Pinot does for us: it gives us crazy artists some grounding.”

Fogstone Clone Trials: 113 and 115

Brosseau said that 113 used to be very common in Pinot Noir vineyards but has been replaced by the more popular 667 and 777 for their deeper color. From the two samples, the color difference is apparent. Picked about the same Brix, 24.4° and 24.3°, the clones are in adjoining blocks in this Santa Lucia Highlands Vineyard.

The 113 is a gorgeous garnet color, with great transparency. The aromatics were slightly gamey and reductive, with pure flavors of cranberry and a



LAURA NESS

Testarossa winery's production team conducts numerous cellar trials throughout the year.

vibrancy that approached the topnotes on a piano. In stark contrast, the 115 was far more mainstream, deep in hue and, in every sense, darker, gamey and essentially fierce.

“I love being the contrarian and pouring wines from clones that are forlorn,” Brosseau said. “113 is a wonderful match for this very cool-climate site and really amplifies the terroir when sometimes even a 115 clone can be a little heavy-handed in dark fruits.”

Doctor's Vineyard Whole Cluster Trial

Testarossa typically doesn't go for whole cluster in their Pinots, so this was an interesting experiment. Brosseau explained that he typically isn't picking with brown stems as that would be too late. If the canes and leaves are drying out, the vines are shutting down, and that's when you might do whole cluster.

Both lots were clone 667, and the first lot was picked on September 5 at 26.5° Brix, processed with no whole cluster. This wine was dense and extracted but didn't say much in the nose. The second was 25 percent whole cluster, picked on September 14 at 27.6° Brix. The color was noticeably more intense and the aromas considerably stemmier, with hints of basil.

Brosseau said he feels that 25 percent is a bit much, but he definitely notices a bump in the aromatics.

“This trial was all about ‘it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission,’” said Brosseau. “As people know me, I like to push the limits, even if it goes against the past stylistic objectives we have portrayed. It just so happened that we had a small patch in the vineyard that needed a touch more time, and it just so happened to fit nicely in a 1-ton plastic fermenter. Doing a punchdown on a partial whole cluster bin is also the fastest way to silence an overly energetic intern. Once the skins are treaded enough and liberating juice, those workers punching down the bin go from tense to peaceful very quickly as they smell the enchanting aromas. While the aromas were very engaging, the tannins were a touch too chalky and need more time to evolve. Perhaps we will try another clone that is less intense.”

2014 Merlot New Oak Trial

Brosseau has been making wine from the Black Ridge Vineyard near Lexington Reservoir for several years and recently took the vineyard on as a consulting project. The grapes were picked on September 25 at 24.1° Brix and done in three different kinds of new oak barrels. The Radoux barrel, with medium toasted heads, was powerfully structured, rich, dark and



smooth. The Demptos MTH TG barrel was decidedly elegant, with black raspberry and red currant flavors, almost bordering on cassis. The Nadalie barrel from the Allier forest was MT+ and three-year aged. It brought out the plum, cigar and leather notes in the nose and delivered noticeably bigger tannins on the finish.

Brosseau said that when he visited Bordeaux, he observed that most houses used five or six different coopers, apparently with no rhyme or reason. Many of them used Nadalie. In contrast, the Burgundy houses had very specific oak regimens they've used for decades. The Demptos and Radoux are relatively new to the Testarossa Bordeaux program and certainly added a touch of class.

"It is exciting to make Merlot from the Santa Cruz Mountains in such a cool climate," said Brosseau. "This Merlot really stands up nicely to all the new oak, surely a sign of its future pedigree. It is quite interesting, though, to see the different strategies of oak selection from that of a Pinot producer in Burgundy versus the Cab producer in Bordeaux. I like to say that we are playing with the same high-quality barrels in Bordeaux but being more surgical like the Burgundians in our specific matching with clones and Bordeaux varietals."

2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Co-fermentation Trial

Brosseau explained that at Black Ridge, where the Cabernet is sourced for their Meritage blend, there are two clones of Cab: 4 and 337. There were three lots, one of Clone 4, picked at 25° Brix, the second of Clone 337 picked at 24.3 and a co-ferment of the two clones picked at 25.1° Brix. The clone 4 shows classic Cabernet aromas of black pepper, leather and tobacco with a huge texture, impressively soft and supple for such a youthful wine. Clone 337 had enormous gamey aromatics and powerful tannins that Brosseau says are exacerbated in hot years. The co-ferment was love at first sip, with gorgeous aromatics of cigar and fine leather. In the mouth, this was beautiful, with a lovely satiny texture and divine balance.

"It was somewhat difficult to carefully monitor the tasting notes as this wine was so dark and concentrated," Brosseau said. "I did tend to like the co-ferment as the tannins had a touch more balance. I do laugh when I talk about this wine as when I tasted with Mel Knox (barrel broker for Francois Frere), who has tasted nearly every producer in the world; he said, 'this wine is dark.' I should note that Mel is hard to impress, by the way, and that is code for amazing wine. So aside from the natural tendencies of this wine, we will continue to assess the co-ferment as this wine settles down over time."

2014 Cabernet Sauvignon New Oak Trial

We sampled four different coopers in this final trial, all using clone 4 Cab from Black Ridge. The Ana Selection was medium with Jupilles toast (JT), which adds a bit of sweetness. It came from two forests and is among the rarest of allocated barrels. It offered up fierce oak aromatics with blackberry jam on toast. On the palate, it delivered a wonderful tannin profile.

The Nadalie barrel, MT from Allier, was the group favorite, with a very pretty aromatic profile that spoke of black and red fruits. In the mouth, it was gorgeous with generous coffee and pomegranate.

The Vicard Generation 7, Privilege, gave off aromas of black licorice, and proved big, punchy and aggressive in the mouth. The Taransaud MTT from Beaune was the biggest surprise of all. Dainty and very aromatically appealing, this one turned out to be a huge tannic monster in the mouth.

The takeaway here was that despite his accomplishments as a Burgundy master, Brosseau has a rich future in Bordeaux, and we can't wait to do the barrel trials when they get ready to do their Meritage blend. We're hoping the Cabernet Sauvignon, as gorgeous as it is, will proudly go solo with a Testarossa badge.

"As with the Taransaud Pure T trial, I have to say that the Vicard fell into this same trend," Brosseau said. "When I talked with the barrel sales rep afterwards, I casually mentioned, 'Your barrels are late bloomers, right?' She obliged, and so I will do my best to wait patiently and not cancel the barrel order just yet. Truly, the hardest thing in winemaking is being patient and waiting."

The Result

Winemakers have just one chance each year to turn grapes into something amazing. The opportunity to work with fruit from a wide range of vineyards provides not just a different set of challenges but also unique opportunities to discover the "voice" of each one. Conducting as many trials as possible each harvest, across a variety of factors, gives winemakers a better chance at discovering just the right twist or set of tweaks that can make the wine even better the following year. It's kind of like tuning a bunch of different pianos all at once: it might be cacophony for a seemingly excruciating period, but the music will eventually be all the sweeter for the effort. WBM