

## Field Blends - Part 2

# Field Blends: Doing things the old way

### Visits to two field blend vineyards, planted 80 years apart

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Field blending used to be the standard way of creating blended wines -- several sympathetic varietals were planted together, to be harvested, pressed, fermented and barreled as one, as we [discovered last time](#). In the wine country, the traditional field blend has always been about 75% zinfandel, 20% part petite sirah, and smaller amounts of other grapes usually including alicante bouschet and carignane.

The situation that exists up the road toward Cloverdale, where a vineyard called Chianti Station produces a field blend, is the same, but different. Here the primary grape is not zinfandel, but sangiovese, the King of Chianti.

### SEGHESIO'S CHIANTI STATION

While the Seghesio winery is well known for its deep line of zinfandels, it's their Chianti Station that's closest to the heart and soul of traditional field blend. "It's a unique wine in California, a true Tuscan-style field blend," said winemaker and owner Ted Seghesio.

The wine derives its name from the train stop just north of Geyserville -- one stop south of the Asti Station, where Italian Swiss Colony was based. (There was also a Brunello stop, continuing the Italian metaphor.) Back at the turn of the century (the penultimate one), granddad Edouardo Seghesio was making wine for ISC, and decided to plant some well-behaved clones right outside Chianti Station, so visiting Italians would be greeted by a familiar landscape.

He chose four clones of sangiovese, plus a caniaolo, and two white grapes -- trebbiano and malvesia -- probably to make the wine more approachable. The vineyard, planted in 1910, still produces its fruit, small densely flavorful clusters from short vines struggling in the shallow soil. Though some of the sangiovese goes in the company's retail varietal, about 45 cases are produced in most years of this authentic field blend.

"It has to be co-fermented or it's not a true field blend," Ted Seghesio acknowledged. "Nobody plants those field blend lots anymore, with zinfandel, carignane and petite sirah growing in the same row." He speculated that it just doesn't make any sense, in terms of production: Petite sirah matures later than zinfandel, so it's almost impossible to pick them both ripe at the same time. And



Christopher Chung / PD File

Bill Nachbaur of Acorn Winery works the grapes in his 100-year old field blend Alegria Vineyard. His 2002 Heritage Vines Zinfandel from this vineyard won Sweepstakes for Best Red Wine at the 2004 Harvest Fair.

carignane takes longer still.

“Everyone planted grapes that way. It was probably just easier to plant the blend in the field, rather than blend it in the winery. Besides, people back then just didn’t care that much about making great wine – they just wanted wine.”

“Those old vineyards are almost all gone now,” Ted added. “Many were pulled up for chardonnay or cabernet, from the 1970s on. But,” he said proudly, “we’ve never yanked up an old vine yet.”

## **REVIVAL AT ACORN WINERY**

As sometimes happens, however, there’s an exception to every rule. In this case, the rule is that no one plants field blend vineyards like they did a century ago, and the exception is Acorn Winery, along 101 just south of Healdsburg. This small farm still does things the old-fashioned way, focusing on field blend wines traditionally produced; in addition, owners Bill and Betsy Nachbaur have gone one step further, planting their new vineyards with field blend variety. What was once commonplace has become remarkable.

A rarity among winemakers, Bill Nachbaur is committed to field blends. “It’s like cooking – if you put a lot of ingredients together then cook something up, you’re going to have something different than if you just cook them separately and mix them up before putting them on the table.”

Indeed, co-fermentation is the hallmark of a true field blend. “There’s probably something chemical going on, that the molecules being formed in fermentation are borrowing a little from this grape and a little from that grape. . . It would be nice to have a chemist to focus on it and explain what’s really going on.”

Their Alegría vineyard is over 100 years old, planted in 1890, with a long and storied history that includes ownership by Dry Creek pioneer A. Rafanelli at one point. The vineyard is comprised of classic Sonoma field blend grapes: mostly zinfandel, interplanted with petite sirah, Alicante bouschet, and smaller amounts of carignane, plus some Trousseau, Sangiovese, Petit Bouschet, Negrette, Syrah, Muscat Noir, Cinsaut, and Grenache.

“We were selling the grapes to Ridge, from ‘90-96, who had an Alegría vineyard designated wine. Then they went to Rosenblum from 97-2003. During that period we bottled the wine under our own label, Acorn Winery.”

Success was immediate: the 2002 Heritage Vines Zinfandel grabbed the coveted Sweepstakes Award as the best red wine at the 2004 Sonoma County Harvest Fair.

The Alegría field blend wine is very similar in composition and age to the Lytton Springs wines that Ridge makes. However, the very first wine produced by Acorn was a 1994 Sangiovese, produced from a vineyard planted in 1990 with 7 different clones of sangio, plus small amounts of the Tuscan grapes Canaiolo and Mammolo. It too is a true field blend sangiovese, but from a vineyard planted 80 years after that Chianti Station field.

Despite its critical success, Acorn is, and will probably remain, a small winery. Production is currently about 3,000 cases, and most of it is sold at the rural tasting room by appointment only. But sold out it is: visitors hear about the wine from friends, or have it at one of the Healdsburg restaurants (especially Zin, but sometimes also Bistro Ralph, Manzanita, Scopa, and others). And Bill Nachbaur plans to continue his maverick ways.

“To me it makes wine less like a commodity than if you’re growing 26 acres of chardonnay, or whatever. It may not be the best business plan, but it does makes it more interesting.”

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