

# Vining & Wining

**Kathleen Jarschke-Schultze**

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It was during the fall, three years ago that I met Ernie. My friend Myna and I had gone to an evening of art at a local gallery in our county seat, that teeming metropolis of Yreka, California. Along with the *objets d'art* were a few finger foods. But what caught our attention was the wine. It was a local wine, which made it heretofore unheard of. Even more astounding—here was the winemaker himself, Ernie Neveu, talking about his wines.

I made my way over and began grilling him. What were the best wine grapes to grow here? Why? What varieties was he growing? How long did it take to get a crop? Was winemaking easy or difficult? Weren't the cold weather and late frosts in our particular area a problem? Ernie smiled and sighed, knowing he was in for a long haul.

My husband Bob-O and I had planted a small orchard at the bottom of a large sloping side hill in our yard. We have fifteen trees altogether, with several varieties of apples, pears, plums, and cherries, all semi-dwarf. The slope above the orchard gets very good sun, but seemed too steep for more trees. We had spoken about planting a small vineyard there.

Even though I actually grew up in the Napa Valley, I knew nothing about wine, except what I liked to drink myself. You can believe me when I say I am not a wine snob. So I was pumping Ernie for all the information I could get.

I had passed his vineyard on the long back road to town many times. I always meant to stop in and ask my questions. Somehow, town trips are always full of errands and have no time for unscheduled stops.

## *Bottling Buddies*

Ernie could see that I was interested and asked me if I'd like to come to his winery the next day and help bottle up some Pinot noir. Boy, would I! I asked if I could bring my friend.

The next morning, Myna and I showed up ready to go. We met Ernie's wife Maryann. We were instructed on

our given tasks, and we bottled up dozens of cases that day. Our pay was some of the wine we had bottled. By the time we were finished, Ernie had hired me to help with the winter pruning in his vineyard.

I was only able to work on weekends and a patchwork of days when Bob-O was in the office that winter. One day, it was snowing as we pruned along the rows. It was great working with Ernie. He had retired from teaching at a San Diego university and couldn't help but be a teacher when talking about winemaking (and any other subject we touched upon) as we spoke. He covered not just how to do something, but also the "why" of it.

## *Our Own Vineyard*

That spring I got a call from Ernie. A friend of his had planned to plant some Pinot noir vines near Ernie's place. Then the man realized he couldn't take care of the planting the way he should from his distant home. He had already

**Bob-O inspects the vines a month after planting.**



bought the year-old Pinot noir cuttings to plant. Ernie resold as many as he could at fifty cents apiece. He told me to come by and grab whatever I wanted from the remainder.

Bob-O was going to a job over Forest Mountain and down into Scott Valley the next day, so I told him to swing by Ernie's on the way back and get me a few bundles of vines. Ernie had told me where they were, bare root and wrapped in wet burlap. Bob-O brought home seven bundles.

We assumed each bundle would contain ten cuttings. Oh

## Wine & Mead Basic Methodology

The basics of making either wine or mead are the same. One difference is that with honey you add water, with grapes you crush them for their juice alone. For both, you make a "must." The must is the crushed grapes or honey/water prepared to receive the yeast. Sometimes you need to add sugar to the grapes or yeast nutrients to the honey and water mixture.

Then the natural yeasts must be killed. This is accomplished by heating for the mead, and by adding sulfites to the crushed grapes. In France, they mostly just use the wild yeasts on the grapes for their wine. However, they have made the same kind of wine in the same regions for hundreds of years. Any lees (spent yeast in the bottom of the secondary fermentation vessel) were thrown out to the farm animals and dissipated into the air. Interestingly enough, air samples in America's wine regions are now beginning to show concentrations of wine yeasts.

The next step is to "pitch" the yeast. This means to proof it (just like when making bread) and add it to the prepared must. Your primary fermentation begins. The brew bubbles and gases a great deal. With wine, you press the juice from the grape skins, which adds their color and flavor. Then the wine or mead goes into a carboy, a large bottle with a small neck.

Fermentation locks are placed securely in the necks and filled with vodka. A fermentation lock blocks out airborne bacteria and yeasts, using a barrier of fluid. The carbon dioxide gas build-up is dissipated through the lock with a bubbling action.

When the bubbling slows or stops, the brew is racked (carefully siphoned into another carboy or cask for aging). After aging, the wine or mead is bottled, labeled, and ready for drinking or further aging.



The hypnotic bubbling carboys.

no—each bundle had twenty-five cuttings. We scrambled. Bob-O spent several long days on the tractor. He leveled terraces and dug the rows for the rootstock.

I heeled the vines into a bed in the garden so they wouldn't dry out. We ended up getting a total of 102 vines into four rows on the side hill. The rest, I heeled in for the year, inside the deer fence of the garden proper. We laid a drip watering system on the rows right away. But it took two more years before we found the time to get the posts and a trellis system in.

### *Medium Diversion*

I knew it would be literally years before we would be able to harvest grapes and make wine. So I decided to try making mead. Mead is a honey wine. Arguably, mead was the first manmade alcoholic spirits. I got on the Internet, I bought books, and I dove right in. I started with 3 gallons (11.4 l) of mead.

It took a long time to process, but it turned out quite well. We were very pleased. I had begun acquiring the equipment needed for all my brewing ventures. In addition, I shopped online, found brew Web sites, and discovered a local (50 miles away) store that carries a limited supply of brew gear. I read a lot.

### *Bob-O Nose*

As we began really learning about wine, we realized we knew nothing. What winemakers say about American wine drinkers is "90/24." This means that 90 percent of wine bought in America is drunk within twenty-four hours. I built a small wine cellar in the basement and paid more

attention to what wine I was buying and storing.

Bob-O turned out to have an excellent nose for wine. Ernie was impressed that Bob-O could discern the subtle nuances in a wine right off. I am no good at this. There is a wine aroma wheel of the most common tastes in wine. If you do not have a good nose naturally, like Bob-O, you can train your nose.

I know what tastes good to me. Those descriptions of wine have always cracked me up, as in, "Poignant, but not overbearing... With a hint of filet mignon and Cuban cigar... A buttery blackberry finish." Hock patooey.

## *First Shot Pinot*

The second year, through our mismanagement, we had a very small harvest. By mismanagement, I mean we did not pinch the little bunches of grapes when they first appeared. We should not have had any harvest at all. You should not allow any fruit to mature the first two years, so that all the growth goes into the main trunk of the vine.

I couldn't help myself. We picked the grapes, and I made wine. When all was said and done, I had twelve bottles of Pinot. I wanted to call it Pinot Bob-O, but Bob-O nixed that. So we printed up labels for "First Shot Pinot." When it was finished, we eagerly poured, studied, and drank some. Bob-O calls it a good "vin ordinaire." Our friend Jerry Igo said, "Well, that's a lot better than 'Vin-á gar.'" He's right, of course.

I'm pleased with the result and hope to improve my technique with this year's harvest. I'm now keeping records of what I do and when I do it. It's surprising how important that is. Live and learn, eh?

## *Vintage 2004*

This year, we have about seven gallons (26.5 l) of Pinot bubbling through the fermentation locks in a neutral corner of our living room. Next to it and considerably more active is this year's batch of sweet mead. Soon, I'll start a larger batch of dry mead. This year, I want to try sparkling mead. They say its taste can rival the best champagnes. I harvested 276 pounds (125 kg) of honey from four hives this fall. I have plenty to experiment with.

## *The Winery*

My old *Home Power* office in our basement has become our wine cellar. I keep my honey bottling equipment there also. Of course, this is all for our own use and gifts for friends. We do not sell the wine or mead, just the honey.

When we were designing our wine label, Bob-O wanted to call our venture Windy Winery. Well, yes, it is very windy here. All our trees are flagged. But I just couldn't do it, as much as I like alliteration. The name brings flatulence to my mind.

When we first moved to the creek, someone told me it had once been called Otter Creek because of all the otters that used to frolic there. So, we have become Otter Creek Vineyards. I like that a whole lot better.

I have found brewing wine and mead to be quite enjoyable. There is something positively hypnotic about

## **Origins of Mead**

The monks of the European Middle Ages became accomplished mead makers. They kept bees for the beeswax harvested from the hives. They made candles to keep the light of knowledge burning through those dark times. I picture the monks in their cramped carrels copying manuscripts by the light of a single beeswax candle.

Since waste is a sin, they harvested the honey by crushing the combs and draining them through baskets. The crushed combs were then washed with water. That honey water was made into mead for medicinal purposes.

watching a fermentation lock bubble. I found out Pinot noir vines live about 35 years, so I'll get plenty of opportunity to learn the art.

## *Access*

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