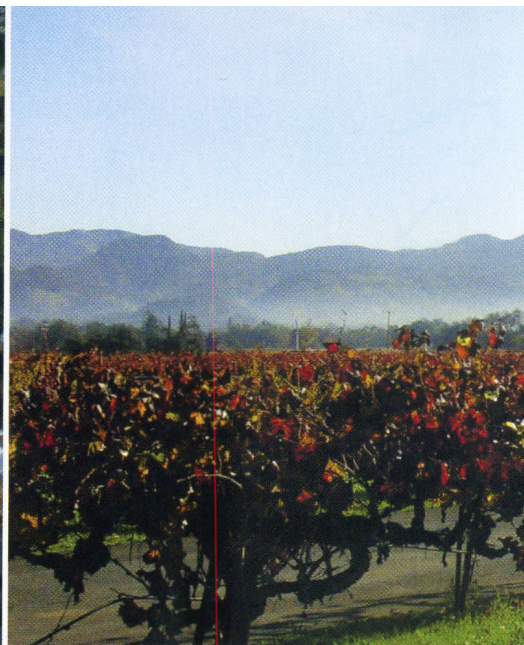




George Vare with ribolla grapes



Italian Vines with an Edge

new alternatives in Napa Valley

by Wolfgang M. Weber

“I failed at retirement,” George Vare said as we walked along the perimeter road of his 2.5-acre vineyard in Napa’s Oak Knoll District. While part of this vineyard is planted to Napa’s king grape, cabernet sauvignon, the best part of it—including the former bed of the nearby creek—is planted to ribolla gialla, a white variety native to the hilly borderlands between northeastern Italy and Slovenia. Curiously, these vines produce some of the most compelling white wine made in California today. Perhaps even stranger is the fact that someone of Vare’s stature would be messing around with ribolla gialla.

Vare is an industry veteran for whom the word failure doesn’t seem to apply. He began his career in the wine business in the early 1970s after he helped Schlitz Brewing Company buy Geyser Peak Winery, which he then managed directly for a few years. Later he ran the Henry Wine Group, one of California’s largest distributors, before forming a group of partners to negotiate Nestlé’s sale of Beringer Vineyards in 1995.

In 1996, along with partner Mike Moone, Vare started Luna Vineyards, a winery dedicated to Italian varieties. Vare, Moone and their winemaker, John Kongsgaard, traveled to Europe to find, as Vare puts it, “the holy grail of pinot grigio.” After trying Alsace (the wrong soil and climate conditions) and Alto Adige (too cold), Vare and company settled on Friuli, the Italian region nestled against western

Slovenia—the former crossroads of the Austro-Hungarian empire. On a subsequent trip, Vare met Stanislao Radikon, who introduced him to the wines of the Collio region. Along the way Vare also met the iconoclast Josko Gravner, who convinced him to experiment with ribolla gialla back home in Napa. (Gravner has since visited Vare’s vineyard.) What started as a quest for pinot grigio became an obsession with ribolla.

Vare retired from Luna in 2001 and began to seriously develop his own vineyard, which he’d initially planted in the late ’90s. The first harvest was in 2004. “That year we fermented a lot on the skins for eight weeks,” he recalls. “After six months Paul Roberts [then of the *French Laundry*] said to me: ‘Treat it like a red, age it for a year and I’ll buy it all.’ Which he pretty much did.”

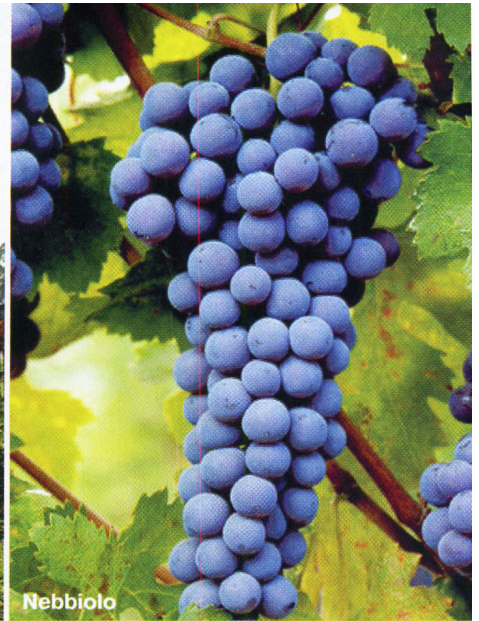
Oak Knoll is one of Napa’s cooler subregions, and in addition to the fast-draining gravel soils in his vineyard, Vare believes that the area’s microclimate is the main reason that ribolla can thrive there. Both his ’05 blend of ribolla, pinot grigio, tocai friulano and sauvignon, and his ’07 ribolla gialla are complex and powerful, each wine expressive and vibrant, with lasting elegance. “I’m only growing ribolla at this point,” he says. “We found in ’07 that we finally got the fruit right.”

Vare had some help making a home for ribolla in California from Steve Matthiasson, a young viticulture consultant whose clients include Araujo, Spottswoode and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars. Matthiasson developed a passion for ribolla while working with Vare, and the two have traveled together to meet winemakers in Friuli. For his own label, Matthiasson gets fruit from Vare, as well as some from his own tiny ribolla vineyard, to blend with sauvignon blanc and semillon. The blend is partially inspired by the rare *bianco* Enzo Pontoni makes at Miani in the Collio.

“Of all the wines I tried in Friuli, that one just hit the sweet spot,” he says. “Finesse and power—it’s so important to balance the two.”



Dolcetto growing in Napa



Nebbiolo

In a twist, Matthiasson adds semillon, which he believes acts as a binding agent, pulling together the various components and flavors in the wine.

In contrast to Vare, whose wine is clearly influenced by the long maceration times and the oxidative style of Gravner and Radikon, Matthiasson generally pursues a more reductive winemaking philosophy. He prefers to pick and press earlier for both white and red wines, and to create his blends when fermentation is about 80 percent complete, a stage when there is still a substantial amount of carbon dioxide in the wine. Likewise, he racks as little as possible and keeps the wine on its lees for a long time. "By doing all that, I find I can hold on to the freshness in the wine for longer," he says.

Like Vare, Matthiasson is a victim of the same experimentation bug that continues to beguile the best winemakers in the Collio. In 2008, Matthiasson, who lives with his wife, Jill Klein, and their two young children on an old farm hidden behind a subdivision outside of Napa, set aside some of his grapes for his own take on "skin-fermented ribolla." After harvest, his sons stomped the grapes in a bin, and he left the juice to ferment in the barn. "I didn't add any yeast or sulfur dioxide and at a certain point it went dry," he recalls. He pumped the wine into a barrel where it recently finished malolactic fermentation.

At this point in its life, Matthiasson's ribolla tastes rich and nutty, sort of a cross between almonds and dried orange peel. It feels vibrant in the finish, though not as much as he'd like. "I'm kind of hoping a little VA [volatile acidity] gets going in it, something to brighten it, to balance the richness," he says.

For Italophiles working with red grapes, the challenge is less about experimentation and more a question of getting around California's cabernet-centric culture. That may sound easy



Steve Matthiasson

but in a place like Napa Valley, it's a decision that instantly relegates a winery to the purgatory of the "other reds" section of a list. For some, however, that risk is worth it: They get to make the wines they like. "It's a way to showcase some of the diversity of Napa," says Rob Lawson of Pavi Wines.

Lawson and his wife, Pavi Micheli, started Pavi ten years ago with a mission to produce only Italian varieties from the Napa Valley. Lawson's initial focus was sangiovese and pinot grigio, which has been expanded to include dolcetto, native to Italy's Piedmont. "Dolcetto is elegant and approachable, but it's certainly not mainstream," he says. "It's my favorite wine that I make." Lawson buys his dolcetto from a vineyard near Yountville—prime cabernet country—where Andrew Hoxsey of Yount Mill Vineyards grows nine acres of the variety. For Lawson, it's a cool enough part of Napa Valley for dolcetto. "By having a little more natural acidity, it brings more balance. It feels seamless," he says. Still, Yountville isn't Piedmont. "We have to make sure we get a good

canopy on the vines to prevent the grape's dehydrating tendency," he says.

Lawson's quest for acidity and balance echoes the philosophy of Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen. Clendenen has been working with Italian varieties like nebbiolo, teroldego and tocai friulano in the Central Coast since the early 1990s, mostly under his Clendenen Family Vineyards label. "Americans think Italy is a warm country," he says. "Sure, Sicily and Lazio and southern Italy are warm, but the rest of the country, in the north, is cool and even cold-climate." Vintners like Clendenen and Lawson harvest their grapes relatively early to maximize acidity and mimic, in part, the native Italian style. Clendenen believes it's essential to these varieties. "Like barbera—it has to have acidity or it doesn't work."

For now, Italian varieties grown in California occupy a tiny niche in the market. And they can be a hard sell to chardonnay or cabernet drinkers. "I made fiano and I sold it all to Germany," Clendenen says. "I made arneis, and I practically had to give it away." ■