

Fall 2009

Say syrah, syrah: Savoring the rewards of patience, contemplation, and TLZ

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Recommended Citation

Plante, T. G. (2009). Say syrah, syrah: Savoring the rewards of patience, contemplation, and TLZ. *Santa Clara Magazine*, 51, 49.

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Say syrah, syrah

Savoring the rewards of patience, contemplation, and TLZ

THOMAS G. PLANTE

My family and I fondly say that we have the best syrah Menlo Park has to offer. (Although to our knowledge, it is the *only* syrah grown in Menlo Park.) While that doesn't put us in the league of prominent winemaking alumni and friends of Santa Clara—including Michael Mondavi '66, the Sebastianis, and Fess Parker—it is the result of a decade of growing grapes at our home on the Peninsula.

A decade ago we were able to purchase an adjacent property and plant about 100 vines of syrah. One of my good friends, Dave Gates, is the viticulturist at Ridge Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He analyzed the soil, made appropriate amendments, and chose vines that he felt would thrive in our microclimate. We planted syrah clones from the United States, France, and Australia. He tutored and advised me on caring for the vineyard, and I enrolled in several courses on viticulture. While my family and I care for the vineyard, Dave makes and bottles the wine at the winery.

Fruitful harvest: Zach Plante and the grapes of '08



We call our wine TLZ—for the three members of our Plante family: Tom, Lori (my wife), and Zach (my son, now 13). The label was designed by SCU students in a graphic design class. According to one friend who is a wine professional, our syrah is “medium-full body, nicely controlled, with soft tannins ... [with a] nice mélange of dark cherry, blackberry, tar, licorice, tea, black pepper, [and] baking spices.” In a word, yummy! One of our biggest thrills thus far was having our wine featured at a Santa Clara Trustees' dinner.

The vineyard is, for me, a place for prayer and contemplation. So often particular concerns, worries, and problems are either solved or don't seem so bad while working there. Though the work is more than one man can do alone, I joke with my wife and son that if they want to retain their initials on the wine label, they have to help me in the vineyard when needed—otherwise, the font on the label representing their contribution will get smaller and smaller.

The harvest is a truly communal effort, with friends and family helping, followed by a celebratory dinner party. Around the table are friends from diverse backgrounds—a bread delivery truck driver, a former astronaut, a few Silicon Valley CEOs and CFOs, a trained pastry chef, a few professional writers, too many psychologists, and my son's kindergarten teacher—all with a common passion for great food and wine.

We have learned a great deal while managing a small vineyard. Not only about growing wine grapes but how

fragile and miraculous the whole process can be. Birds, squirrels, skunks, and other troubles can destroy your hopes of a successful harvest. We worry about oak root fungus, which appears to have killed a few of our vines. Two years ago I battled pesky raccoons, who managed to eat several vines of grapes. And in 2005 we lost all of our grapes thanks to the wrong kinds of rain at the wrong time of year, which resulted in devastating mold and mildew.

Often I say that I'm glad that the vineyard is my hobby and not my livelihood. My family and I certainly have developed much more empathy for those who depend on growing food for their living. Our most recent harvest in October 2008 yielded 450 pounds of

grapes, translating into about 110 bottles of wine. That's plenty of wine to keep our family and friends busy but less than the 1,000 pounds of grapes and 240 bottles of wine we got from the 2007 harvest.

I am especially grateful that my son has grown up with our vineyard, to better appreciate where and how food grows—and to understand the challenges of successfully getting fruit to harvest. He enjoys it, is proud of the family vineyard, and joyfully shares it with

his friends and visitors. (He created the vineyard Web page.) After all of this vineyard work, though, he was rather disappointed with his first taste from our inaugural bottles in 2002. He was expecting something a bit sweeter, like Juicy Juice. Although he is only 13, he claims that he wants to come to Santa Clara for college and become a biologist. I certainly hope that his desire comes to fruition.

In addition to growing grapes for TLZ Wine, Thomas Plante is a professor of psychology at Santa Clara University and director of the Spirituality and Health Institute.



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WEB EXCLUSIVES

See more photos from the TLZ vineyard at santaclaramagazine.com.