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SUMMER WHITES: UNCOMMON VINES

Central Coast rebels with a winemaking cause

Making unoaked wines from unusual grapes, an Edna Valley winery is trying to redefine California whites.

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SAN LUIS OBISPO — ALBARIÑO and Grüner Veltliner from the Central Coast? Edna Valley vintner John Niven believes that these white wines -- most commonly associated with Spain and Austria, respectively -- are the new frontier for California wine. And like a true frontiersman, he's out way ahead of the pack.

Niven, 35, with his cousin Michael Blaney, 42, members of the third winemaking generation of the Niven clan, owners of Baileyana Winery and Paragon Vineyard, has planted the largest Albariño vineyard outside of Spain's Galicia region: 50 acres of prime Edna Valley AVA real estate, half of all of the acreage planted to this grape in California. His 10-acre Grüner Veltliner plot is one of only two in California; the other is a single acre on Napa Valley's Diamond Mountain planted by Rudy von Strasser of Von Strasser Winery.

The Albariño and Grüner Veltliner are two of seven grape varieties the cousins are cultivating for a new line of white wines called Tangent Wines. Pinot Gris, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Grenache Blanc -- the cousins have planted acres of each of these less than noble grapes for their "anything but Chardonnay" brand, and they are buying Pinot Blanc grapes from a neighboring vineyard.

"The idea is to redefine California white wines," says Tangent winemaker Christian Roguenant, a Burgundian-born Champagne maker who came to California's Central Coast in 1986 to make sparkling wine and became Baileyana's winemaker in 1999. Niven heads marketing for the family company; Blaney manages operations for Baileyana and Tangent.

The first vintage, 2005, which includes a Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Albariño, Pinot Blanc and a blend called Ecclestone, was released in May. It will take time to prove that Old World grapes rarely seen outside of their native regions will show off their unique

characteristics when planted in the Golden State.

It's a particularly daring experiment for this winemaking family. The idea of producing a portfolio of white wines that doesn't include Chardonnay was "a bolt in the night" for Niven, an idea so startling he sat upright in bed when it hit him just three years ago. Chardonnay has been a key element in the Baileyana portfolio as well as in the Edna Valley Vineyard wines the Niven family produces in partnership with Diageo Chateau & Estates. "Chardonnay pays the bills here," Niven says.

Exotic grapes are not the only defining feature of the Tangent line. Roguenant says that compared with what has become standard for California whites, all the Tangent wines have lower alcohol levels, higher acidity, greater minerality and more varietal specificity. That means food-friendly wines that have distinct flavor profiles.

With cold ocean breezes and thick morning fog that burns off to allow bright afternoon sun, Edna Valley has the perfect microclimate for such wines, he says. It is one of the coolest viticultural areas in the world. Fruit here ripens fully without the high sugar content that results in high alcohol levels, retaining its natural acidity.

Easy-drinking wines

Other characteristics of the Tangent line make up a check list of qualities wine lovers look for in easy-drinking wines: They're not aged in oak, they have screw-cap closures and are priced at less than \$20 a bottle.

Yet the wine press isn't condescending. England's Decanter magazine names Tangent a "winery to watch" in its August 2007 issue, calling the wines "electrifying" and "more racy than rich." Wine Enthusiast magazine named Tangent's Pinot Gris an editor's choice and gave that wine as well as Tangent's Albariño 90 points on its 100-point critical scale.

"I love that they are focusing on offbeat white wines," says Wine Enthusiast's California wine expert Steve Heimoff. "It is a breath of fresh air. We desperately need dry white wine alternatives in California. Everyone believes they have to make Chardonnay, even when that means growing the grapes in the wrong place and producing uninteresting wine."

Coastal San Luis Obispo County is the perfect place for such an experiment. "You get beautiful acidity there. At the same time you get ripe fruit. That's the Holy Grail for great white wines," Heimoff says. "These are not simple wines. They are complex, food-worthy wines of great elegance."

Niven's family has been growing grapes in Edna Valley for 35 years and started making wine there in 1977. Under the Edna Valley Vineyards label, a partnership originally with Chandon that was transferred to Diageo Chateau & Estates when that company bought Chandon, the family produces 300,000 cases of wine a year, 250,000 cases of which are Chardonnay. The family's proprietary Baileyana Wines, launched in 1991, releases 10,000 cases of Chardonnay a year, roughly twice as much wine as it makes of either Pinot Noir or Syrah.

On the cutting edge

The Niven family's success with the Baileyana wines, Heimoff says, is the reason he isn't surprised that it's on the cutting edge with Tangent. "They've been on the forefront of viticulture and enology in this region at their Paragon Vineyard. They are always going to exceed expectations."

The 1,220-acre Paragon Vineyard offered Niven and Blaney plenty of room to experiment. They started with an empty 100-acre corner that had been a less than stellar Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard and 50 acres of Sauvignon Blanc their grandfather planted 34 years ago.

It's rare to find Sauvignon Blanc vines that old in California. These vines produce fruit that is richer than most New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc but with higher acidity and the kind of fresh fruit flavors that often are missing from California Sauvignon Blanc, Niven says. The wine was an orphan, however, at Baileyana. Until Tangent was launched, the wine was being blended away or sold off.

A 30-acre planting of Pinot Gris was an early addition to the portfolio, for Roguenant's Alsatian-style Pinot Gris; it was followed by 16 acres of Viognier.

The Grüner Veltliner, Grenache Blanc and Riesling plantings are still too young to produce varietal wines. But a blend called Ecclestone -- Pinot Gris, Viognier, Riesling and a splash of Orange Muscat with a crowd-pleasing touch of residual sugar -- has been released.

The thought of including Albariño in the lineup occurred to Niven only after he discovered a 5 1/2 -acre plot of the grape in a neighboring vineyard. The owners sold him a few tons of fruit in 2005. "When we got our hands on the fruit, we knew we had something special. The moment it was done fermenting was a light-bulb moment," he says.

Niven reasons that Pismo Beach must have a lot in common with the cold, damp coast of northwestern Spain. The wines showed the tangerine aromas and the telltale taste of sea salt with bracing acidity that is typical of Spanish Albariño. "Before we even bottled it, we were on the Albariño train," Niven says.

But neither he nor his cousin had a clue as to where to plant their own. And Roguenant didn't know how to make the wine. "I've never seen the grapes grown anywhere but in Edna Valley," Roguenant says. "We've been growing it the same way we grow Chardonnay, fermenting it the same way."

Though the results have been good, Roguenant realized he needed to learn more. So he, Niven and Blaney left July 16 for a crash course in Albariño winemaking among Spain's Galician coastal vineyards in Rías Baixas.

"I can't wait to look at the soils in Galicia to see what they have," Roguenant says, noting that he has planted Tangent's Albariño vines in the same heavy clay soils where he's

planted the Grüner Veltliner. In that case, however, he'd been to the grape's native Wachau region in Austria and knew the soils were similar.

It's risky, flying blind like this, Roguenant says, "but it's fun. It's the beauty of being a winemaker in California: The discovery. In France, you do everything to maintain what has been done before. That's not true here."

Particularly these days, he says. Americans are increasingly open to new wines and new ideas about Old World wines. "People are interested. They want to know about the whole spice rack of wines," he says.

For winemakers whose careers in white wines have been all about Chardonnay, it's a welcome new beginning.

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