

## Vincent Arroyo Founder and Winemaker

Vincent Arroyo Winery

2361 Greenwood Avenue, Calistoga

8,000 cases

Vincent Arroyo's father emigrated from Spain to the United States, married and settled in California. Vince spent his boyhood in Hollister where his parents grew row crops until they went broke in the 1920's. Vince's father had to give up tomatoes and become a carpenter. After finishing high school in the 1950's, Vince studied to become a mechanical engineer in the aerospace industry. On call as an independent contractor with a specialty in packaging, Vince would figure out how to suspend circuitry, fuel tank boxes, you name it, in everything from cash registers to satellites.

After Vince married, he and his wife lived in Los Gatos where she taught school and he worked pretty much seven days a week, ten hours a day. Vince says in the mechanical engineering business when an independent contractor is called in it always means trouble. In time, Vince became very unhappy always working indoors and he didn't like the politics of contracts. He says marketing drives design. You work hard on a proposal and then you don't get the contract—all that work for nothing. Worse, when a company

bids on projects, it needs ready manpower, so workers are all set to go but with nothing to do, waiting.

One day, a fellow Vince was working (or not working) with saw an ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for potential vineyard in Calistoga and called out, "Vince, you like wine. You should go see what this is about." Vince had grown up with wine, so he did go and look at the property and he is still there today, at that very same place that was advertised in 1974. At the time it was all in prunes except for two patches of grapes and a big pile of brush out back where some prune trees had been pulled a few years before. A see-through barn, a house with a flat-top roof and another house half the size it is today, a derelict tractor, junk car, rabbit hutches, and hencoop plus a fair amount of other junk



completed the holdings on 22 acres. After seeing the property, Vince drove back down to work for two hours, resigned his job, drove back up, made a deal, and then drove back down to wait until his wife got home.

She was fine with the venture. Vince's wife said she would manage their place in Los Gatos and teach while Vince took possession of the property and sorted things out. He moved to Calistoga, but when escrow closed after harvest Vince realized he'd need to look for another job until at least the first of the year. As a kid he had picked prunes, walnuts, apricots and tomatoes, but Vince had no clue what to do with grapes, so he introduced himself to his next-door neighbors and volunteered to give them a hand. Starting in January on the weekends Vince helped Frank Barberis of Palisades Vineyards and every other near neighbor he could for free. He would work in Sunnyvale and Mountain View during the week for pay and then drive to Calistoga. For five years Vince would get in Friday night to find a neighbor's tractor waiting for him with instructions on its seat for the weekend. Vince says learned how to do everything in a vineyard and did it, like prune and plant, working for free. Before he pulled out the rest of his prune trees, Vince harvested and took their fruit to the dehydrator for two years, even though he lost \$3,000 a load

because he couldn't just let them just rot. Then he bought an old crawler, which wasn't very good, and planted two acres of Petite Sirah where that big brush pile had been. Vince got the budwood from his neighbor, Roy Enderlin, and did the budding himself.

Although Vince sold his grapes to Napa Valley Cooperative Winery, he found that as a grower he just couldn't get ahead because the Coop's prices and tonnage limits were so low and worse, a lot of fruit was turned away after its quotas for varieties were met. Vince was growing single varietals, no blends, and his blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Gamay and Petite Sirah made tons of fruit. Vince figured he'd get a permit for a winery just to handle his excess fruit that the Coop wouldn't take. With a permit in hand in 1984, Vince built a winery in the old see-through barn. Next, he got on the board of the Coop, serving along with Andy Hoxsey, and actually worked to dissolve the cooperative in 1986, which Vince says is one of the best things that ever happened: "It got people going in different directions."

Petite Sirah, according to Vince, is a hard wine to make and a tough grape to grow. It doesn't like everywhere and it gets everything. Red leaf virus? It's going to get it; it's prone to eutypa, and it sunburns no matter what. Vince didn't know all this when he

planted it, but he says he likes the challenge. His first experience with Petite Sirah had come when he was off camping somewhere with the guys and outside grilling steaks, and one of his friends opened a bottle of Petite Sirah. Vince has no idea whose Petite Sirah it was or anything about it, just that it went perfectly with the steaks.

In addition to its 22 original acres, Arroyo owns two parcels across the street, one in Petite Sirah and the other in Sangiovese (with budwood from Shafer) and a third parcel of 37 acres down the street bought from Cuvaion when it was planted to Pinot Noir, Gamay Beaujolais, Napa Gamay, and Cabernet. Now it is in Cabernet, Petite Sirah, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot. Arroyo also leases "Rattlesnake Acres," a neighboring vineyard Vince planted to Petite Sirah for the Enderlins when he first moved to Calistoga. The soils are deep at Arroyo, largely gravel in the back and half the front. The rest is black, sticky, gooey sedimentary soil. Arroyo doesn't plant cover crops but chops vine prunings and tills them back in. It uses very little spray, a mildicide but no insecticide and strip sprays between vine rows. In alternate years a hoe plow goes through. Arroyo is still all dry-farmed. There was an irrigation pond in place on one of the new parcels, but it is only used for frost protec-



tion along with a few wind machines. The layout of the vineyards and the winery are all Vince's. A bad fire in 1989 was caused by a short in the old barn's post and tube wiring. Vince said they lost inventory and had to build a whole new building.

Today, Arroyo makes four estate Petite Sirahs, two from single vineyards, as well as twelve other wines. At harvest, how fruit is managed differs with each lot: the eight patches of Petite Sirah in the block across the street are kept separate from the time they are harvested (the same is true for the Cabernet). Petite Sirah is picked into half-ton bins, goes into a destemmer-crusher, across the belt of a sorting table, and into open-top stainless steel fermenters where it could spend a couple of days cold soak.

Then yeast is added and the cap of skins and seeds punched down. Arroyo likes a slow, cool fermentation for Rattlesnake fruit, which crops five tons at most, but a warmer fermentation for the estate Petite Sirah. Vince says he has let one tank go to 10° Brix and pressed off early, then let fermentation finish back in stainless while the other tank fermented to dry. He might extend its maceration by ten to fifteen days and then blend both back into a closed stainless tank for a couple of weeks. The new wine is racked off into new barrels of American oak. Vince thinks American oak is a better match for Petite Sirah as it is more aggressive and he doesn't think the vanilla in French oak goes well with Petite Sirah. He says he has been using American oak since way back when and was probably World

Cooperage's first customer. Vince learned that if you try and make Petite Sirah like Cabernet it will be much too tannic and will take ten if not fifteen years to be ready. To soften it, you need to change your wine-making style. Vince's first Petite Sirah is just coming around now and he says the 1985 is great.

Arroyo makes 300 to 400 cases apiece of its two single vineyard Petite Sirahs, and still grows some Gamay; its proprietary blend "Melange" has a Gamay base. It also makes 600 to 800 cases of Chardonnay for those customers who insist on having an Arroyo Chardonnay. In January, barrel samples are pulled and a tasting set up for Vince and the staff with glasses and a graduated cylinder for each sample. The challenge is to blend the very best wine you can. Vince says the process helps in educating tasting room staff so they know what to say about the wine to customers (Arroyo wines are sold only at the winery), and Vince says, "I'd be a fool if I didn't listen to other people." Take blends: Arroyo keeps adding more and more. The wines find a market and then Arroyo can't cut them out. Vince says it stopped making Zinfandel for a while, but had to start again. The first years it did a thousand cases, now 8,000 cases. Vince says the small batches are 1,200 gallons (4 tons is ideal) and spend a minimum time in barrel of 22 months for

reds, ten for Chardonnay. In the winery, barrels are in tiers of four and earthquake clamps, unique to Arroyo, stabilize the racks (with at least two clamps per rack).

In 1992, inspired by Elias Fernandez at Shafer, Arroyo made 15 barrels of Petite Sirah port. Elias showed Vince how, and the port sold out. Now every 375ml bottle 20 barrels is pre-sold. [The tin label was inspired by a French olive oil Vince had served to him on a visit to France (all at the expense of the French government, and he's still not sure why).] For Vince the port is a fun-thing—in the evening, a piece of chocolate, a little glass of port. No, he doesn't cook at all. "I'm afraid to cook. If I did, I'd weigh five thousand pounds!"

Vince used to take classes with Dr. Lisa van der Water in things like microbiology at The Wine Lab in St. Helena. Now he keeps up by reading and the occasional seminar. His family is also involved. Although his daughter and son-in-law are both attorneys—they met in law school—his son-in-law has taken charge of compliance and his daughter handles all the writing. And everyone takes turns looking after Vince's new grandson. ■