

Albertina Wine Cellars-- In Synch with Nature

Mendocino WineNotes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

The gate was open when I arrived at Zmarzly Family Vineyards, home of Albertina Wine Cellars, five miles up the mountain just west of Hopland. Inside the gate I noticed two deer munching grass and looking nonplussed as I drove past them. Knowing that deer are not welcome in vineyards, I felt compelled to mention their whereabouts when I met Fred Zmarzly at his vineyard on a sunny morning in early July.

“This is their home,” he responded easily. As we walked past the pond he stopped to look for the red wing black birds that come every year in January or February to this 417-acre ranch he and his wife Alberta purchased 25 years ago. “They stay until the babies are big enough to go on their own toward the end of July,” he explained while looking for the mallards that are also on the pond. We didn’t see them and he was worried that a predator might have gotten the ducklings.

The property was once a hunting preserve and today wild pigs, mountain lions, turkeys, rattlesnakes, bear and coyote still have the run of most of the acreage. In 2000, the Zmarzly’s planted 17 acres in vines, mostly cabernet sauvignon, but also some merlot, petite verdot and cabernet franc, the Bordeaux varietals that do so well on hillsides. The vineyard is fenced separately to give the vines a chance but Zmarzly smiles when he talks about the wildlife that gets in anyway.

“I own vineyards and I love turkeys,” he says knowing this is a controversial topic. Not everyone likes turkeys among their vines, but, “they eat weeds and insects all year,” he explains pointing to their footprints in the dirt. He knows they also eat the grapes but doesn’t really mind sharing. “They might eat ten to 20 pounds but we harvest 50 tons.” He also chuckles when he remembers a bear that got into the vineyard. At first he wasn’t sure what it was because grapes were plucked one at a time from the clusters and he would have thought a bear would just rip off the entire cluster.

The natural way to do things comes up again and again as we walk through the vineyards. From its dramatic setting on a relatively level knoll, this ten acres of vines is bounded to the west by peaks of the coast range and to the south the views stretch across Sanel Valley at the south end of Hopland to the Maycamas Range. On an oak tree shaded

knoll picnic tables and chairs provide a respite and in the clearing, flowers and vegetables grow. Through the trees you can see another seven-acre vineyard scaling the mountainside.

Why did the Zmarzlys decide to get into wine making? They live part of the week in Santa Rosa where they manage their real estate investments and Alberta works as director of Indian education for a Sonoma County school district. They had the property, which was a weekend place purchased because Alberta wanted to reconnect with her rural roots. Her father and grandfather were Italian-American hog farmers in Contra Costa County. Years ago, a tour of boutique wineries in Sonoma County sparked their interest in planting a vineyard as Zmarzly thought this would be a good “retirement” job.

He took classes at Santa Rosa Junior College. Their first wine from here was made in 2004. They chose Albertina as the name because this was what Alberta’s father used to call her and they wanted to honor the Italian heritage.

Looking closely at the vines, Zmarzly says the crop looks good. Even though the temperature on April 20 dropped to 29 ½ degrees, he feels really lucky that he doesn’t have much frost damage. Holding a cabernet sauvignon cluster he describes it as typically an open cluster, which allows air to move between the grapes. Further down the row he notices a little bit of “shot” in the clusters. This happens when the flowers don’t fertilize, leaving gaps in the cluster.

At harvest, the grapes are all hand picked. Half are sold and the rest go into about 1000 cases with the Albertina brand. The label is a sepia tone photograph that resembles a woodcut of the vineyard. The Zmarzlys use two talented Mendocino winemakers. Greg Graziano from Graziano Family Wines in Redwood Valley and Alison Schneider from Jepson Winery in Hopland each make wine from half of the grapes grown at the Zmarzly Family Vineyards.

Wine Club members are entitled to discounts and private tours and tastings at the vineyard. The wine is available at their website www.albertinawinecellars.com.

Tasting Note: I tasted Albertina’s 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve with sautéed medallions of venison backstrap. An exemplary Cab in my book, rich with perfectly ripe fruit, an undertone of black olive, and just the right integration of oak from its time in

French, American and Hungarian barrels. The result is a velvety smooth and satisfying mouthful.

To learn more about what to do and where to stay in Mendocino County, visit www.gomendo.com. For more information about Mendocino County wineries and wine regions, visit www.mendowine.com