
A GARAGISTE GROWS IN LINCOLN: TURTLE CREEK WINERY

BY JONATHON ALSOP

As anyone who's ever written a piece of software or owned a French car will tell you, there's more than one way to do almost anything, even things we've been doing for a long, long time that we think we know how to do right. Like wine making, for instance.

For the last 8,000 years or so, making wine followed a simple formula: plant grapes, grow grapes, harvest grapes, make wine. Traditionally, the winery itself has always been in close physical proximity to its vineyards because grapes are a fragile fruit, thin-skinned and highly perishable. Move them around too much and they get bruised, the skins burst, and the precious juice makes a run for it. Unlike other fruits, grapes won't ripen even a bit after they've been snipped off the vine. Buy some under-ripe pears, put them in a paper bag on the kitchen counter, and in a couple of days, you have a bag of nice ripe pears. Try the same trick with grapes, and they simply shrivel.

Even with the advent of mechanized cooling, chemical preservatives, and more rapid transportation — the last century, that is — wine makers and wine lovers have kept the vineyards and the wineries close, both in their hearts and in their marketing. Wine labels boast “Estate Grown” and “Estate Reserve” as if most wineries have a practical choice, which they don't. Granted, there's a certain romance associated with growing grapes on a unique plot of land and then making wine on the same ground. As is so often the case, when we can't think of any other way, we choose to call it romantic.

Supremely large wine making entities — the Duboeufs, Constellations, and Gallos of the world, among others — have enjoyed the benefits of getting grapes from far-flung vineyards and growers for years. This strategy of dispersion allows them to acquire diverse grapes at good prices, free from the limitations of having to make wine only from the grapes they personally can grow. In the case of the Duboeuf enterprise in France's Beaujolais region, they own vineyards and buy grapes from all over Beaujolais, which a leisurely driver can cover the entire length of in about an hour. Even when such modern wine revolutionaries break the rules and think radically “outside the vineyard,” so to speak, they're typically getting most of their grapes from growers just a few miles down the road.

Much closer to home, owner and winemaker Kip Kumler

of Turtle Creek Winery in Lincoln, Mass. is taking this concept to an entirely different level, albeit on a gigantically smaller scale. In addition to his first Lincoln-grown Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, and Riesling harvested in the fall of 2006, he has been sourcing outstanding wine grapes from California and, to a lesser extent, New York state Finger Lakes and Long Island vineyards for about ten years. In that decade, he's grown the winery from 500 cases a year, which is utterly miniscule, to 1,000 cases a year, merely teeny-tiny. The good news is that his wines are very, very good. The bad news — for thirsty wine lovers, at least — is that 1,000 cases is the self-imposed limit of his winery's production.



“Wine is one of the few businesses I've seen where a small scale gives you a decided advantage in quality,” Kumler says. “It doesn't give you an advantage in anything else, not in distribution or sales or marketing. But at this level, if there's a decision to be made, it's not economic criteria [that rule], it's quality.”

Kumler gets his grapes from famously well-known California wine regions like Sonoma, Napa, and Amador County, as well as lesser-known but excellent grape growing sites like Grass Valley, not far from the delightfully named town of Rough And Ready. The grapes are harvested to his specifications, custom crushed and de-stemmed, then flash-frozen before being shipped east.

“We're talking about very small quantities for California — a minimum of one ton of grapes to a maximum of 10 tons,” he says. To put this somewhat in perspective, the 2005 harvest in California averaged 7.9 tons per acre, although fine grape wine growers often intentionally limit their yields to half that or even less in pursuit of finer fruit. Depending on the vineyard, Kumler is buying an acre or two of grapes, or in some cases, perhaps just a couple of rows. “In the beginning, to get the winery functioning, I decided to try to purchase fruit, and we used a broker,” he says. “In 1997, before we had permits to sell the wine we were about to make, we got chilled grapes that arrived in the back of a truck. That first vintage, I made Zinfandel and Syrah, and a dry version of Cayuga,” which is a flavorful white grape from the Finger Lakes in New York.

“Even though the grapes are not from here,” Kumler says, “the wine making represents a certain style. I'm trying to make wines that are interesting, well made, and that repre-

sent a certain point of view: you can make a world-class wine in a place people are incredulous about.”

Kumler also has about three acres of grapes planted in Lincoln, and the harvest of 2006 was his very first. “The three acres are very densely planted,” he says, “much denser than most American vineyards. If these 4,000 vines were planted in California in a more conventional way, they’d be about six or seven acres.” The vines are almost evenly distributed between Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, and Riesling.

“The basic idea here is to try to bridge the traditional schism between viticulture (grape growing) and oenology (wine making),” Kumler says. “It’s essential the wine maker know what’s going on in the vineyard — to walk the vineyard, see what’s going on, taste the grapes. The more you’re invested in the viticulture, the more it informs your wine making.”

Kumler says he’s very optimistic about the Chardonnay and riesling he harvested, “and on paper at least, the Cabernet Franc and Pinot Noir should do well. In hindsight, we picked the Pinot Noir too early, and we most likely will not release any of that.” He says he’ll probably only produce a garagiste-like 100 cases in total from this first estate harvest.

Garagiste is a label Kumler accepts with pride. At first, this was a derogatory term that “real” wine makers in France applied to small-batch artisan wine makers who produced in such minute quantities that their wineries fit sometimes literally in their garages. Thirty years later, it is a badge of honor. “Garagiste is a term of scale,” Kumler says. “Originally, it was pejorative because the wines came from properties with no official provenance. It described an activity without brand or pedigree. The true garagiste attempts to produce the highest quality possible, by necessity or design, on a small scale.”

The garagiste concept “proliferated in France and other places,” he says. “Screaming Eagle is probably the ultimate example,” referring to the 500-case-a-year California cult winery that sold for about \$30 million last year. “In California today, these smaller wineries are being emulated by some of the biggest places, like Gallo and Jess Jackson,” the producer of the ubiquitous Kendall-Jackson line of wines.

Kumler wasn’t born into the wine business, far from it. He spent years as a successful business management consultant, and as he grew older, “I became naturally more introspective. I found I wanted to really get my hands on a product. The idea of craftsmanship has always interested me. I’ve always admired craftsmen, and I was looking for something that can be made into a craft.”

His 15 years as a large-format photographer shooting with large box cameras on 8x10 sheets of film cemented his respect for craft and quality. “The quality of large-format photography is unsurpassed,” Kumler says. “When you watch people view photographs in an exhibition, I could see people, in

some cases, change and react. I learned that to be successful, a photograph has to have a presence. Something about it has to command your attention. It must be in some way arresting. And a bottle of wine has some important things in common with that.”

As good as Kumler’s wines are today, he says his work is far from over. “Doing what I’m doing is a long game, not a short game. My goal is to save the world from indifferent wines.”

And that takes time. □

Jonathon Alsop has been writing about wine since 1989. He is author of the wine column “In Vino Veritas” as well as many articles for La Vie Claire, Cultured Living, Beverage Magazine, the Associated Press, and others. In addition to writing, Jonathon lectures on wine, conducts wine tasting classes, and hosts wine events around the country.

TASTING NOTES

2005 Turtle Creek Chardonnay (about \$17) The fruit may come from White Rock Vineyards in Napa, but the style is decidedly less oak-centric than your typical California chardonnay: a third is fermented in stainless steel and the rest in five-year-old barrels. It’s got great fruit flavors like pear, white peach, and honeysuckle, and a nice bright citrusy zing to it. Total production: under 75 cases.

2005 Cabernet Franc (about \$18) These grapes are grown in Grass Valley, about 125 miles northeast of Napa-Sonoma wine country. Kumler calls this grape “underrated,” and he is right. This wine is rich and round, full of dark fig and date flavors with a nice dose of toasty oak. Fewer than 60 cases made.

2005 Turtle Creek Zinfandel (about \$16) This is my own personal favorite from the Turtle Creek line, and it figures that only about 35 cases were produced in total. The juice comes from Amador County, one of California’s best zinfandel regions. The color is a sunny, radiant ruby, and the wine is deliciously spicy. The way I’m feeling about this wine these days, I think I could drink up the whole 35 cases myself!

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