

Wine for Normal People

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ACORN Winery: Unique Stuff and Still Truly One of Sonoma's Finest

by Elizabeth Schneider

When people I really like who happen to run wineries send me wine, I get a little nervous. It's like a friend asking you to read her novel. You know she put blood, sweat, and tears into the process. You know she's so proud of her accomplishment. And even though you may think of her as an outstanding writer, you worry that maybe this time something will have changed.

Sometimes you're right. But often, when someone's got it, they've got it, which can be a tremendous relief and a real joy too. Such is the case with **ACORN Winery** located in Sonoma's Russian River Valley in California.

I visited owners Bill and Betsy Nachbaur's a while back and had an amazing time at this small winery. **As I mentioned in the previous post**, this ain't the first rodeo for the couple — like many in the industry (where you can make a small fortune by starting with a large one) they had a life before wine and were very successful. Like others in Napa and Sonoma, this wine pursuit for them was and is driven by passion. But unlike others, if you talk to Betsy and Bill, see their modest but very comfy tasting room, and hear what other people from other wineries in Sonoma say about these people, you understand that this is a different operation.

Bill, the winemaker, is self-taught. And even though ACORN has been around since 1990 and has been making wine since 1994, the Nachbours don't seem to care about glossy photos and being quoted in the press. They care about figuring out how to grow amazing grapes and make amazing wine.

The winery sells half its grapes and only makes 3,000 cases of wine a year. Their vineyards aren't the highly manicured, "curated" vineyards you see around the Russian River Valley. They're from the old tradition, where grapes grew together in the vineyards and were picked and fermented as a batch (field blends). ACORN's Alegría (means joy and is so appropriate for the approach) Vineyard is 120 years old and is mixed up and co-fermented in the winery.

What's co-fermenting? Instead of making a batch of Merlot and a batch of Cabernet Franc separately and then blending them, you ferment it all together so the flavors meld. I'm happy to report that after trying this vintage, I'm even MORE into ACORN than I was before. I approached with a serious critical eye to make sure I wasn't biased but these wines are amazing any way you cut it. The lineup is below, but I can tell you this: wine after wine was astoundingly balanced, delicious, and memorable. These wines make me want more...all the time! I think anything you try from ACORN is going to be a class act. I can't think of too many places I can say that of, but this remains a favorite.



All wines are from ACORN's estate Alegría Vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley.

2009 Sangiovese

The Grapes: 98% Sangiovese, 1% Canaiolo, 1% Mammolo

Alcohol: 13.2%



Color: Orange rim, with a dried rose color in the center. This is lighter — Sangiovese doesn't hold color well.

Smell: Lovely scents of dried flowers, coffee, cherry, and dried cherry.

Taste: Sour cherry, red cherry, and dried strawberry with a little bit of orange peel. Bright with great acid and light tannins.

Drink or sink?: Drink. This is not an Italian Sangiovese; it's a California version with bright fruit and great acid, but none of the rusticity as in an Italian wine. It's fruity, with acid and tannin and pure flavors. If you try this, don't make the comparison to Italy, this is a true California style and it's outstanding in its own right.

2009 Dolcetto

The Grapes: 96% Dolcetto, 2% Friesa, 2% Barbera

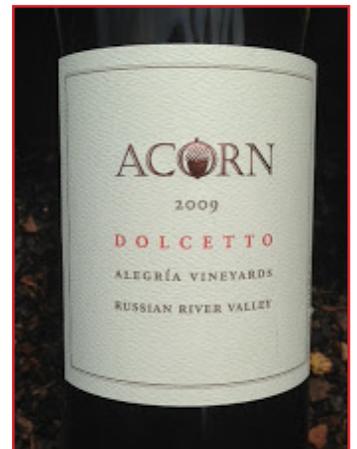
Alcohol: 14.1%

Color: Plum-red like black raspberry juice and lots of consistent color from ripe grapes.

Smell: Earth and plum, dark fruit, raspberry, and dried strawberry made this very fresh. The leather notes give it almost a Syrah-like quality to smell, which is heavier than most Dolcettos.

Taste: Dark fruit, cherry, with leather notes (but really mild, it didn't taste like a Syrah!). It was medium weight with good acidity and slight bitterness due to the grape, which usually has that biting character.

Drink or sink?: Drink. Unlike the Zin, I love the bitterness in this wine. It offsets the fruit in a way that makes it a point of interest rather than a distraction from the flavors. Dolcetto is a unique grape and this wine is a great expression of it — clean, pure fruit flavors with great texture. I love it.



2009 Cabernet Franc

The Grapes: 96% Cabernet Franc, 2% Merlot, 2% Petit Verdot

Alcohol: 13.4%



Color: Ruby, sparkling and glycerin like — a shiny, clean looking wine

Smell: Coffee, violets, dark berry, spearmint, black pepper, and potting soil, this had ideal aromas for a California Cab Franc.

Taste: Chocolate covered coffee beans, dark cherry, spearmint, leather, a great floral note. So balanced, with medium tannin and acid.

Drink or sink?: Drink. SO balanced, pleasant and sippable but this had real depth in flavor -- it wasn't just a one note. An amazingly delicious balance between earth, fruit, acid, and tannin. A perfect California Cab Franc.

2010 Heritage Vines Zinfandel

The Grapes: 80% Zinfandel, 11% Petite Sirah, 7% Alicante Bouschet, 2% a ton of other stuff, including Plavac Mali, a Zin clone

Alcohol: 15.3% (high)

Color: Crimson and ruby in the center, the wine had a very consistent color — even ripening of the bunches, I suspect. Fat legs from the alcohol.

Smell: Powerful, brandied black cherry, blackberry, and vanilla, oak, and coffee grounds from the barrels.

Taste: Coffee, black cherry, vanilla with a slight hint of bitterness and a little acid.

Drink or sink?: Drink. But with the caveat that this is the second time I've said to M.C. Ice — "I love all this wine but this Zin is just great, whereas the rest are mind-blowing." Great wine, but I don't love the slight bitterness and I think the wine could use a little more tannin for balance. Also, you need to watch the alcohol on this — pairing with food is hard with a 15%+ wine, even if it's balanced. Still, it's a good wine and I'd drink it any day (just after I drank the rest of Acorn's line first!).



2009 Alicante Bouschet

The Grapes: 98% Alicante Bouschet, 1% Petit Bouschet, 1% Grenache

Alcohol: 13.6%

Color: Plum and dark purple in color, this looked like a rich wine.

Smell: Smoky and peaty, like Scotch from that 83% American oak used (much of it new)! Bacon, smoked barrels, black licorice, and tobacco. After a while it was less smoky and peaty and more like briar, baked rhubarb, blackberry syrup, and black pepper.

Taste: Plum, briar, raspberry, and vanilla flavors — it was like a pie! Medium acid and tannin, cigar, tar, and underbrush gave it complexity,

Drink or sink?: Unbelievable. I love this wine. The smell alone had me, but the taste was rich, full, and meaty. Loved it.



2009 Medley

The Grapes: 44% Syrah, 14% Cabernet Franc, 13% Sangiovese, 11% Cinsault, 7% Viognier, 5% Muscat, 3% Zinfandel, 3% Other stuff.

Alcohol: 14.2%



Color: Like canned red beets — dark red to purple but with a slight orange tinge. Thick legs from the alcohol.

Smell: Pepper, plums, prunes, dried blueberries, and dried dirt were enriched by nutmeg, dirt, and campfire smells from oak aging.

Taste: Like a blackberry briar (berries + underbrush/outdoor smell), with orange peel, blood orange, and sundried tomato flavors -- very cool and interesting. It had medium tannin and bright mouth-cleaning acid.

Drink or sink?: Drink. FABULOUS balance and so delicious. I could drink this all day and all night alone, but it's also great with food.

What can I say? **ACORN** proves again that it's a complete hit parade of wines. For me, this is a MUST visit if you're heading to Sonoma. The wines are nothing short of outstanding. Whew. I dig the people and I'm glad they haven't lost their touch. Go see them — you won't regret it.