

Michael Drash

Winemaker, Luna Vineyards
Napa
40,000 case production

On Making Pinot Grigio

Although Mike Drash grew up one hour south of Memphis, Tennessee, his family comes from Northern Mississippi. Mike is descended from five generations of cotton farmers—one of his uncles was elected Farmer of the Year for 2004 in Mississippi.

After graduating from college in Tennessee, Mike drove to Key West, Florida. He got a job bartending at Pier House Restaurant pouring a lot of White Zin. Luck brought him a 1987 Jordan Cabernet to try. He promptly decided to head West. His successor at the bar had been at De Loach and she recommended he try there. Mike started as a cellar rat at De Loach and stayed two years. Its main wines were Zinfandel and Chardonnay, with some Gewürtztraminer. Mike next spent a year and a half at Chateau de Baun (bought by Kendall Jackson) working in the cellar and the lab. The next two and a half years were at J Wine Company (Jordan Sparkling Wine), disgorging and bottling. Mike also tasted lots of wines at Jordan and became its sparkling wine production manager. In 1998 he went to Far Niente as assistant winemaker to Dirk Hampson, making Cabernet, Chardonnay

and Dolce. Mike feels lucky to have been part of Far Niente. He says the caliber of wines its small winemaking staff tasted was incredible—all first growths. He was turned on to a high, high level of winemaking. Out in the field there was the same attention to detail: hand sorting, an overall commitment to keeping only the very best of the fruit. Mike realized he wanted to be winemaker at a winery below the radar. He considered going outside Napa, but the timing for Luna was perfect and he joined it in 2003. They make no Chardonnay, no Cabernet, so it's challenging for him, but also lots of fun. Case production is 40,000 to 45,000 cases, two thirds of which are white wines, 30,000 of which are Pinot Grigio.

Luna was started by Michael Moon and George Vare in 1995 at the former St. Andrew Winery. When John Kongsgaard joined them as winemaker it was with the understanding that one day he would leave to make his own wines. When he did, Abe Shoner, assistant winemaker, served as interim winemaker while he gave Mike a crash course in vineyard management—cover crops, row orientation (they are still learning what works well at Luna). When Luna was started, the 22 acres of Chardonnay and Merlot were replanted with Pinot Grigio on 146 and 152 rootstocks. With Pinot Grigio, you expect a lot of fruit, but at Luna they have a hard time getting four tons, not the six or eight or nine people expect. It's hardy, just not as vigorous there as, say, in Oakville.

Winemaking is very much hands-off at Luna. They whole cluster press the Pinot Grigio for 1 1/2 hours, to a little bit of color. They then press it to stainless tanks at 50 degrees, and rack it to barrel the next day. The 60 gallon barrels are all old French oak, two to twelve years old. There is no yeast inoculation; they let native yeasts do the work. Whatever happens, happens. Between day 7 and day 8 you can start to see activity—spritzing. Pinot Grigio spends 2, 3, 4 or 5 weeks in the barrel; some lots are faster, others slower. One lot took 4 or 5 months. Luna lets the wine finish fermenting to as dry as it'll go. They top off and stir every two weeks (battonage) for 4 to 5 months to a month prior to racking, when the wine is left alone. Pinot Grigio has 100% to 50% malolactic fermentation, depending on the year (50% in 2003, 100% in 2004). It is sumped out with N₂ from oak barrels to stainless tanks, one lot per tank, at 50 degrees, settled, and blended. For blending there is a tasting every other day in the lab. It takes 3 to 4 weeks to blend: a week to two weeks to make the blend and a week to cold stabilize at 28 degrees. Luna uses a cross-flow filter, one of a handful in the Valley. Mike feels diatomaceous earth beats up the wine (the cross-flow is popular in Europe because disposal of diatomaceous earth there is so costly). Although a cross-flow costs more than others, it is incredibly gentle. It has filamentous ceramic membranes and regulates itself. There is no loss of wine, and the wine tastes as good or better than in the lab. There is no shock. The wine then goes back into the



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big tanks at 60 degrees and in less than a week is bottled. It spends a month or two in bottle before going to market. Luna is using corks now but is interested in screw tops.

Luna's style of Pinot Grigio is barrel-fermented, native yeast, over 14% alcohol, not your usual Pinot Grigio. One of their models is Radikon Winery of Josko Gravner in Collio, Oslavia, in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of north-eastern Italy. Another, the Alsatian 14 plus alcohol, over the top wines from the domaine of Zind-Humbrecht, which Mike loves. He considers Zind-Humbrecht to be pretty much god of Pinot Grigio and other whites. Asian food works extremely well with this style of wine. Hot, spicy shrimp and crab Pad Thai with Luna Pinot Grigio is just incredible. And oysters. Mike's a fan of oysters

Pinot Grigio is thin-skinned, susceptible to botrytis. Its clusters are so tight, unripened berries (the jacks) get pinched out as bunches mature. When weather conditions permit, Luna makes a Late Harvest Pinot Grigio, "Mille Baci". Their 2003 Late Harvest is still in barrel, but coming around after 18 months--maybe it could have been in the vineyard longer. However, it's developing the thickness, the lusciousness Mike wants. Its Total Acid is a little higher, to bring out some richness, Mike says. It is always difficult to choose when to pick for dessert wines, but that's the way it goes: rain, early or late. You never know.

Sauvignon Blanc, like the Pinot Grigio, is pressed whole cluster (they played around with skins in 2003) and cold fermented. It goes into old oak and is stirred every two weeks. Chardonnay, from a Coombsville vineyard with Nathan Fay budwood, is also whole cluster press, aged 50% in French oak and 50% in stainless steel barrels to keep the wine a little fresher and to balance out the wine. It is skin fermented and stirred every two weeks for eight months. Malolactic goes through 100%. They make 300-400 cases once it is racked and blended, virtually in a week. The Chardonnay is not cold stabilized, and is sold directly at the winery.

The Luna white wine blend, "Freakout", was inspired by wines of northern Italy, and first made in 2001. The 2003 has just been released as a Reserve White. Freakout is a blend of Tocai Friulano, estate Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Mike handpicked the barrels of wine that went into this new Reserve.

Tocai Friulano is a cousin to Sauvignon Blanc, and comes from a region on the Italian-Slovenian border. Tocai Friulano is super-expressive (editor's note: Stony Hill Winery makes a Tocai Friulano with fruit from Larkmead Vineyard). They do skin fermentation with it in half-ton fermenters. They crush, de-stem, punch down, and ferment to dryness on skins in the tank and pump it over like a red; it is pretty phenolic, an expressive wine. Skin fermentation helps

tame it. It is barrel aged in 60 gallon and "baby" 30 gallon French oak, new and old. 100% malolactic is allowed to go through. The larger barrels of Tocai Friulano may be bottled as a varietal. The babies go into Freakout.

For as long as Mike can remember he has loved eating grapes, and now he loves making wine in the Napa Valley. It opens up a whole new world around a lot of fun, to wines not Chardonnay—from Italy, from France. Mike says 2004 was an awesome year for whites.