

Nils Venge

Owner, Winemaker
Saddleback Cellars, Oakville
8,000 case production

On Making Pinot Blanc

In the 1950's Nils Venge's father had started a wine, beer and spirits distribution business in City of Industry. Nils grew up tasting really nice white Burgundies with a beautiful balance. His parents had planned for him to take over the business and Nils had gone to UC Davis and gotten a degree in viticulture and enology. However, his classmates Justin Meyer, Ric Forman, and Dave Cofran told him, 'Don't go back to LA! Come to Napa and do what you studied how to at Davis.'

Nils did come to the Napa Valley, after graduate school and a tour of duty in Viet Nam. He started at Charles Krug, and then went to Sterling for the '72 and '73 harvests. Ric, Peter Newton and Michael Stone introduced him to Jim McWilliams who was just starting Villa Mt. Eden. Jim offered Nils the position of General Manager and Winemaker, which Nils took. He was there ten years before moving over to Groth to become its founding General Manager and Winemaker. After eleven years he left Groth to devote most of the last eleven years to Saddleback. However, he also consults as winemaker for neighboring PlumpJack as well as Robert Keenan and

Bacio Divino and has most recently established Venge Vineyards in St. Helena with his son, Kirk. Kirk does Zinfandel, Sangiovese and Petite Syrah at the new winery because, for the Venges, the warmth of Oakville makes it Cab and Merlot country, and the cooler Carneros is for Chardonnay.

In 1976, Nils and his father-in-law, Bob Call, bought a Cabernet vineyard which is near both Villa Mt. Eden and Groth. Nils could work it evenings and weekends while working full-time. He suffered along with leaf-roll virus, but at least all the vines were on St. George rootstock. Nils built a winery in 1982. In 1983 he grafted some acreage over to Chardonnay with budwood from the Wente clone. After the major flood of 1986, Nils began a replant in 1988. He now has 9.5 acres Cab, 1.5 acres Merlot, 2.5 Chardonnay, one acre Pinot Blanc and a quarter acre Pinot Grigio.

Nils had wanted to supplement his cash flow while the Cab was aging two years in the oak. He started making Sangiovese, "The Prince, so why not The Princess?" Nils also thought he should make Pinot Grigio and got budwood for it from Robert Pepi. The inspiration to plant Pinot Blanc came from Merry Edwards in Sonoma who made a wonderful Pinot Blanc at Matanzas Creek. UC Davis Experimental Vineyard in Oakville reported Pinot Blanc crops averaging up to five tons to the acre with good quality. Revenue from the fruit was \$800 to \$900 a ton so, in 1981,

Nils planted Pinot Blanc bench grafts on AxRI rootstock. As a side note, Nils observed that Pinot Noir on its own tends to mutate to Grigio, which mutates to Blanc, right in the field. "You'll be walking down the row, testing sugar," he said, "and all of a sudden you'll see a shoot with two white clusters spurting out of the Grigio. Voila!"

Although wind flow in the vineyard and a tractor-driving orientation of North-South are contrary to optimum, they work well for the quad-trellised Pinot Grigio. Nils does most of his own tractor work--the vineyard soil is easy to till, well-drained with a high water table. Only the young vines need irrigation; the rest is dry-farmed. Red tail hawks take care of mice and other small creatures. Whenever coyotes walk through they squeeze the drippers looking for water. Nils did all the pruning until a wild horse threw him. Now he lets one of his crew of three handle it. Starting in 1984, the Pinot harvest was supplemented first by fruit from Jim Fair in Carneros, later harvests from Andy Hoxsey and Pat Garvey, just down the road.

They do whole cluster pressing on whites at Saddleback. The resulting wine is fruitier; there's no abuse of the berries, although with whole cluster press there is a sacrifice in production. They get about 160 gallons per ton. Hand-picked fruit goes from 4x4 bins to the press within an hour. Pinot Blanc can oxidize quickly on the crush pad at the press but during fermentation, Nils says, it will clear up

nically-- all the brown pigments drop right out after cold settling. Fermentation starts at 52 degrees, yeast-inoculated, in stainless steel. Nils keeps the SO₂ up so the wine stays crisp. When major fermentation is through at one

and a half weeks, they rack into neutral oak barrels. Because they don't allow malolactic fermentation, all the white wines are filtered. "Why allow malolactic to bring the acids down again?" Nils wonders, shaking his head.



PHOTOGRAPH: PRISCILLA UPTON

They top off with wine bimonthly; battonage is weekly, "to cream it up," explains Nils. Saddleback once had an evergreen contract with Clarke Swanson for Chardonnay fruit. When Swanson replanted, Nils got budwood, which he said is really good. He also gets fruit from Paul and Pat Garvey in Carneros. Once Chardonnay is fermenting in the barrel it takes 4-5 days to finish out (it's 68 to 70 degrees in the winery in September). Chardonnay is aged in 60% new, 40% used oak. After a couple of years, the old barrels go to the Viognier, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Grigio. Saddleback makes 600 cases each of Pinot Grigio and Pinot Blanc, bottled every March, and 1,000 of Chardonnay bottled in May. Since 1999, 450 cases of Viognier are also bottled in May. To Nils, the Pinot Blanc has a flavor of melons, Grigio more of the pear mixed in with tropical. Chardonnay has a ripe apple character, not pippin but nice, ripe apple. Viognier is perfumed but not real sweet, a honeysuckle character.

Wines Nils likes have a roundness and fullness on the palate with the weight that is so important to him. He has gone to France a couple of times for tastings, which he found really great. He thinks his Chardonnay is wonderful with food while the Pinot Blanc can be enjoyed on its own, or with abalone or oysters (Nils is an avid abalone diver and shells from a few of his dives ring the sycamore trees alongside the winery). And the '04 harvest at Saddleback? "Ah," Nils sighs with pleasure, "Salute!"