

# Complexity adds character to wine

By BRENDA CAROL

**C**ONSISTENCY is crucial in growing any crop on a commercial scale. It keeps production costs to a minimum. It keeps pests manageable. It keeps irrigation uniform. It makes a grower's life tolerable.

However, you won't find much resembling consistency in Calaveras County's wine-growing areas. "It's geological chaos around here," says Scott Klann, winemaker, Twisted Oak Winery, Murphys. "We have mountain ranges that figure into typical foothill vineyards. We can have volcanic-ash-based soils at one end of a vineyard, and it turns into loamy clay soils at the bottom of the slope. What you have in one place can be completely different 200 feet away. Soil nutritional challenges alone are daunting."

That degree of variability creates challenges for vineyard managers, but it also creates an array of possibilities for the finished product. Complexity is not only desirable, but also a given fact of Calaveras gold-country grape growing and winemaking.

"Largely, it's about mitigating the environmental hand you've been dealt,"

## Key Points

- Calaveras County winegrape growers deal with geological chaos.
- Varied soil and terrain add to the complexity of the wines.
- A benefit of the isolation in Calaveras County is few pest and disease issues.

Klann says. "In addition to terrain, we can have some fairly harsh weather, and it's not predictable from one year to the next. That can affect what you produce and bottle for the consumer."

Calaveras County winemakers are choosy when it comes to varietals. The climate and soils are somewhat similar to the Rhone Valley in southeastern France, and many wineries produce similarly styled wines instead of mimicking popular choices such as Chardonnay.

"We're dealing with a lot of rock and shale," says Rich Gilpin, owner of Lavender Ridge Vineyard. "It's basically hydroponic farming. There isn't much water-holding capacity in these soils, and that makes things interesting."

While growers in more temperate and ag-friendlier landscapes may have been dealt an easier hand, Calaveras



**TASTING TOWN:** Matt Hatcher (left) is the owner of Hatcher Winery, and Rich Gilpin owns Lavender Ridge Vineyard. Twisted Oak Winery, Hatcher and Lavender Ridge all have tasting rooms on Main Street in Murphys, along with other local wineries.

County growers are generally in agreement that their situation works to their advantage. "The uniqueness of the soils and the terrain in this area add to the complexity of the wines we produce," says Matt Hatcher, owner of Hatcher Winery in Murphys. "There are flavors that are derived from growing winegrapes that you don't necessarily get from a consistent soil type."

## Karma out of chaos

Growers in the area have come up with ways of bringing at least a portion of order to their chaos.

"When we're establishing a vineyard, we start by picking the soil strata that we like," Klann says. "Then we try to find boundaries for blocks that can minimize the variation as much as possible. The biggest challenge is in the beginning. This is when you figure out what rootstock is the best suited for what you have, what's the best row alignment, how you can structure it where irrigation won't be a nightmare and other management considerations that come into play later on down the road."

One advantage of their isolation is the lack of endemic pest issues, a problem that other wine-growing areas have been forced to deal with in recent years. So far, glassy-winged sharpshooter, vine mealy bug and severe disease have not been issues for the county's growers.

"That's a bonus," Klann says. "Because of that, we can focus on small things like leaf thinning and things that ultimately contribute to quality wine. We're not trying to play catch-up."

## Twisted marketing

As unusual as the soils are, that unusualness is nothing compared to the marketing. Twisted Oak Winery lives up to the part of its name that is "twisted." An online visit to the winery's Web site reveals that wine snobbery is not a component of the way they do business.

"Drinking wine should be a fun thing," says Twisted Oak owner Jeff Stai. "We do our best to make sure it is."

At Hatcher, more often than not, it's the owner, Matt, or his brother, Sewell, who pour wine in their dungeonlike tasting room. "We believe our marketing strength is the relationship we can build with people who come into our tasting room," Hatcher says. "It's very much a 'hands-on' operation."

A couple of doors down at Lavender Ridge, it's the husband-and-wife owner team of Rich and Siri who guide tourists through the Rhone-styled varietals often unfamiliar to tasting aficionados. They also grow and sell lavender, a successful positioning theme to promote identity and integrity for the winery.

No matter what winery you stumble across in Calaveras County, it's likely to be incredibly special with a surprise or two not easily anticipated and not necessarily found in the wineglass.



**MANY HATS:** Scott Klann is winemaker, vineyard liaison, personnel manager and assorted hat wearer for Twisted Oak Winery; he is also a partner in Newsome-Harlow in Murphys.

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
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