



PREPARING NAPA VALLEY WINE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

ABBY SCHULTZ, WASHINGTON POST, AUGUST 29, 2019



Signs the climate is changing as higher temperatures are recorded year-after-year across the globe isn't news to winemakers who are already coping with the effects of a warming world in their vineyards.

In California's Napa Valley, Larkmead Vineyards' winemaker Dan Petroski, has experienced a "roller coaster ride of major climatic events," including earthquakes, fire, record rainfall, and drought" since he came to Napa about 13 years ago.

While he's been able to make fantastic, largely Cabernet-based premium wines through it all, Petroski is mindful of the role climate plays in making great wines. Warmer vintages are already quickening the maturation stage of the vines, for instance.



“Seeing how quickly I’ve shifted my entire growing season by almost ten days to two weeks—to as much as month—that doesn’t seem right to me,” Petroski says.

Petroski has, in fact, been talking about climate change and its potential effects on Napa Valley wines—and what to do about it—for some time, and has convened other experts, winemakers, and industry leaders, to talk about it, too, at discussion forums he calls “Salons at Larkmead.”

A forum earlier in August titled “Cabernet: Climate Change,” dealt with how winemakers can and should adapt, held “quite fittingly on a 105-degree day,” as he wrote in *SevenFifty Daily*, an online beverage industry magazine.

What Larkmead is doing to adapt is create a three-acre viticultural “research block” in clay soil near the winery, where he and his colleagues will plant several grape varieties that could potentially be blended with Cabernet. The idea is to prepare the winery if, in 20-to-30 years, Napa Valley becomes as hot as Modesto, Calif.—130 miles to the south in the Central Valley.

“I need to think about what kind of wine Larkmead makes, and in the grand scheme of things, what kind of wine does Napa Valley make?” Petroski says. “If Cabernet has chinks in its armor, how do I fill those out? What grape varieties can we use to make Cabernet continue to feel, look, and taste like Cabernet, even if it’s not 100% Cabernet.”

The research plot will be planted with various grape varieties, clones, and rootstock. The grapes will include reds like Petite Sirah and Zinfandel, as well as whites, including Chenin Blanc, that have thrived in the Central Valley. The winery also will experiment with varieties from warm Mediterranean climates, including Aglianico from southern Italy, Tempranillo from Spain, Touriga Nacional from Portugal, and Syrah, which does well in warm weather locations like the southern Rhône Valley in France and in the Barossa Valley of Australia.

Petroski expects Cabernet has “some runway” in Napa Valley, even if the climate continues to warm, before winemakers need to make adjustments. But because “great wines are made from old vines,” the process of figuring this out needs to start now if Larkmead is to make great wines in 20-to-30 years, he says.



Napa wine laws allow producers to label their wines “Cabernet Sauvignon” if the wine is made from at least 75% Cabernet. It’s that 25% that Larkmead can play with. Petroski knows, for instance, that Petite Syrah blends well with Cabernet.

“It helps with the textural, color, and mouth-feel components that we get from Cabernet today that we might not get from Cabernet tomorrow,” Petroski says.

This thinking is why the research block is being planted in honor of Larkmead’s 125th anniversary in 2020—it’s a statement that the producers plan to continue making premium wines for the next 125 years.

“I want to believe that Cabernet is going to adapt and evolve and it’s going to be the king of Napa for the next 125 years,” Petroski says. “But I don’t want to sit and wait to be wrong, and not move. I want to be first to market with a healthy product coming from a healthy business.”