

Sangiaco Family Vineyards' 23rd Annual Chardonnay Tasting

Eighty producers compare wines made from same or similar fruit, gaining insights into growing and winemaking.

Eric Stern

Eric Stern recently retired as winemaker from Landmark Vineyards in Kenwood, California after completing 22 vintages. He continues to reside in Sonoma where he follows the wine industry and enjoys the fruits of his labor.



Symposium Highlights:

- The wine industry is unique in that competitors routinely gather to share their products and experiences at tastings.
- The symposium permits competitors to taste and subjectively evaluate each other's wines and discern what traits can be attributed to vineyard-specific characteristics versus stylistic or winemaking decisions. It also allows participants to sample different vineyards, gaining insight into which vineyards they might want to try in future vintages.
- Like all symposiums, ideas are exchanged, and intellectual stimulation generates greater thought and advances knowledge.

PHOTOS ©MIKE PUCCI
Sangiaco Family Vineyards

ONE OF THE MOST clichéd phrases in all of winemaking—that wine is made in the vineyard—was emphatically demonstrated at the 23rd annual **Sangiaco** Chardonnay tasting on March 24 at **Ramekins**, a culinary school and inn in Sonoma. The long history of this tasting reflects the naiveté and can-do, eclectic, experimental and evolutionary trends that have so marked the past 20-plus years of California's premium wine industry.

The tasting provides a forum for each producer to compare dozens of wines from the same or similar fruit and gain insights into how picking and processing decisions affect the outcome. Each winemaker presents his or her own interpretation of the challenges and opportunities that the vintage brought, and each winemaker is free to critique or compliment those efforts. **Dick Ward** of **Saintsbury** winery, a Sangiaco client for 30 years, served as this year's moderator for the 80 winery professionals in attendance.

This is an "educational" tasting, exclusively for client wineries, rather than a preferential judging. All of the wines are produced from Sangiaco grapes and labeled instead of tasted blind. Confidentiality and candor facilitate a more open exchange of ideas and thoughts about the vintage, vineyards and winemaking, tempered by collegial good behavior and largely positive feedback.

Most Challenging Vintage in 30 Years

Many have described 2010 as one of the most challenging vintages in the past 30 to grow California winegrapes. The reasons were largely climatic: a cool summer, near record in fact, along with extreme heat spikes of temperatures over 100 degrees for several consecutive days and late season rains. In addition, a global economic recession, translating into a decrease in wine sales and demand for grapes, and a European grapevine moth infestation that necessitated costly sprays, bureaucratic red tape and a requirement to tarp grape loads moving out of quarantined areas contributed to a year in which profit margins got pinched and nerves frayed. Furthermore, state-wide, many grapes went unsold or had to be discounted due to unmet quality parameters.

Depending on where a vineyard was situated and where it was in terms of maturity, the cold, heat, rain and pest infestations kept growers and winemakers guessing about quantity and quality throughout the harvest season. In general, Chardonnay was better able to weather some of these insults, particularly the heat spikes, although some sites with minimal canopy protec-

tion and water deficits were “fried” by the 100-plus degree temperatures; red varieties, due to their heat-absorbing pigmentation, were even more susceptible. Pinot Noir, with its thin skin, took the largest hit from the sun, especially on south-facing rows, with many growers reporting losses of 50 percent or more. Given Mother Nature’s multi-pronged attack, the 2010 vintage was a true cause for concern.

How the Tasting Works

Twenty-one of the more than 100 separate sites that the Sangiacomos farm were presented for this year’s tasting. Thirty-one wines were showcased from 27 of the more than 70 clients throughout the state and further afield, including one Canadian producer, who sources Sangiacomo Chardonnay. The logistics of this are daunting, given that winemakers tend to be individualists and resist group participation, especially when deadlines for samples and technical data must be met. The ranches presented for the tasting were



Producers gather at the 23rd Annual Sangiacomo Chardonnay Tasting in Sonoma. All of the wines are produced from Sangiacomo grapes and labeled instead of tasted blind.

Tallgrass, El Novillero, Home, Catarina, Vella and Kiser.

Barbara Lindblom, consulting winemaker and tasting coordinator, makes these tastings happen. She remarked that during the earlier years an attempt to cover too much ground left even experienced professionals with mental fatigue and sensory overload. Through experience, a more manageable three- to four-hour format has been established.

The wines were presented in four flights of seven to eight wines by ranch and block. After a 20-minute silent evaluation, group discussion ensued, with each winery representative—usually a winemaker but, in some cases, a vineyard manager or owner—talking about his or her winemaking and the particular fruit that they utilized then answering questions from their peers. And the Sangiacomos added insights to each vineyard block: its soil profile, clonal selection, rootstock, spacing, trellis and history. Overwhelmingly, the wines were of very high quality. In fact, two-thirds of the Chardonnays sampled are programmed to sell between \$25 and \$30 per bottle. Sarcastic laughter amongst the assembled, as they asked for clarification of “suggested or actual” retail price, was a sign that the recession is not quite over and sales are still struggling.

Three Generations of Farming

The Sangiacomo family’s roots reach back to Genoa, Italy. Vittorio Sangiacomo in 1927 immigrated to the California Bay Area at age 17 and went to the Bay Island Farm community in Alameda, known at that time for its asparagus and hop production. Eventually, he married Maria and moved to Sonoma, where they raised four children on 52 acres that today comprise the Home Ranch, just south of downtown Sonoma on Broadway.

The next generation of Sangiacomos worked in the fruit orchards that Vittorio established but slowly transitioned, beginning in 1969, to grape growing in response to an emerging California wine industry. Today the third generation is responsible for farming approximately 1,600 acres of ultra-premium winegrapes. The majority of their ranches lie within the Carneros AVA of Sonoma County, with newer vineyards along Lakeville Highway and Roberts Road in the Sonoma Coast AVA. Chardonnay accounts for the majority of the plantings, with Pinot Noir and Merlot rounding out the portfolio. Their story is indeed the American dream writ large, and given the uncertainties of farming and the intense competition in the wine industry, their success is particularly compelling.

WBM

Flight I: Tallgrass, El Novillero Ranches

The first flight comprised eight wines, four each from Tallgrass and El Novillero. Both these ranches were planted in 1993 and featured well-defined, mature flavors. A section of the Tallgrass vineyard has been in gradual de-



El Novillero

cline, and replanting has commenced somewhat ahead of schedule. Normally, a Chardonnay vineyard can stay in production for more than 25 years. This decline was partially attributed to the rootstock choice in this block: 5C.

Differences were apparent as winemaking styles, clonal and rootstock selections and cellar treatments varied from producer to producer. Yet, many shared similar protocols. All but one or two wines throughout the tasting were produced using whole cluster pressing. Barrel fermentation was pretty much universal, at least in these samples brought for discussion, and all but a handful were fermented with the introduction of pure yeast strains.

A winemaker’s decision of when to harvest the grapes, however, can play a larger part in the wine’s style than any of the above-mentioned protocols—for it is the grapes’ intrinsic flavor profile at the time of harvest that most strongly influences the future wine. Any question as to the vintage’s overall success was put to rest by this rich and tasty flight of 2010 Chards.

Flight II: Home Ranch

Flight II had seven lots of Home Ranch and included some stellar wines: Vine age matters. Some of the Sangiacomo family's oldest vines reside here, planted in 1980 and 1982 on phylloxera-susceptible AXR rootstock. Older vines tend to achieve a better balance between canopy and crop. These older vines were harvested late in the season, October 19 through 22, and at significantly lower sugars than many would consider optimal today: 22.3 to 23.8 Brix. But these numbers don't really tell the full story, namely physiological maturity of the grape. These are the kinds of Brix numbers that were considered quite normal 25 years ago in California wine before today's popularity of Chardonnay and the equally vociferous outcry over high alcohol wine in general.

With normal conversion, these lower-Brix, old vine Home Ranch Chardonnays might produce wines of 13.8 to 14.7 alcohol. But there is much more than alcohol at play in determination of flavor. Whatever the reasons, these vines are making superior wines today. European winemakers have known for generations that old vines are capable of making the most profound wines, and consumers are willing to pay a premium for such wines. The old vine designation for California wines is



Home Ranch

limited since such vineyards barely exist. Farming them takes both a serious commitment from the grower and a winery able to command a higher price, commensurate with the lower yields they typically produce.

Flight III: Catarina Ranch

More older vine lots, planted in 1982, were on display in Flight III from the Catarina Ranch; and once again, some of the same clonal material, described as Hopland on AXR, showed distinctively. Pick dates also tended to be late October with moderate Brix levels: 22.7 to 23.2. A cool growing season can be very favorable indeed to Chardonnay, where higher acidity and moderate alcohols can contribute to well-balanced wines with a structure that promises longer aging potential, evident even in these five-month-old barrel samples. An exception here was a Dijon selection, 95 on 101-14, planted in 1999 and harvested in late September several weeks before these other Catarina clonal blocks. While the wine had richness and ripe flavors, it begged the question: Why plant these French clones in sites that have shown themselves to produce distinctive wines from tried and true California selections?

One can claim that the jury is still out since there are no 30-year-old Dijon selections currently in production here. Stay tuned for the Sangiacomo Chardonnay tasting in 2029. Several samples from the Vella Ranch, planted in 1997, were quite distinctive, attributable to both clonal selection, Wenté, and the fact that this site has unusually high levels of nitrogen in the soil, a condition that the Sangiacomos have been managing through the planting of competing cover crops. These grapes tend to have extremely high nutrition, and the wines ferment quite rapidly and always finish extremely dry, with less than 0.2g/L of glucose/fructose. The wines can display a vegetative flavor/aroma profile, depending on yeast and cellar treatment. The Wenté clone has a distinctively rich and concentrated flavor profile that has long contributed to making it a California favorite.



Catarina Ranch



Kiser Ranch

Flight IV: Kiser Ranch

The final flight of the morning included two more examples of Catarina “old vines” and an even older (1974) unknown clone from Kiser Ranch. Also represented were UCD17 and UCD4, the latter considered a kind of workhorse California selection, capable of good yields and high quality, a utilitarian Chardonnay widely propagated. At this point, it would be particularly hard to characterize the flight. It might be worth noting that the 36-year-old Kiser Ranch Chardonnays were picked late, October 26 and 27, after significant rainfall that more or less brought the harvest of 2010 to its inevitable and merciful conclusion.

Late season rains often force winemakers to pick despite a lack of optimal fruit maturity in the race to complete the harvest and salvage a field of grapes from the ravages of post-rain bunch rot, a particular vulnerability of Chardonnay and other thin-skinned grape varieties. Indeed, the Brix levels in these grapes were lowered by the rain. The issues of increasing potential for rot and minimal benefits to be gained by hanging the grapes any longer through cooler and shorter days led inevitably to the decision to pick. Notwithstanding, these wines were nicely balanced, albeit with slightly lower alcohol, and will probably be blended and bottled into \$25 to \$30 bottles of Chardonnay in the coming months.

Looking Ahead

Working with a grower who has three generations of experience to draw upon in responding to the complexities and demands of farming is both a rarity and a pleasure in the wine business. The Sangiaco family combines knowledge, integrity and a commitment to excellence in their work; they make the winemaker’s job a whole bunch easier—and they make the overused cliché a reality: *Wine is made in the vineyard.*

At the conclusion of the tasting, Ramekins’ staff served a tasty luncheon buffet with numerous bottles of wine contributed by the attendees. Over food and wine the educational exchange continued as participants discussed the vintage and no doubt headed home with new ideas for the next vintage, secure in their knowledge that the Sangiaco family would be partnering with them to make their Sonoma Chardonnay the very best it could be in 2011. **WBM**

For more information: www.sangiaco-vineyards.com

This article was first published in the June 2011 Wine Business Monthly.