

## Dining Out

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### THE POUR

## Gratification, but Not the Instant Kind

By ERIC ASIMOV

**T**HE California wine industry sometimes seems to exist in two parallel universes. In one, the air is heavy with a smug sense of self-congratulation. Billionaires buy pieces of Napa Valley, charge \$150 a bottle for the first vintage and want you to understand, by the way, that they do it all for charity. Earnest ideologues natter on about the terror in their 16 cuvées of pinot noir, but the wines all taste the same. Hot young consultants notch more 95-point wines than Paris Hilton has boyfriends. It's the gospel written by publicists.

The other universe is a more modest one, where a respect for the past tempers the can-do certainty. It's a world where you realize that for all the accumulated knowledge of viticulture, winemaking and marketing, some forces are simply beyond control; where after 50 harvests or more it begins to dawn on you that, paradoxically, the less you think you know the more you begin to understand.

It's this sense of accumulated wisdom that characterizes many of California's visionary wineries like Ridge Vineyards and Mount Eden Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, the Calera Wine Company on Mount Harlan, Stony Hill Vineyard in the Napa Valley and Hanzell Vineyards here, on a winding dirt road that gently rises into the hills overlooking the city of Sonoma.

Though respected, Hanzell is rarely mentioned these days when people speak of California's greatest wines. Yet year after year, Hanzell's chardonnays have stood with California's best.

And while California wines are frequently condemned as fruit bombs that have little sense of place and will not age, Hanzell, approaching its 50th vintage, has produced wines of subtlety and power that age beautifully and, above all, speak clearly of the vineyards that crown this hill on the southern end of the Mayacamas ridge.

On a bright, cool August morning, I sat down at the winery to taste 10 older vintages of chardonnay and 8 of pinot noir with Bob Sessions, who was Hanzell's winemaker for 30 years, before he retired in 2002; Jean Arnold Sessions, the president; Michael Terrien, the general manager and current winemaker; and Alexander de Brye, the owner.

What makes these wines so distinctive? "Ageability is what we feel is the hallmark,"



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

At Hanzell Vineyards in Sonoma, California, from left: Michael Terrien, the winery's current winemaker; Bob Sessions, its former winemaker, who retired in 2002; Jean Arnold Sessions, its president; and Alexander de Brye, the winery's owner.

Ms. Arnold Sessions said. "You just can't have a wine that is ready to drink now but will age for 20 years." Mr. Terrien added, "Burgundy is about potential, while most California wines are about delivering the potential right away." Indeed, young Hanzell chardonnays are clenched and coiled, but with, say, a decade, they start to open up.

A 1995, though still tightly wound, was beginning to exhibit a rich, tangy texture, while a 1991 was in its prime, full of citrus, apple, herbal and mineral aromas and flavors. A 1990 was rich and deep, more open than a 1986, which, though it showed floral and nutlike aromas, might have benefited from decanting.

A 1973, Mr. Sessions's first vintage at Hanzell, was vibrant with anise, apple and pineapple aromas, while a 1965 had aromas of wet earth, mushrooms and hazelnuts and continued to improve in the glass for a full two hours.

Each wine had a lively energy and freshness that kept me going back to the glass for more, and showed distinct mineral

aromas and flavors, qualities often hard to detect in California wines.

"Minerality is often a characteristic of wines made with restraint," Mr. Terrien said. "I think a lot of minerality is covered up in wines by oak and other things."

While Hanzell is known more for its chardonnays than its pinot noirs, the pinots, too, are compelling for their unusual tannic power and the intense flavors that eventually evolve. Both a 1998 and a 1993 seemed too young, with piercing fruit aromas that were kicking like newborn foals.

But a 1981 had beautiful raspberry, strawberry, licorice and mineral aromas that were intense yet light, while a pale ruby 1974 was complex and harmonious. These pinot noirs demand patience to say the least.

Through his 30 years as winemaker, Mr. Sessions was determined to maintain Hanzell's stylistic legacy though the wine-making world around him was changing. Now Mr. Terrien has taken on the challenge, even as Hanzell's own world has changed.

In 2003 Hanzell's 2000 chardonnay and 1999 pinot noir were found to be tainted with

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2,4,6-trichloroanisole, the compound that causes musty aromas and flavors in corked wines. The taint was traced to its old cellar, and the wines were taken off the market. The winery was then in the process of building a new facility and moved its operations to the new cellar later that year.

But while the equipment has changed the Hanzell winemaking has remained

steadfast. Years back, Hanzell was one of the bigger California wines, with alcohol levels hovering above 14 percent. It's still in the range of 14 to 15 percent, even as many top California wines now surpass it.

Walking through the 42 acres of vineyards, where the gorgeous panorama can stretch all the way to the Golden Gate on a clear day, it's easy to see why James D. Zellerbach, an industrialist and later an American ambassador to Italy, chose this site back in 1953 to plant six acres of pinot noir and chardonnay.

Mr. Zellerbach was not without ambition. California then had less than 100 acres of chardonnay and even less of pinot noir. But

he envisioned his winery, which he named Hanzell Vineyards after his wife, Hana, to be a piece of Burgundy in the Sonoma Valley. He even modeled the facade of his winery on an ancient structure at the Clos de Vougeot, the historic Burgundian vineyard.

With an innovative winemaker, Brad Webb, Hanzell helped to revolutionize wine-making in the late 1950's. It was the first winery to use stainless-steel temperature-controlled tanks for fermentation. Such tanks are now used all over the world. Hanzell also is credited with introducing French oak barrels to California, though only a third of the oak barrels it uses each year are new.

"We prefer a gentle oak pedestal rather than a slathering-on of flavor," Mr. Terrien said.

Mr. Zellerbach died in 1963, and the estate was sold to Douglas and Mary Day in 1965, then to Barbara and Jacques de Brye in 1975. Alexander de Brye, then a teenager, inherited the vineyard in 1991.

Perhaps in the face of change at the top, safeguarding the identity in the wines became that much more important. Or maybe it was simply a respect for tradition, an overused word that ought to be earned rather than seized.

"Now it's our legacy to protect," Mr. Terrien said.

SAMPLE

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