

{ up-and-coming }

A REGION ON THE MOVE

**LONG KNOWN FOR ZINFANDEL,
AMADOR COUNTY IS TAKING
CHANCES WITH NEW VARIETIES,
NEW TECHNIQUES**



*Andis Wines boasts one of
the most advanced wine-
making facilities in Amador.*



The bucolic landscape of Amador County belies the progressive winemaking taking place there.

BY ROXANNE LANGER

Driving into Amador County wine country in California is like driving back in time. A man wearing jean overalls slowly saunters across the main street in Plymouth, not bothering to look for cars as there is no traffic. It's hard not to grasp the monumental difference between this region and the Sacramento metro region just 40+ miles away or even the greater Bay Area a mere 100 miles westward.

Amador is as it has been—rural. Sheep farms, cattle ranches and vineyards dot the landscape. To the naked eye not much has changed since the miners turned into farmers, realizing that there was more money to be made in these golden hills from grapes than from gold. True to their rustic heritage, wineries here are not the grand edifices of Napa and Sonoma. This is a working man's wine region—with grape growers and vintners who live and die by their vintages.

But to the trained eye, there is a lot going on here: new grape varieties, new fermentation techniques, state-of-the-art and even experimental equipment and the like. A transformation has taken place in both the vineyards and the cellars but it's a quiet one, not loudly touted, rather proven in the bottle.

Best known for Zinfandel, many Amador vintners are questioning whether Zin is really the varietal that should get the region's top billing. But like Paso Robles marketing Cabernet Sauvignon in a region previously known for Rhône-style wines, it takes patience and proof.

Jeff Runquist of Jeff Runquist Wines has been making wine in this area for quite a while and believes that Barbera is really the best grape to grow in the Sierra Foothills, and that Amador Barbera is easily the best in the state. And having seen his cellar, which is a Disneyland for somms because of the 20+ different varietals being produced—all red and most of which are *not* from Bordeaux grapes—it's clear that one or two more Amador wines might also deserve a "best in state" designation.

Tempranillo is of the many non-Zinfandel varietals made at Amador Cellars.



IMAGE COURTESY OF AMADOR CELLARS

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According to Jeff, “I get opportunities thrown at me, so what the heck?” He purchases two tons for his experimental wines but treats these wines as if they were his mainstay. Because he purchases all his grapes, he has the freedom to source the grapes from the best grower in the best region for that variety. When asked how he can possibly sell these wines to consumers who aren’t familiar with lesser-known varieties such as Alicante Bouschet, Carignane or even Grenache, he explains that he sells them to his top-tier wine club members. This membership level, called SME (“send me everything”), gets the opportunity to taste even the smallest of his lots. Many of his distributors across the country would like to get their hands on them but can’t; during our interview, his Ohio distributor called to see if he could get three cases of Runquist Tannat. The answer was “No.”

Just down the road at Amador Cellars, winemaker and family member Michael Long also believes that Amador isn’t just Zin country and can grow and produce almost any warm weather red grape variety. Currently, Amador Cellars is working with 14 different varieties of which five are Italian. I tasted the Aglianico,

which was well-balanced with a slight menthol flavor and good acidity. Although they grow many of their own grapes, Amador Cellars also purchases from local vineyards and like to produce in small-batch lots resulting in 100 to 500 cases per lot. According to Long, “With the smaller-lot batches, we can bring out more of our own Amador terroir using Italian, Rhône and even Spanish grape varieties.”

Vino Noceto Winery is banking its reputation on Sangiovese. This winery does make other wines but Sangiovese is the signature varietal. Intrigued with the Altesino Sangiovese clone from Montalcino, Rusty Folena, the winemaker, began to trial it but became concerned with its high acid and tannin structure. So, for the past few years he has been experimenting with various fermentation techniques trying to alleviate the clonal issues in order to produce a wine with the acids and tannins much more married into the wines. What he has come up with is very intriguing. Using 130 gallon puncheons, he sets the barrels upright, removes their heads and ferments open. According to Folena, “By fermenting this way, we don’t encourage the oak flavors, as were not after oak. We can keep more extraction color, and we



Jeff Runquist believes Barbera is the best grape to grow in the Sierra Foothills.

Amador wine pioneer Jeff Runquist and his wife Margie.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF RUNQUIST WINES

PHOTO COURTESY OF VINO NOCETO WINERY



Winemaker Rusty Folena is experimenting with the Altesino clone of Sangiovese at Vino Noceto.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VINO NOCETO WINERY



One of the 130-gallon puncheons used to ferment Sangiovese at Vino Noceto.

believe the tannins and acids are much more manageable and blended.” In December, Vino Noceto will release AX1, the first of the wines made this way.

Andis Wines, founded by commercial real estate developer Andrew Friedlander, boasts one of the most advanced winery facilities in Amador. One unique fermenting container being used at Andis is lovingly referred to by the cellar staff as “the egg,” which ferments low and slow. I tasted a pretty Grenache-based rosé that was in its fourth week of fermentation and in which the Brix was steadily climbing by 1 point per day. The benefits of fermenting in this 100% concrete egg are that the lees are always in motion, as the wine is fully rotated around the inside of the vessel, preventing any uncontrollable hot spots. Made by Sonoma Cast Stone, it holds 476 gallons. This particular rosé will take about six weeks to finish fermentation. The serene and bucolic landscape of Amador County belies the progressive winemaking taking place there, but the wine these wineries are producing do not. Gone are the days of Amador being known for only one varietal—Zinfandel. There is a revolution, albeit a quiet one, taking place in Amador to produce red wines of distinction from varieties both known and unknown to the average wine consumer—a chancy bet at best, but one that a wine region on the move is willing to take. *sj*



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDIS WINES

“The egg” is a 475-gallon fermenter that ferments low and slow.