



## Mike Dunne on Wine

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DUNNE ON WINE

# Light-handed approach paying off for Sacramento winemaker Craig Haarmeyer

BY MIKE DUNNE

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Educated as an artist, Craig Haarmeyer has been a painter and a sculptor. Now he's a winemaker.

In contrast to many of his brothers and sisters in the trade, however, he doesn't talk as if making wine were an art.

For Haarmeyer, a third-generation Sacramentan, making wine is more about place, history and naturalness. The less he intervenes between grape and glass, the better.

"Wine is an agricultural product that wants to do its own thing, and we should let it," he says while preparing to pull samples from barrels in the dark, chilly and rustic quarters he leases in West Sacramento for his Haarmeyer Wine Cellars.

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That space represents one aspect of Haarmeyer's interest in history and place. It is the former home of Harbor Winery, founded in 1972 by Charles Myers, a Sacramento City College English teacher who played a pivotal role in the revival of zinfandel in the Sierra foothills. Myers died in 2015.

Haarmeyer is a member in good standing of a small and loose community of winemakers whose approach to winemaking is more light handed than it customarily has been in recent decades.

He favors grapes from organically and sustainably farmed vineyards. To seize the zesty acidity he wants in his wines he generally harvests grapes when they aren't as ripe as winemakers often want them, but when their acids are higher. "This is such a warm region we have no trouble getting fruit to ripen. To make more unusual wines you have to fight that ripeness," Haarmeyer says. "I typically pick early, when most people are just starting to sample grapes (to determine ripeness)."

In the cellar, he stomps those grapes with his feet, not only because it is personal and traditional but because the technique enhances a wine's complexity and better captures its place of origin, or terroir, he feels.

To ferment the juice he uses only natural yeasts. He eschews fining and filtering. And by and large he ages his wines in neutral oak puncheons so they don't pick up as much essence of wood as if they were aged in smaller oak barrels. "We add nothing but elbow grease," Haarmeyer says.

But what most distinguishes Haarmeyer is his devotion to both the underappreciated green grape chenin blanc and the underappreciated Sacramento area, which by his reckoning includes the Sierra foothills, the Delta and Lodi, for his fruit.

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With any given harvest he is apt to make six chenin blancs, each from a different area, such as Aparicio Vineyards east of Sutter Creek and Sutter Ranch Vineyard at Clarksburg.

Why his passion for chenin blanc, a grape and a wine not much taken seriously beyond South Africa and France's Loire Valley?

"I just like to drink chenin blanc," Haarmeyer says. But there's more to it than that, he is quick to add. "It's a three-dimensional grape – you get fruit, great acidity and great texture, and you can immediately get other notes, like wet wool and lanolin. It's not so fruity like sauvignon blanc, and it isn't as manipulable as chardonnay."

But six a vintage? "I want to see how the terroir of each vineyard is expressed, how the site changes chenin blanc's natural characteristics, which always shine through."

Thus, his unreleased 2017 chenin blanc called "Cresci," the original name of a vineyard near Rancho Seco, now Palmero Family Vineyard, is all fresh and animated fruit from the apple family, underscored with veins of minerality. (The wine is to be released this fall.)

By comparison, his newly released, equally fruity 2016 chenin blanc called "Iris" is more floral and persevering. ("Iris" is named for Iris Aparicio, whose husband, Joe, at her request some 40 years ago planted a small plot of chenin blanc at their largely zinfandel vineyard just outside of Sutter Creek.)

His most offbeat take on chenin blanc is his direct yet playful St. Rey Petillant Naturel, the clean and refreshing fruitiness of which gets a boost from carbonation generated during the wine's primary fermentation and then retained in the bottle.

Chenin blanc isn't the only relatively obscure white wine with which Haarmeyer likes to work. Not much riesling is cultivated in California these days, but Haarmeyer makes an unusually aromatic, layered and edgy interpretation with grapes from the dry-farmed, low-yielding Wirz Vineyard along the east side of the Gavilan range in San Benito County's Cienega Valley. It is believed to be the second-oldest stand of riesling in California, dating to 1952.

When it comes to red wines, Haarmeyer is conflicted. He prefers his reds to be leaner, spikier and more delicate than the muscular and aggressive style in vogue today. Nevertheless, the clarity and mettle of the reds he poured during my visit should convince even partisans of the more robust style that there's another enticing side to the red-wine story.

One was his fresh, biting and spicy newly released 2017 zinfandel made with grapes from the old Stevenot estate at Murphys in Calaveras County, now owned by another vintner in the vanguard of alternative winemaking, Matthew Rorick (Forlorn Hope Wines). Despite its light color and angular build, the zinfandel declares itself an all-star take on the varietal for its pulsating berry fruit.

Another was his sinewy yet lingering newly released 2016 syrah from Fields Family Vineyard in Lodi's Mokelumne River sub-appellation, which despite its slim profile and low alcohol (just less than 13 percent) commandeers the varietal's telltale floral, spicy and berry/cherry aspects.

Still, Haarmeyer isn't sure whether he will continue to make red wines or stick to his first love, whites. "I'm still trying to figure out red wine in California. I'm not sure if I'm on to something with these light red wines."

And as much as he is pleased by his red wines, he questions whether the market is ready for his more refined style. Regardless, despite his affection for offbeat varietals, unorthodox techniques and small production, Haarmeyer has had little trouble developing a demand for his releases in his principal markets - San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Sacramento. He may make as few as 12 cases of any one wine, and rarely more than 100; his retail wine prices generally range from \$20 to \$42.

His unconventional approach to the wine trade extends to his labels, but that's where he also allows his artistic background and inclination to flourish. His labels bear most prominently the name of vineyard, appellation or a proprietary term such as "Iris" or "Cresci." "Haarmeyer" isn't easy to spot, tucked off to the side or back.

For each label he gets out his calligraphy pen and writes the name he wants for the wine in a kind of Old English or gothic font, a tip to his German heritage. "I write each name three times, then take the best version to use for the label," Haarmeyer says. An old art-school buddy, Sacramento artist Tim Davis, then finishes designing each label.

Though he grew up in Sacramento, close to wine regions, Haarmeyer came to the trade slowly and tentatively. His great-grandfather was a Sacramento saddlemaker, his grandfather a plumber. Decades ago, his visionary father saw potential in rundown Old Sacramento and began to restore its rickety buildings. "When he had trouble finding a tenant he created one," Haarmeyer recalls. Often, it would be a restaurant, sometimes run by his mother - Buffalo Bob's Ice Cream Saloon, The California Cracker Company, Delta King, Il Papavero. They provided Haarmeyer with work as a high-school student.

Afterwards, he attended the San Francisco Art Institute, and discovered that making beer in his apartment was easier, more practical and less intimidating than trying to make wine.

His introduction to winemaking began in 1989, when he returned home to attend grad school at Sac State. He, other students and faculty members gathered Friday nights at the home studio of Sac State professor and sculptor Gerald Walburg (Indo Arch), a home winemaker, to talk art, politics...and wine. That got him to thinking of making wine, but he still was intimidated by the science, timing, tools and so forth that the craft entails.

Then he met Charles Myers and began to help him at Harbor Winery. "There was no climate control, he was using open fermenters, this place was so rustic," says Haarmeyer, gesturing around the quarters he now occupies. "Why was I intimidated?" he recalls asking himself.

After Myers quit making wine, Haarmeyer teamed up with an old elementary-school pal, Joe Genshlea, to get Revolution Wines rolling in midtown Sacramento in 2007. In 2009, Haarmeyer became Revolution's winemaker, a position he held until about two years ago when he left to move into the old Harbor site with his own initial brand, St. Rey, which he had created in 2008.

Though largely untrained formally as a winemaker, and operating on a thin budget - he also works four days a week as a wine clerk at Corti Brothers - Haarmeyer is convinced that he and his wines are getting consumers to "think not just about terroir-driven wines but to see that the Sacramento region can produce some good wines."

"We shouldn't think of Sacramento as 'Sacratomato' anymore. I think the tomato has been surpassed by the wine grape as the county's number-one crop," adds Haarmeyer. (True, according to the 2016 Sacramento County Annual Crop and Livestock Report, which has wine grapes as the county's top crop with a value of \$184.2 million; processing tomatoes are way down the list with a value of \$13 million in 2016).

*Wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne's selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. He can be reached at [dmichaeldunne@gmail.com](mailto:dmichaeldunne@gmail.com).*

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A lineup of wines by Haarmeyer Wine Cellars in West Sacramento. Mike Dunne

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