

Weekly Interview: Bill Nachbaur

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Each week, as regular readers know, we pose a series of questions to a winemaker. This week, we're featuring Bill Nachbaur, who runs **Acorn Winery** in the Russian River Valley together with his wife, Betsy.

Bill spent most of his career as an attorney. But in 1990, after deciding to purchase the 100+-year-old **Alegría Vineyard**, he retired from law to become a farmer. Betsy joined the winery full time a few years later.

Early on, Bill and his wife sold most of their grapes to wineries like Ridge and Rosenblum. In 1994, they decided to make some of their own wines and established Acorn. The first wine—a 1994 Sangiovese—was released in 1996.

The Nachbours are **big believers in field blends**. Indeed, every wine they produce includes “multiple grape varieties [that] are grown together, harvested together, crushed, and co-fermented.” The Alegría vineyard is home to Zinfandel, Syrah, Cabernet Franc, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, and many lesser-known varieties, about 40 in all.

Acorn's portfolio also includes a rich and pretty rosato of Sangiovese, a Cabernet Franc, and a savory yet modern Syrah.

Check out our interview with Bill.

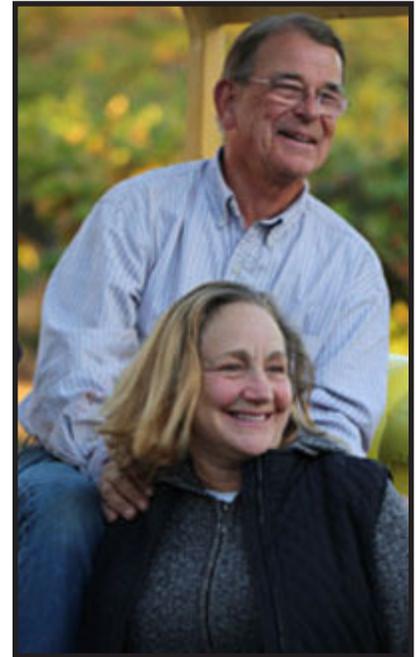


Photo: Michael Huang, MD

What is your general winemaking philosophy?

I believe the axiom that wine is made primarily in the vineyard. That's why I think of myself as a winegrower rather than a winemaker. I'm a proponent of reviving/continuing the co-fermented field blend tradition. I'm convinced that my conscientious adherence, for 23 years, to sustainability in the vineyard produces healthier, more flavorful grapes. In the winery, attention to detail is very important. For example, each year, I choose a particular combination of yeasts and barrels that best complement/elevates each wine that year. Based on 20+ years experience with the wines, I have a different baseline regime for each one. Every month, I taste from each barrel to monitor and learn how each wine is progressing.

What's open in your kitchen right now?

A Topolos 1994 Pagani Ranch Alicante Bouschet that friends brought us. Tasting remarkably young & fresh! I'll try to think back on this as our ACORN 2009 Alicante Bouschet matures.

Who are your favorite winemakers in history, through personal account, or their wines?

I first sold grapes to Ridge Vineyards in 1990 and enjoyed tasting our wines with Paul Draper. His dedication to preserving old vine Zinfandel field blends was inspiring. I have made our ACORN wines at several

different wineries, and I learned a lot from the winemakers at each place. At Rosenblum, Jeff Cohn and Kent Rosenblum opened my eyes to the almost infinite variations in barrel flavors you can get from different forests and coopers. Clay Maurtison's attention to vineyard and flavor balance is very insightful. I never met Randall Graham but his experimentation with unusual varieties struck a chord with me when I was planting.

What new winemakers are you most excited about, and why?

I'm impressed with the young winemakers who buy grapes from our Alegría Vineyards. Ryan & Meg Glaab of Ryme Cellars are doing innovative things like a whole-cluster fermented Cab Franc made from our grapes, as well as "his and hers" versions of Vermentino. Mat Gustafson of Paul Mathew winery makes a nice Valdiguie, and he makes an un-oaked Cab Franc from our Alegría grapes. Bryan Vais of Bailiwick Wines makes another Vermentino, as well as a Cabernet Franc from Alegría. Bill Arbios' Lagrein makes me want to plant some.

How do you spend your days off?

After 23 years, working in the vineyard still often feels like vacation to me. But I don't take enough time off. We try to include some personal time when we make sales trips. Our vacations tend not to be totally winecentric, but we like to learn as much as we can about the local wines and enjoy them with the local cuisine, wherever we are.

What's the best wine you've ever tasted? The most interesting?

40+ years ago, when we mostly drinking jug wines, I ordered a bottle of Chateau Carbonnieux Graves at Jean Pierre, a French restaurant in DC. It was an eye-opener. It may not have been the best wine I ever drank, but it was memorable because it made me realize how much better wine could be and caused me to search out new wines to try.

What's the oldest bottle in your cellar? The most expensive?

We have several 1970 Bordeaux wines and Napa Cabernets because we married in 1970. They were not expensive when we bought them, but they're priceless now for sentimental reasons.

If you had to pick one red and one white to drink for the next month with every dinner, what would you choose?

We'd have something different to eat every night, and I find our Sangiovese to be the most versatile with a wide variety of food. For a white, I'd stock up on a yeasty grower blanc de noir Champagne.

What's your biggest challenge as a winemaker?

In a word: "weather." As I said, wine is made primarily in the vineyard, so my biggest challenge is to be sure do whatever I can in the vineyard to get the best grapes to make the best wines.

What's your favorite wine region in the world — other than your own?

I haven't travelled as much as I'd like, but I'm very fond of Tuscany, which looks a bit like Sonoma County [plus castles and hill towns.]

Is beer ever better than wine?

Yes! During harvest, after a long hot day, beer hits the spot. Bear Republic and Russian River are favorite local brews.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I was a Coast Guard licensed ferryboat captain when I was 18.

If you weren't making wine for a living, what would you be doing?

Building things, painting pictures, getting more exercise, travelling, doing pro bono legal work, maybe planting another vineyard.

How do you define success?

Making field-blend wines that people enjoy (and buy). Folks enjoy the products of my labor way more now than they did when I was a lawyer, and I enjoy the positive feedback.

To view this interview online, visit <http://www.terroirist.com/2013/07/weekly-interview-bill-nachbaur/>