



Betsy and Bill Nachbaur's 32-acre Alegria Vineyard is in the Russian River Valley. (Courtesy photo)

My first impression of ACORN Wines came from their motto: “Estate-grown, Sustainably Farmed, Field-blended.” With a little investigation, one finds Betsy and Bill Nachbaur sitting in the middle of their 32-acre Alegria Vineyard in the Russian River Valley, surrounded by 71 field-blended varietals, most of which cannot be found anywhere else in the appellation.

Today, many blended wines come from different blocks and the varietals are only introduced when bottled. In contrast, ACORN's century-old, field-blended vines are planted, farmed, harvested and fermented together, resulting in a mosaic of color, aromas and integrated flavors that exceed the sum of their parts.

The California Certified Sustainable Alegria Vineyard is a global mosaic that includes numerous grape varietals, none called pinot noir or chardonnay that currently dominate the Russian River Valley vineyards.

The primary blocks include zinfandel (Calif.), cabernet franc (France, Bordeaux) dolcetto (Italy, Piedmont), sangiovese (Italy, Tuscany) and syrah (France, Rhone),

each field-blended with more obscure varietals like Khir Ghulman (Afghanistan), Liatiko (Crete) and Kurtelaska (Croatia). Varietals like grenache, carignane and cinsault are more familiar, although not to this appellation.

Bill Nachbaur left his law career, purchased the Alegria Vineyard in 1990 and began studying viticulture. At that time, the easterly portion included mostly field-blended zinfandel blocks planted in 1890, after the Gold Rush and before Prohibition. In the early 1990s, he added a cabernet franc, sangiovese, syrah and more zinfandel blocks with rows of dolcetto, barbera, cinsault, petit verde and others.

As we walked the vineyards, Bill pointed to the diversity of leaf shapes, cabernet franc resembling an oak leaf, sangiovese, a maple leaf and zinfandel, foot-like with hair on the back side. We passed dolcetto vines that produces reddish new growth and alicante bouschet, the only varietal with natural red juice.

Nachbaur's original intent was to remain solely a grower, but now he sources out half and, from the remainder, creates 2,500 to 3,000 cases of these unique blends. We sat down after our walk to taste some new releases.

It began with a 2017 ACORN Rosato, Alegria Vineyard, Russian River Valley (\$28), a zinfandel-dominant field blend with significant cabernet franc, sangiovese and smaller among several other varietals. In contrast to a lighter rose, these grapes have 24 hours of contact with the skins, adding darker color and complexity to the flavors.

We compared the 2014 and 2015 vintages of the ACORN Cabernet Franc Alegria Vineyard (\$38) which is what it says with bits of malbec, merlot, petit verdot, cabernet sauvignon and tannat. The 2014 vintage had a spice and floral quality to the aromas and a creamy mouth-feel of dark cherry and a hint of coffee on the palate. The 2015 vintage, which will not be released until spring 2019, exudes more mushroom and red fruit nuances with lithe, young tannins.

With origins in Tuscany, the 2014 ACORN Sangiovese Alegria Vineyard (\$32) is nearly all sangiovese, but it represents 23 different clones. The earthy aromas are clear and the fruit-forward flavors are rich. Dolcetto is an everyday wine in Italy's Piedmont region, where it is often blended with barbera and nebbiolo. The 2014 ACORN Dolcetto Alegria Vineyard (\$35) was barrel-aged for 18 months, bottled in 2016 and released this Spring. After some time in the glass, I picked-up the spice on the nose and the baked fruit flavors.

If you come upon a blend of 60 varietals, aged 15 months in French, American and European oak, some new, you have probably discovered the 2013 ACORN “Medley” Alegria Vineyard (\$50), awarded 94-points by Wine Enthusiast magazine. The 2013 vintage expressed red fruit and spice aromas with complex fruit-forward flavors while the 2014 vintage had more of a floral nose with cherry and baking spice flavors.

There is a reminder on the ACORN website that “everyone knows mighty oaks from little ACORNs grow.” For nearly 30 years, Bill has worked these old field-blended vines, adding his new plantings along the way. The pride in both Bill and Betsy is evident when they tell their story or speak enthusiastically of the creative winemaking process.

Ninety percent of ACORN wines are sold direct to consumers, so the best place to taste them is at the winery outside of Healdsburg. I recommend that you reserve a time at ACORN during your next Sonoma County tasting excursion. It's a bit of history and there is nothing like it in the region.



Betsy and Bill Nachbaur are known for creating unique blended wine.