

Building a better Chardonnay

It's not every day that I'm invited to a "clonal presentation," so two years ago, when Baileyana winemaker Christian Roguenant's roadshow first came to town, my curiosity was piqued. If nothing else, I gave him credit for being original. After all, in a business where hyperbole is actually the norm — each successive launch of a new wine is more "spectacular" than the last, and each sit-down with so-and-so, the owner or winemaker who exudes "passion" about their latest and "hottest" project, is a must-attend event for the ages — it's not often that I'm offered something that smacks more of substance than style.

So when Roguenant recently returned for an encore performance, it made some sense to dig out my old notes and see what a difference two years makes. On both occasions, the Burgundy-born vintner essentially deconstructed a couple of his wines. The first time, he dissected two Carpe Diem Pinots and two Chardonnays (Carpe Diem is one of the labels he is a consultant for); on the return trip, he did the same with a Baileyana Chard, Pinot and Syrah. Offered up were samples of each wine's clone components. Two years ago, there seemed to be much less talk about clones than now. The subject matter then would have been just as likely to elicit thoughts of Dolly the sheep, or perhaps even *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but now that all of us have completed our post-*Sideways* studies, clone selection seems like it could be the next big thing.

But Roguenant's clone obsession isn't just another selling point or an attempt to make his wines stand out in a very crowded market. Instead, he is trying to accelerate Mother Nature's natural selection process by decades, if not centuries. And he's doing it for all the right reasons. Many fairly criticize the California style of Chardonnay (and Pinot, for that matter) as being overblown and lacking nuance. Putting aside the obvious — there really isn't a "California style" because there are far too many places planted to result in a monolithic version of it — there is some truth to the claim that the Golden State's Chards tend toward the unctuous. What critics might see as a weakness in execution, Roguenant sees as an outgrowth of California's relative winemaking infancy. Clonal research is one way to close the gap. "In Burgundy, they don't need to study clones. They've had natural selection for hundreds of years," he said the first time we sat down.

Roguenant plies his trade mostly in the Edna Valley, a fortuitously situated place only miles from the cooling waters of the Pacific. With its handy east-west configuration, there is a consistent swoosh of ample late-morning fog to keep the sun's heat at bay, and thus protect against the two things that stick out in many California Chardonnays (and, again, Pinots, for that matter): a diminished acidity level and an over-ripeness of fruit.

While not of Fitzcarraldo-like dimensions, Roguenant's quest is to find just the right clones for his Firepeak Vineyard wines. This is the vineyard that most speaks to his Burgundy background, with its complex mix of soils and the aforementioned blessing of its microclimate. He would never suggest that one day Firepeak will be as recognizable as Montrachet (or La Tâche, or Côte-Rôtie now that syrah is part of the study, too) — "It's not quite as site specific in California yet" — but he does believe that California has a great deal to offer

once producers move beyond planting what they want, and instead put in what belongs. His clone studies take this concept of *terroir* a step further; it's not enough that the consensus is that Edna Valley is a terrific place for chardonnay. The question really is which chardonnay clone belongs where in the Edna Valley.

The two component tastings made me feel even less knowledgeable about the winemaking process; there are so many levels to what these people do. But when asked how he manages it all — the multiblock clone trials, the clone-specific fermentations, the complex mixing and matching — he just shrugged and said, "Clones are our spice rack." As if he were simply taking a pinch of this and two of that.

The most remarkable thing about both tastings were the easy-to-discern differences between each of his chardonnay clones (the pinot clones, while also capable of expressing themselves, showed much less individuality than the

chardonnay, a finding duplicated at both events). Each of the three — Dijon numbers 77, 96 and 4 — provided something very specific to the resulting blend. And it wasn't just because Roguenant said so. Both times, he requested that those in attendance jot down their tasting notes before any discussion took place; he did the same. Each time, there was remarkable agreement about each clone's characteristics among the tasters. And, as if to make us "experts" feel a bit better about our diagnostic skills, each time we found just what Roguenant hoped we'd find.

The beneficiary of all this trial and error is the consumer. Baileyana's Chardonnays have nuance and plenty of fruit. The "regular" Edna Valley Estate Chard is about \$18, an unheard of bang-for-the-buck deal. The Grand Firepeak Cuvée, the best Chardonnay that Roguenant can muster from his clones, is only \$30. They serve a grossly underserved segment of the market.

As the clones have matured in the last two years, his hunches and experiments have, well, borne fruit. "There's a stronger connection between the fruit flavors in the vineyard and the final product now," he said. He's further along with his chardonnay research than his pinot at this point. Or more accurately, he's more confident that he's closing in on which chardonnay clone is the best partner for Firepeak. "In 20 years, one of our clones will stand out and the others won't be needed," he said. But there is hope for Pinot fans; it just may be awhile. "Firepeak is a better spot for chardonnay than pinot now. Pinot vineyards need more time to get 'older' and more time to show greatness."

Of course, Roguenant isn't the only one in California to express interest in clones. Beaulieu Vineyard, for example, has been bottling clones for years. And it won't be long before back labels and then front labels start touting Pommard (a pinot clone named for the Côte de Beaune commune of the same name), UCD 2A, Dijon 115, 777 and the like. The risk of doing so for commercial reasons could serve to short circuit the experiment. "Clones are very site specific. They don't show well in one place just because they may be good in another," Roguenant said during his recent visit. So, any attempt to cash in may result in even more of the more-of-the-same wine that we're already drowning in.

Roguenant, though a true believer, is not married to any one theory, and is already involved in the next step in his chardonnay- (and pinot- and syrah-) building project. "I think leaf pulling and canopy management might be even more important than clonal selection," he said with not a little enthusiasm. I'm not sure how he'll pull off that roadshow, but I'll be willing to attend. 🍷

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