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Hopland

Discovering one of California wine country's shiniest jewels.

By Francis Fecteau

The California wine country's siren song rises for me each time I visit.

There is much about it to love, and each of its appellations holds a unique charm. Much as I revel in Napa's opulence and Sonoma's gentility, I must confess that, of late, the town of Hopland in the Mendocino appellation has staked out a uniquely affectionate bit of acreage in my little wine-broker's black heart.

There are no multimillion-dollar tasting rooms in the town of Hopland (Mendocino's agricultural heart), no four-star restaurants (although I must confess a weakness for the buffalo chili at the Bluebird Café) and no glitzy grocers with overpriced goat cheese.

On the other hand, you can get a good steak, cut to order, from the Hopland Superette, and if there is a better, friendlier wine shop/tasting room in California than the inimitable Bernadette Byrne's "Sip," I have yet to find it. Sip is a treasure trove of small production Mendocino producers, all of whom Bernadette seems to have known since the beginning of geologic time. It doesn't hurt that Hopland is home to some of California's most innovative winemakers and farmers.

The town of Hopland lies about 20 minutes north of Healdsburg. And, as you head north, the land rises, the road twists and winds, and the landscape takes on a more varied topography. This means that microclimates—highly localized atmospheric variations that can sometimes have a dramatic effect on vineyards—are everywhere, contributing to a stunning range of grape variety and expressiveness. It is no accident that Mendocino is also home to some of California's most profound bottlings of Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah. For fans of varieties such as Petite Syrah, Zinfandel and Viognier, these flavors form the backbone for some stunning value-driven blends. We may go to Napa for Cabernet, to Sonoma for Pinot Noir, but Mendocino is a hub for variety that thrives in the hands of its sometimes odd, quirky, gentlemen-hippie-farmers.

Clean farming makes for great fruit, which helps make better wine—plain and simple. And nowhere in California is this more apparent than in Mendocino, a veritable paragon of clean-farming virtue. Generally, there are three schools of farming thought to consider: Sustainable farming, which considers day-to-day farming decisions in terms of the least amount of inputs; organic farming, which eschews the use of any artificial fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or fungicides; and, finally, biodynamic farming, which embraces a "super-organic" approach that incorporates organic farming approaches in conjunction with the lunar cycle. It's not as complicated as it sounds, as Will Bucklin (owner of Sonoma's historic Old Hill Ranch Vineyard and a top-flight winemaker) put it to me, "The idea is that you don't have more acres than you have animals to crap on [them]."

What rises from great soil is great fruit. And what happens when you hand a great winemaker great fruit? Said winemaker wants the fruit to show its proverbial Sunday best. And in Mendocino, home to some of California's most historic old patches of Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah and Zinfandel, this translates to winemakers finding it less necessary to resort to acid corrections or additions of concentrate to add heft and sweetness to wines (in hopes of higher press scores).

Hopland offers a simpler look at California wine country. If it isn't the vineyards noisy with life or the dazzling clarity of the night sky or the owners or winemakers pouring you a taste at the winery, it's hard not to feel that affection for Hopland grow. And the best part? Many of the Hopland/Mendocino producers now listed in Utah qualify for Utah's progressive Small Winery Exemption. As always, supporting the little guy just tastes better.

Francis Fecteau is owner of Libation, a wine brokerage.



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