

# Harvest Seminar

St. Helena - It All Began Here

Saturday, October 22, 2005

Spottswode Winery  
1902 Madrona Avenue

On a sunny, mild morning 32 association members met on Spottswode's crush pad to begin a day devoted to the new St. Helena Viticultural Appellation. Allen Price, board member and a seminar director, greeted the group saying the field seminars on appellations had been held for about ten years. Allen went on to say that the high-end of the wine industry had started in St. Helena, and in through the 1860's, '70's and '80's was the center of American premium winemaking. Allen then introduced Jennifer Williams, Spottswode Winery's vineyard manager and assistant winemaker.

Jennifer has been with Spottswode for three years. She said George Schonewald had developed the estate on Hudson Avenue, completing its main residence in 1890 and calling it "Esmeralda." Subsequent owners re-named it. When Mrs. Albert Spotts bought it in 1910, it became "Spottswode." 1972 the Novaks bought the property from Constance Holmes Skillings, a relative of Mrs.

Spotts. The Novaks' first vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon was in 1982. Today, 38 acres at Spottswode are planted to Cabernet and 2 1/2 acres to Sauvignon Blanc. The winery also buys Sauvignon fruit from Frediani in Calistoga and Hyde in Carneros and its Semillon from Toffanelli in Calistoga.

Walking down Hudson Avenue, Jennifer pointed out a vineyard replant program. Because vineyard blocks at Spottswode average 5 to 6 degrees hotter, they use a Y-shaped trellis system with two catch wires, which assures filtered sunlight and



*Jennifer Williams*

shade on the fruited arms, a system that has come to be known as the “Spottswode”. The group continued through the gates of the main house and its formal gardens, out to vineyards where Jennifer discussed the redevelopment of three vineyard blocks. These were being prepped for drainage--ripped for old roots and marked out with drainage lines. Jennifer’s favorite piece of farm equipment is the sunflower, by Pellenc, a mechanical weed remover for under-vine tillage. Its “sunflowers” reach two to three inches deep beneath the grapevines. Jennifer also praised their Tortella spader. It eliminates disc pan by working at an angle, fracturing the soil up to a foot deep, unlike a disc that works only at a uniform depth and, over time, can compact the soil. Jennifer said spaders are widely used in the Valley.

Spottswode has an acute environmental interest affecting all their vineyard practices. For example, they are changing over to biodiesel. They have converted two tractors to the fuel, phasing it in, and changing lots of fuel filters in the process. For two years Spottswode has planted sustainable cover crops on 4 to 5 acres, alternating rows of a permanent cover of native grasses with rows of triticale, clover, bell bean, oat, pea, and vetch. Before these plants go to seed they are integrated into

the soil to retain moisture. An addition of worm castings provides nutrients and worm eggs, increasing the earthworm population in the vineyard.

Jennifer next walked the group down to a creek which borders the property along its south side. There she spoke of a program to remove the invasive giant cane, *Arundo donax*, from the creek’s banks, one section at a time. Walls of willow wands woven over stakes maintain habitat for creatures at the water’s edge while native grasses, wildflowers and various shrubs are planted and irrigated until they take hold.

Spottswode was picked two weeks before the seminar, in 5 or 6 days, 20 to 26 tons of fruit each day at 25 to 26° Brix. Jennifer said fermentations were going well. Vineyard blocks are planted to a Cabernet Sauvignon clone Jack and Mary Novak chose in the 1970’s. It is quite distinct, although it doesn’t show itself in the leaf. Cabernet clone 337 and the Eisele clone are also planted.

Jennifer said under some of the vineyard there is a layer of clay 18’ down, so they are applying gypsum-lime and do ripper shank tracting every other row, every other year to lessen the compaction. Jennifer also pointed out the Rainbird

valves, programmed to provide automatic watering in all the blocks.

The group returned to the winery, along a row of olive trees that borders Madrona Avenue. The Manzanillo olive trees were planted a dozen years ago. In a few weeks they will be picked and the olives taken to Long Meadow Ranch, to be pressed at its organic olive oil facility. A member asked if *veraison* might apply to olives?

Later, we asked Ted Hall, of Long Meadow Ranch about *veraison*. He said it applies only to grapes. Unlike olives, grapes ripen quickly, in a few days. A specific set of measurements determines *veraison*: the onset of a softening and ripening in grapes and the full expression of varietal character. With *veraison*, black grapes change color and white grapes, Peter McCrea of Stony Hill Vineyards, contributed, turn translucent.

At Spottswode Winery Jennifer provided aerial views of the vineyards for members to study, and responded to questions and comments about their visit to this historic vineyard property within St. Helena City Limits.

## Vineyard 29 2929 St. Helena Highway North

Next on the itinerary was Vineyard 29 where Allen Price introduced owner Chuck McMinn at the winery. Chuck said he and his wife, Anne, bought Vineyard 29 and “Aida,” two and a half miles north, in 2000. Aida vineyard, planted in a style popular in the 1920’s has been ripped and replanted, again to Zinfandel and newly to Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. The Vineyard 29 vineyard was developed by Paine and Norton in 1989 and planted



*Chuck McMinn (top left)*

to a Cabernet clone from the neighboring Grace Family Vineyard. Its first release, made at Grace Family, was in 1992. After six years at Grace Family, Paine and Norton custom crushed at Miner Family Vineyards, as plans for their own winery took shape. When Chuck and Anne bought Vineyard 29, they continued for two years at Miner Family as they went ahead with plans for a winery and cave. Their first release is the 2002, made when their winery was half-built. The winery was finished in 2003. Vineyard 29 now produces 14,000 cases of wine, 8,000 for Vineyard 29 and 6,000 for eight custom crush clients. Philippe Melka is the winemaker, with five consulting winemakers. Anne McMinn oversees the landscape planting outside and Chuck oversees the plant inside the winery.

As the group moved out of the winery onto the crush pad, Chuck pointed out new Sauvignon Blanc vineyard up the hill. In the past, Vineyard 29 bought fruit from five vineyards. The first release of wine made from all their own fruit will be 2006.

Chuck said harvest was coming in 50% heavier than 2004. About 240 tons of fruit will be “done” at the winery. From half-ton bins or 60 pound lug boxes the fruit goes into a hopper as leaves, twigs or any pickers’ hats are taken out. Once through the Delta E2 destemmer (which

Chuck said 10% of the wineries have), berries are sorted on a moving tabletop for raisins, shots and jacks. At the end of the table, whole berries drop into a bin. The bin goes to the top of a fermentation tank, a trap door opens and fruit falls into the tank. This avoids any pumping. Chuck prefers whole berry fermentation. It takes longer, with harder working yeast, and more color and flavor extraction. Because the E2 destemmer can handle ten tons of fruit an hour, all day, but people can’t, chiller boxes for the fruit help pace berry selection. The grapes the group saw being sorted were Cabernet Sauvignon from nearby Abbey-Luce Wines, Jerry Roland consulting winemaker.

Vineyard 29 has two fermentation rooms and three kinds of fermentation tanks: stainless, oak and cement. Oak is highly insulated, giving a gradual degree change; stainless provides rapid degree change controlled with a glycol jacket; cement is in-between the two. Chuck believes variety aids blending. (The rooms have high gloss barn red floors; an Advance floor polisher is at the ready in an alcove.)

By law, outside winemakers cannot touch anything in a winery--they only consult. A wet chemistry lab provides clients with full reports of microbiological statistics; acid, sulfur, enzymatic and ammonia levels; yeast activities. Client preference determines natural or commercial yeast

use. Chuck says natural yeasts have long lag phases; fermentation is sluggish or can stick, although this is rare with a ripe Cabernet. Chuck likes commercial yeast for even fermentation. In the lab there is a clipboard and spreadsheet for each winemaker. A unique computerized tank control system will soon be up and running. Chuck envisions every winemaker going on “Tanknet” to check the dynamics of a tank and changing the temperature or influencing Brix, TA or pH with a click.

During fermentation they usually pump over to remoisten the skins, for color and flavor. Chuck said for special lots they use a corner freight elevator to lift, empty and refill a tank. This is a longer but more gentle method. Conduits slope down to the caves from the fermentation rooms so barrel fills are by gravity, too. With red wine, after free-run has exited a fermenter, they use a computer-controlled hydraulic press to extract juice from the remaining 25% in the tank with a minimum of pressure. Neoprene mesh mats layered inside the tanks also help control pressure. Sensors manage CO<sub>2</sub>, calling on fresh air from the caves to push out CO<sub>2</sub>.

In the caves, which took ten months to dig, 800 barrels of French oak are stacked two deep. The barrels, on rollers, are filled whole fruit, either through a port or the whole top; raked five times in the first

year, once in next. Emptying is either by pumping out or from the push of an inert gas. A portable bottling and labeling line, which can do 24 bottles at a time, means lots of flexibility as to when to bottle. Behind glass doors, a warmer interior barrel room is used both for malolactic fermentation and entertaining. Vineyard 29’s wine library is also here.

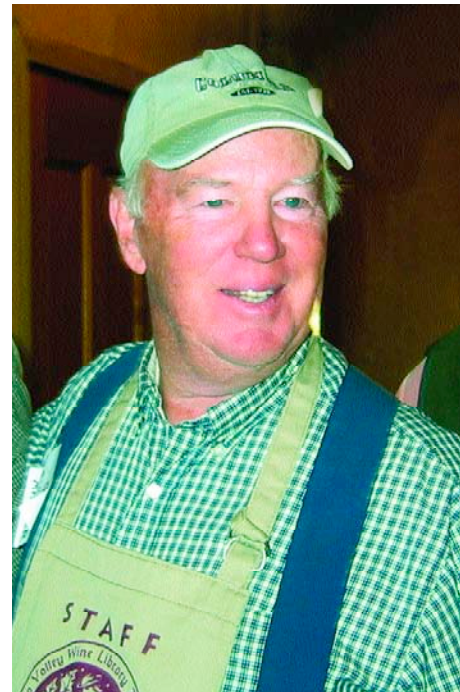
The final stop was a compact room above the fermentation rooms, where the winery makes all its own electricity. PG&E supplies the natural gas to power a Capstone microturbine system that also heats and cools the buildings and caves and provides for the sterilization of equipment. The winery also has its own wells and septage system. Chuck says it takes three gallons of water to make a gallon of wine. Having their own water and power systems makes them about 80% efficient. Chuck hopes they combine the best of innovative technology with traditional techniques at Vineyard 29.

### David Fulton Winery 825 Fulton Lane

Board member and seminar organizer Fulton Mather, together with his wife Dink, welcomed the group to the crush pad of the re-established David Fulton Winery from in front of their Delta E2 destemmer. Surrounding vineyard of Petite Sirah has been continuously farmed

by descendants of David Fulton for six generations.

Fulton Mather’s great-grandmother Mary walked over the Isthmus of Panama in 1860 and married great-grandfather David in 1863. Their house on Fulton Lane was built in 1864, where Fulton’s father was born in 1898. The founding David Fulton died in 1871, and the winery, proving too much for his widow, fell into desuetude; however, the vineyard has been active right up to the present day.



Fulton Mather

When Fulton and Dink retired, they moved to St. Helena to rehabilitate his family's wine business. A water tower is partially restored; its tank house served as a winery as they went to work on the original. Both are still works in progress. 80% of the original stones of rhyolite, mined from the Valley's eastern hillsides, have been re-set; the great oaks shading the site haven't moved an inch. David Fulton Winery produces 350 cases of estate Petite Sirah. Its first release was in 1999; so far, it sells out every year.

This year Fulton said vineyard canopy was larger and more fruit set than usual. Cluster weight was 50% higher, there were no heat spikes to drive up sugar levels, and there were seven extra weeks of hang-time.

Karen Williams and David Stevens of Acme Fine Wines helped pour the wines tasted before lunch. Once, at a blind tasting of Karen's, a consultant from New Zealand pegged the wine as David Fulton. It was actually from Trespass Vineyard, contiguous to David Fulton. Karen said there is a definite quality to St. Helena wines--dusty, mineral, violet and Oakville, for instance, is minty, robust.

The wines poured were: Aida Red Wine 2001; Charter Oak 2003; David Fulton Petite Sirah 2002; and Spottswode Cabernet Sauvignon Estate 2002. The Charter Oak, made by Rob Fanucci, Rob

Hunter consulting, is 72% Charter Oak Zinfandel, 25% Petite Sirah from David Fulton and 3% Monte Rosso Zinfandel. Aida Red Wine is a blend of 75% Cab, 24% Merlot, 1% Petit Verdot and Cab Franc. Chuck McMinn said alcohol content of "Red Wine" can be plus or minus 14%, that of "Red Table Wine" must be 14% or less. Wines poured at lunch were Calafia Cellars Red Wine 2002, 56% Cab, 18% Merlot, 24% Malbec and 2% Petit Verdot; and Spottswode Sauvignon Blanc 2004. Fulton Mather observed that Petite Sirah and Zinfandel worked well in St. Helena before the revision to Cabernet and Bordeaux varietals. Allen Price said it's why Barney's Backyard is what it is.

During the catered buffet lunch Julie Dickson introduced wine writer, Bob Thompson. Bob said an absolute key to both producing and appreciating wine is to know about where it comes from. In 1981, Mike Martini, chair of the Napa Valley Appellation Committee, hired Bob to find out where the vines were, to map them as part of a marketing strategy for the new Napa Valley appellation. There had been an "explosion of vineyards", from 10,000 acres in 1960 to 28,000 in 1985. A map-lover, Bob researched spy, satellite and U2 photographs--you could see a tennis court but not its lines--and matched them to assessor's parcel maps. He showed his meticulous map of the vineyards in 1985, saying it was time to

do one again, for in 2005 there were now 48,000 acres in vines. Bob has donated all the materials from his research to the Wine Library; copies of his historic map were provided for those at the seminar.

Fulton then spoke about the history of St. Helena Viticultural Society, descended from the St. Helena Viniculture Club of 1875. After that club's initial success to foster non-mission grapes locally and market them nationally, it faded with phylloxera and Prohibition. In 1941 Napa Valley Vintners Association was formed to take up the marketing cudgels. In the summer of 2004, energized by Beth Novak Milliken and Chuck McMinn, St. Helena Viticultural Society was formed to spread the word about the new St. Helena appellation and bring its community of vintners together, as Fulton said, 'to educate, promote and make the best.'

