

ARTISTS



TAPAS

TAPAS means more than delicious Spanish food—it also stands for Tempranillo.

by Richard Paul Hinkle

There have been way too many times over the years when the American wine business has been content to be staid, stuffy and serious beyond comprehension. To the point of becoming arrogant and pretentious. It wasn't the best way to draw in new consumers and, to be blunt, sell wine.

Fortunately, the growing contingent of folks who grow and produce the silky Spanish varietal Tempranillo (and its other Iberian counterparts) will have none of that nonsense. Several producers of these sparsely planted Spanish and Portuguese varieties have banded together to form a promotional organization called TAPAS:

Tempranillo Advocates Producers and Amigos Society.

They're as playful as their wines are accessible, and that's a very good combination when it comes to pushing *el vino*.

There are more than 80 members of the society, of which a dozen are vineyards and 58 are wineries (the website, www.tapasociety.org, only lists 60 at the moment—that's how fast things are developing).

There's also the option to join as a consumer supporter of the Iberian varieties, in which case you'd become a member of the Sancho Panza Society (which makes up the remaining membership tally). Surely you recall Don Quixote's famous partner (who uttered the delicious line in the musical, "Man of La Mancha": "Whether the stone hits the pitcher, or the pitcher hits the stone...it's going to be bad for the pitcher.")?

"The thing I like about this group is its spirit of cooperation," says TAPAS Executive Director Heidi Stine, a Phoenix-based consultant who has a particular love of wine. "They're all true innovators who take risks and work together to try new things and bring new ideas to the forefront of the industry. It's exciting."

Tempranillo wines from several Northern California wineries
[Duncan Garrett Photography]



Me llamo Tempranillo

Tempranillo—the sixth most widely planted variety on the third rock—is pretty much where this thing started. In Spain, Tempranillo is at the core of most of the great Rioja wines, as well as those from Ribera del Duero. Here in California, it often yields a wine that is, texturally, somewhere between Pinot Noir and Syrah. “We have a couple of acres that we planted on an isolated knoll here in Carneros in 1998,” says physician/winegrower Tony Truchard. “It’s a real challenge. The vine grows quite vigorously, and you really have to tone it down—restrict it, tame it—and cut the crop levels down by thinning. Heck, the berries look like table grapes; they’re the size of your thumb. But it sure makes wines that are soft, silky and smooth.”

“Everybody was kind of lonely, each one of us out there thinking that he or she was the only one attempting to make this lovely wine.”

—Earl Jones, TAPAS

The prime mover for TAPAS was Earl Jones (it’s almost impossible not to slip a “James” in front of that name), the proprietor of Abacela Winery in Oregon’s Umpqua Valley (outside of Roseburg). In 2004, he was in Sacramento at a winegrower meeting (now called the Unified Symposium), and called an informal gathering of all those he could find who were producing Tempranillo. “I found about 45 interested people, and we crammed ourselves into the largest meeting room I could afford,” he says in a lilting, easy drawl that sounds Southern. (It isn’t. He’s a Michigander, but his wife Hilda is from the South, and so....) TAPAS was officially founded in January 2006, with eight members. A year later, that number was 26 and climbing fast.

“Everybody was kind of lonely, each one of us out there thinking that he or she was the only one attempting to make this lovely wine. I was a physician, had done medical research for 30 years and had become disillusioned with our medical system. I’d traveled a good deal, had tasted wines all over the world, and had become quite enamored of the red wines from Rioja and Ribera del Duero. While at the UC Medical Center in San Francisco, I went up to Napa Valley, but got the feeling it was really too warm a climate for Tempranillo.

“The Spanish climates where the variety does well are rather cool, which allows for natural acid retention. This, of course, led me to Oregon, where we planted our first vines in 1995. We made the first commercial Tempranillo in the Pacific Northwest

in 1997—400 cases—and it was pretty good. But the next vintage was much softer, and that wine won double gold and first place at the San Francisco International Wine Competition. That was our validation, beating out wines from all over the world.”

North Bay Tempranillo trendsetters

The outfit is kind of spread out, but there are a couple of local producers. Clos Du Bois, in fact, marketed its first Alexander Valley Tempranillo with the 1996 vintage, and my notes of subsequent vintages include the line “cherry express.” Says winemaker Erik Olsen, who actually grew up in Davis (and, yes, studied enology at UC Davis, where his dad taught design), “We



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do aim to make the fruit approachable and the tannins soft, but Tempranillo here in Alexander Valley can get crazy with the tannin if you don't work hard to manage it. We actually use Cabernet Sauvignon in the blend to soften Tempranillo's tannin. The fruit has big clusters and big berries, but the tannins are surprisingly firm."

In nearby Lake County, Six Sigma Ranch and Winery owner Kaj Ahlmann has a self-professed love affair with Spain and its wines, hence his planting of Tempranillo. "We were over in Spain this last summer," says winemaker Matt Hughes (Chicago-born, White Sox fan). "We felt like we were right at home in Ribera del Duero—the climate, the terrain and the plant life was so similar to our place. So it's no surprise Tempranillo absolutely thrives here. With most varieties, you have a two- or three-day window of maturity in which to pick the fruit, but with Tempranillo here, you have two, maybe three weeks to bring it in. You're right to say its texture is soft and alluring like Pinot Noir. It might not have the intensity of Cabernet, but it sure has its complexity."

Penelope Coral Gadd-Coster is winemaker/proprietor of Tempranillo-only Coral Mustang Wines, which were once made in Healdsburg but now in Hopland. "After having made all the usual suspects," she says with a chuckle, "Cab, Pinot, Chard, Zin and the like—I decided I wanted to do something different. But I wanted something that was food friendly. I love to cook, and many red wines I've made weren't. I had the chance to travel to Spain, fell in love with the wines and the food and decided to look into the possibility of making Tempranillo in California. After much research, I discovered it should grow well here. The search for mature grapes was a challenge at first. I went all over the state and found a vineyard in Paso Robles that Justin Winery was sourcing for Tempranillo and decided that was where I'd start.

In the meantime, I planted a small vineyard in Alexander Valley. And I recently have been working with a new vineyard in the Russian River area. I like playing with different locations to see how the fruit and the wines differ.

"Tempranillo is interesting, because it can be a big wine, but the tannins tend to be soft from the beginning. There's an inherent smoky quality that makes an interesting taste and aroma profile with minimal oak. It's a fun challenge as a winemaker; it behaves very much like Pinot Noir in the cellar—it's always keeping you guessing!" Coral Mustang shares a tasting room (In Vino Veritas, Healdsburg) with three other wineries.

Wine should be fun

Livermore's Lanny Replogle—Fenestra Winery—is a big supporter of TAPAS. "I was making a Port in the California style," says the retired chemistry professor. "You know: Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Syrah. But I wanted to use to the Portuguese varieties, which we found in Ron Silva's vineyard over in Gault [near Lodi]. Once I decided to try some table wines as well, I was hooked. They make wines that are delightfully *different*. They're very food-friendly, very soft and very approachable. Once we get visitors to taste them, they're hooked too."

Current TAPAS president Jeff Stai, proprietor of Twisted Oak Winery in Calaveras County (the Sierra foothills), has a delightfully twisted sense of humor. He takes this whole Spanish thing *unseriously*, to the point where he has a bright red "Hello" name tag on his website, which reads: "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." (For those without children of a certain age, that's a line—including the "hello"—from the hilarious film "The Princess Bride." You'll have to view it to gain the fullest comprehension.)

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The advertisement features a black background with a still life arrangement of wine bottles, tulips, and fruit. On the left, a wine glass is partially filled with red wine. In the center, there are four wine bottles: one with a red label and a star logo, one with a green label and a stylized face, one with a white label and a circular logo, and one with a white label and a crest. To the right of the bottles is a vase of white tulips. In the foreground, there are two pears and a slice of bread on a dark plate.

"[These] wines are delightfully different. They're very food-friendly, very soft and very approachable."

—Lanny Replogle,
Fenestra Winery

Stai started out life as a Cal Poly ("the other Cal Poly, in Pomona") engineer who worked on computer data storage in Southern California. "The first computer disk drive I worked on had 10 megabytes," he says in mock wonder. "When I decided I didn't want to do that anymore, we got out of Dodge. We wanted a smaller community for our children, and I had an inkling that wine would be a fulfilling career change.

"When I was in college, we'd do the wine touring thing in the Santa Ynez Valley and San Luis Obispo, and I can still remember the wine that really set me off. At a winemaker dinner in San Jose, I was served a Gewurztraminer that was floral and fruity and peppery, and I thought, if a grape can do this, well, that's pretty cool."

He founded Twisted Oak—it's about halfway between Murphys and Angel's Camp—with the 2002 vintage, and presently does about 5,000 cases a year of the Mediterranean varieties, "the Rhones and the Iberians. It's the right climate, and I've always been a big fan of what Stevenot Winery has done up here. When we started TAPAS, we were playing off of the successes of ZAP and the Rhone Rangers. We had a big tasting at COPIA and then at Fort Mason in San Francisco. We're looking to do that again in June 2010, and hoping to organize something of an educational retreat for members so we can talk in-depth about the production side of Iberian wines.

"In the meantime, keep tasting them, folks. They're really interesting." ■

Hinkle is the author of nine wine books. His latest, just released, is called Clos Pegase: The Architecture of Wine. Check out his other work at www.RichardPaulHinkle.com.

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