

Harvest Seminar

Spring Valley, St. Helena

Saturday 13 October 2007

Joseph Phelps Vineyards

St. Helena
60,000 cases

Thirty NVWLA members assembled at Joseph Phelps Vineyards on a cool October morning for the 2007 Harvest Seminar. Rains on preceding days had cleansed the air and roads of dust and the vine rows and fermenting tanks sparkled



Damian Parker

in the morning sun. Damian Parker, vice president in charge of production, welcomed the group on behalf of this employee-owned winery. Damian has been with Phelps twenty-five years.

Damian emphasized new technology as he discussed winemaking techniques and introduced members to various pieces of new equipment at the recently expanded winemaking facility. By means of telemetry, pumpovers can now be automated; so can temperature control. These innovations benefit making wine in both small hand-made lots as well as larger ones.

After touring the new Phelps winemaking facility, members drove up the hill to walk through the original winery and visitor center. Damian gave a history of the eponymous Joseph Phelps as he took the group through various structures that have been expanded and renovated over the years to meet change and growth at Phelps.

Snowden Vineyards

St. Helena
2,500 cases

After Phelps, the group carpooled about a mile up a rutted dirt road to Snowden Vineyards. Owner Scott Snowden greeted the group beside a swimming pool next to the vineyards. Scott was later joined by his daughter and winemaker for Snowden, Diana Snowden Seysses. Diana lives and

works in Burgundy, but makes time for winemaking at Snowden.

The Snowden vineyards are adjacent to and look down on vineyards of Heitz Wine Cellars in Spring Valley, abut Kathryn Hall's Sacrasché Vineyard and Sloan Estate above Auberge du Soleil and nearly touch Seavey Vineyards in Conn Valley. A significant streak of volcanic ash, once a source of Perlite for plaster-work, runs from Quintessa through Hall, Heitz and Snowden (how Beringer's Quarry Vineyards got its name) into Conn Valley. The white volcanic ash reflects light up into the vines and Scott says gives the fruit a distinctive character. A derelict Perlite rendering factory, in fact, stands at the corner of the Seavey property.

The Snowden family bought their ranch in the 1950's. Its vineyard was planted to Petite Sirah and ploughed by an old grey horse every spring. Sulfuring was done with a five gallon bucket, paintbrush and 1950's splatter technique; for deer protection the farmer would hang a quarter of a dead deer in a burlap sack on each vineyard corner. The land had cost \$87 an acre and was regarded as poison oak, rattlesnake and jackrabbit country. It has since proven superb for Cabernet Sauvignon.

23 Snowden acres are now in vineyard. The original vineyard blocks have been replanted to Cabernet Sauvignon clones 7 and 8, although a few library vines of

Petite Sirah remain, and two new vineyards have been added: Los Ricos is in Cabernet clone 337 and Lost Orchard in Cab, Cab Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Water used to be scarce at Snowden, despite all the springs in Spring Valley. However, a new well dug in the 1970's provides direct irrigation a mile away and to an elevation of 500 feet. Their farming practices have changed (the plough horse is long-gone). Snowden no longer discs and has begun to plant cover crops. Irrigation schedules have also changed. Scott and his brother Randy began their replanting in 1981 and finished in 1991. Scott says it's time to replant the 1981.

In 1993 Snowden began its own label with 395 cases. Prior to that it sold all its

fruit to Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. Now one half of its fruit goes to Snowden and one half to David Ramey. This is Diana's third harvest at Snowden as winemaker, with David Ramey consulting. Diana is cellarmaster at Domaine Dujac in Morey Saint Denis, Burgundy. She says it is the furthest swing of the pendulum from making Pinot Noir in Burgundy to Cabernet in California. In France they might make 23 different wines from as few as two barrels to as many as fifty in order to produce the best wine from each site. Diana's seen hailed-on berries picked out with tweezers for a clean cuvée.

Snowden is made at Fantesca Estate with Diana as consulting winemaker. She says Snowden gets lots of attention but tank

space is limited so she can't yet vinify each lot separately. Snowden is naturally fermented, as they do in Burgundy. Diana thinks wild yeasts give greater complexity, superior aroma, length and aging to the wine although the yeasts do require vigilance (all 30,000 cases of wine David Ramey makes are naturally fermented). Diana says the challenge is to do as little winemaking as possible and let the vineyard speak for itself. She now wants to try having Snowden Cabernet remain *sur lies* as in Burgundy, rather than racking every four months in order to change and improve richness and mouth feel. Snowden Cabernet is aged in 50 percent new French oak (from any number of French barrel makers) and 50 percent barrels from past years. The Estate Cabernet is 75 to 80 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 7-ish percent Merlot and Cabernet Franc and 3 percent Petit Verdot. Diana thinks now the time has come for Snowden vineyard-designated wine.

Fruit for Snowden Sauvignon Blanc is from a Beckstoffer vineyard on the Rutherford valley floor. It is pressed whole cold cluster and stays in 70-gallon stainless steel tanks or neutral (not new) oak on the lees for seven months. After some fining it is bottled. Diana says there is no malolactic fermentation, for a lush, buttery, less acidic wine. With malolactic fermentation she says the wine is usually more mineral, clear, with a clean fruit



Scott Snowden

taste because fruity aromas of esters vanish with malolactic fermentation.

Q&A: Differences between French and US practices? The French permit no irrigation, no oak chips. In Burgundy only a low fruiting level on the vine and only Pinot Noir, of course. Some rules are quite practical, others penalizing.

Screw caps? Fine for a wine drunk within three years, but with reds it is a shame not to age them. However, as a market experiment Snowden has done two pallets' worth of Cabernet in screw caps to compare Saranex and Saran (with tin) caps with cork.

Seavey Vineyards

St. Helena
2,000 to 3,000 cases

The next stop was Seavey Vineyards where Mary and Bill Seavey greeted the group at the newly expanded winery, which was originally a dairy barn. Bill said the estate was a horse and cattle ranch when they bought it in 1979. Its vineyard history was forgotten until the Wine Library collections straightened him out.

The elevation maximum in Conn Valley is 400 feet. Seavey is in hillside vineyards with a southern exposure. Trays of Cabernet Sauvignon picked that morning were being sorted, destemmed, sorted

again and loaded into fermenters at the winery. The group began its tour among fermentation tanks alongside the sorting table as the forklift moved a hopperful of destemmed fruit from destemmer to fermenter. After observing this initial phase of winemaking, the group adjourned to the adjacent tank room for lunch that was preceded by an informal wine-tasting put together by Allen Price.

Allen had assembled three Sauvignon blancs, all Napa Valley. He reminded the group that Sauvignon blanc is a parent of Cabernet Sauvignon and grows with extreme vigor: big bushy vines, its fruit honey-flavored in the mouth. The wine can be aged ten to fifteen years maximum. Allen said each of the wines was of a



Bill Seavey

distinct style or type, the result of such qualities as the winemaker's style, ripeness of the fruit and cellar practices. He poured:

Spottswoode St. Helena 2006 (with a tiny amount of Sonoma fruit, too): musqué style--perfumey, clonal—a general type, Muscat-like with apricot and pear, rather like Sultana table grapes.

Mason 2005, Oakville (Randy Mason is the general manager of Napa Wine Company): soft, fruity, grapey, and grapefruit; not a lot of oak, not a lot of acid: very drinkable.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 2006: more minerally, a good wine with food; higher acid, austere, more like Sancerre, its fruit more restrained.

NVWLA scholar Efrain Barragan and member Olin Harris amiably assisted with an excellent buffet lunch catered by a Knickerbockers and accompanied by a large number of wines. In addition to those from Snowden, Phelps and Seavey, the Wine Library was also able to offer wines given by Casa Nuestra, Heitz, Rockledge Vineyards and an Egelhoff Cabernet Sauvignon from the Glendale and Sacraché vineyards given by the Dicksons. Everyone appeared to have enjoyed both his or her day in Spring Valley and its many wines.