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Mendocino vintners design signature wine

By Laurie Daniel
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Mendocino County has been a wine-growing region in search of an identity.

The cool, coastal Anderson Valley has built a reputation for pinot noir and aromatic whites like riesling and gewürztraminer. But the county also has a large, warmer inland section stretching through Hopland and Ukiah and encompassing the smaller appellations of Redwood Valley, Potter Valley and McDowell Valley. Grapes grown in this warmer area range from chardonnay to syrah, and there are some wonderful old zinfandel and petite sirah vines. But the area has never really had a signature wine.

“We've gotten a little tired of just being that ‘other’ county,” says Eaglepoint Ranch winemaker Casey Hartlip. “We have fruit and vineyards and people that have just as much talent and quality as other north coast growing regions.”

“When they think of Mendocino, they think of how we grow such great pot,” he says with a laugh.

So a group of longtime vintners got together with the aim of creating a signature type of wine for the area. The result is a project called Coro Mendocino. (Coro means chorus in Spanish and Italian, a nod to two heritages that have been instrumental in Mendocino County viticulture.)

Each participating winemaker must adhere to a set of rules on the Coro blend. All grapes must be from Mendocino County, and zinfandel must be the dominant component, accounting for 40 to 70 percent of the blend. Secondary grapes can include syrah, petite sirah, carignane, sangiovese, grenache, dolcetto, charbono, barbera and primitivo (which is genetically identical to zin). Tiny amounts of some other grapes are also allowed. Within those guidelines, each winemaker is free to express his or her own vision, although any wine to be released under the Coro label must be approved by a panel of five participating winemakers.

“This panel is not the style police,” Hartlip says. “We want the wine to taste like its region, to not be out of balance.” A few wines, he says, have been sent back to the winemaker for more work but were ultimately accepted. The first Coro vintage was 2001; for 2002, the currently available vintage, there are 10 Coro wines, each selling for \$35.

Some common threads are evident in the wines, largely because of zin's dominance in the blend. But there are vast stylistic differences. Hartlip

acknowledges that the group is still wrestling with exactly what Coro should be. "The very first year or two this thing came out, we had no idea what the model was," he says. But he thinks the wines are getting better each year as winemakers tweak their blends.

Among the **2002 Coros**, **Hartlip's Eaglepoint Ranch** is one of the stars. The wine, which is mostly zin and syrah, is dark, ripe and dramatic, with black raspberry fruit and nice spice. I also loved the **2002 McDowell Valley Vineyards** version, which is also mostly zin and syrah; it's still very tight but displays lovely ripe raspberry flavors and some hefty tannins.

The 2002 from **Golden Vineyards** is a little more accessible, with bright, brambly berry flavors, medium weight and nice balance. Its maker, Dennis Patton, also made the Coro bottling from **Fetzer**, a robust wine that's more tannic and higher in alcohol than the Golden.

Other 2002 participants are **Parducci Wine Estate**, **Pacific Star Winery**, **Graziano Family Wines**, **Brutocao Cellars** and **Dunnewood Vineyards**. The Parducci and Pacific Star are at the lighter, more elegant end of the spectrum, while the others are riper, with some sweetness to the fruit.

A few of the Coro wines are available in some stores, but the best way to buy them is directly from the participating wineries or online at **www.**

coromendocino.com.

MORE MENDOCINO: The winners of the annual Mendocino County Fair commercial wine competition are often on the quirky side, reflecting the eclectic mix of wines produced in the county. That was especially true this year. The **2004 Navarro Vineyards Muscat Blanc (\$16)** was judged to be the best white wine; best red was the **2003 Oracle Oaks Valdiguie (\$20)**.

Muscat is most often made into a sweet wine, but the Navarro version is dry. It's intense, perfumey and dramatic, with surprising weight. This stunning wine won't be released until next year, although the winery will be selling it this weekend to coincide with the county fair. Call (800) 537-9463.

Valdiguie is a grape variety that used to be known as Napa gamay or gamay Beaujolais. It typically produces a wine that's light and fruity. The version from Oracle Oaks is a lot more intense than most, with plenty of pretty cherry fruit. Call (707) 485-5656.

AND MORE: I was intrigued several months ago to receive an e-mail from **Chiarito Vineyard** in Ukiah announcing the upcoming release of wines made from negroamaro and nero d'avola, two Italian grape varieties. Negroamaro is closely associated with Puglia, the "heel" of the Italian "boot." Nero d'avola is the most important red grape in Sicily. Neither is a varietal wine I've seen before in California.

Winemaker John Chiarito is achieving some interesting results with both. The **2003 negroamaro (\$30)** has a lighter color and more elegant profile than the Italian versions, which tend to be a little rustic and

chewy, although the Chiarito weighs in at a hefty 15.3 percent alcohol. The wine is dominated by ripe berry flavors, accented by notes of vanilla and bittersweet chocolate. The **2003 nero d'avola (\$38)** is also a lovely wine, with lively, juicy cherry flavors, hints of fennel and tar, medium tannins and a long finish. Both wines must be purchased directly from the winery. The nero d'avola, in particular, is in very limited supply. Call (707) 462-7146.

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