



Andrew Hendry tuned in from Canada to his brother Mike's tasting of Hendry wines.

ANDREW HENDRY PHOTO

## Hendry: Wine tasting in the great indoors



JENNIFER DILLEY PHOTO

**TONY POER**

Just over the hill from Alston Park, out of sight of dog walkers and trail joggers, the Hendry family has tended vines for three generations.

Now, in the midst of a global pandemic, more people than ever are flocking to the popular Napa park to escape the pressures of shelter-in-place. In an oddly related turn of events, wine enthusiasts across the country are heading to their computers and smartphones to participate in virtual tastings of Napa Valley and other California wines.

It's an escape to the great indoors, and Hendry Ranch is part of the novel experiment.

As they contribute to a rapidly evolving definition of wine country hospitality,

**"Before we had the winery, and even when we built it, we didn't really plan for a lot of visitors. The whole wine tourism thing was not something we thought about."**

**Mike Hendry**

winemaker George Hendry and his nephew and grapegrower, Mike Hendry, find themselves in unfamiliar roles. For their staff at the historic Oak Knoll estate, promoting wine through a virtual format is becoming the new normal.

When the winery notified its club members and

Erick Uner participates in a virtual wine tasting with Megan Carter, wine educator and events manager at Hendry Ranch and Mike Hendry, grapegrower and co-owner of Hendry Ranch.

email list in late March that the "Hendry at Home Virtual Tasting Series" was around the corner — Friday afternoons at 3, complete with BYO wine and optional cheeseboards — it was a new marketing approach for the low-key ranch George Hendry converted to an estate winery nearly 20 years ago. Ironically, for his nephew, it was as much a step back in time as a technological leap forward.

"You know what's funny about this? I feel like this coronavirus thing has taken us back 50 years because it's so quiet here now. And this is the way it always used to be," the younger Hendry said on

the phone.

"Before we had the winery, and even when we built it, we didn't really plan for a lot of visitors. The whole wine tourism thing was not something we thought about," Hendry confessed while recapping the virtual tastings he and events manager Megan Carter have hosted for their online audience. "And like that room where we're doing the tasting, we didn't really even build tasting spaces into the winery. It was supposed to be offices. I feel like recently it's very quiet and very private — more like it used to be, you know, many

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**ON WINE**

## Ways to deconstruct Pinot Gris

A decade ago, Australia's greatest wine taster, James Halliday, told me a Pinot Gris joke: "They held a taste-off between Pinot Gris and Perrier (water), and Perrier won."

Halliday's jest was intended to illustrate how lacking in flavor this varietal wine can be and why it's OK to disparage most such wines.

It's true that Pinot Gris is a grape with some odd characteristics, but its failings, in relation other grapes, don't preclude it from making an interesting wine. Made well, Pinot Gris can be tasty. And great wine-makers using great grapes can make excellent PG.

Dozens of wineries, all of them using ordinary fruit, make Pinot Gris that are simple quaffing wines — nothing special at all. Such wines are popular with many people. Included are Pinot Grigios from Italy that are sold here in huge volumes and elicit about as much excitement as a wet dishrag.

Mysteriously enough, Pinot Gris' various shortcomings can actually make it a fascinating wine for those who are willing to try to understand it. Which isn't easy.

Over decades, I've thought a lot about this strange grape and tasted widely varying styles. And recently I began to dissect it in ways that lead me to like it better than in the past. Part of the reason is that I may finally have put it into perspective.

Both the good Pinot Gris and the bad start with the genetics of this peculiar grape variety, which is a bit of an enigma.

It's a member of the noble Pinot family of grapes, but the "gris" in its name is French for "gray," which is the color of the grape skins late in the season, after the grapes lose their early season green. So Pinot Gris may be viewed as a degenerate cousin of Pinot Noir with no ability to make anything even resembling a red wine, or a rosé.

The "white" wine it makes often has a tinge of copper or gray color from the phenolics (tannins) in the skins. So in a way, it makes a "white wine" that's neither white nor red and definitely isn't pink!

The grape's tannins (leucoanthocyanins) can leave the resulting wine susceptible to being bitter, similar how tannins work in most red wines. Pinot Gris' potential astringency poses a dilemma for winemakers. To mask bitterness, wine-makers use various techniques.

— Leave residual sugar in the wine to cover bitterness. This is more common in France's Alsace.

— Make it with higher alcohol, which can add a delicate

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**PLEASE THE PALATE**

## The Wonderful World of Weird Wines

When you look at your collection of wines at home, what is the "weirdest" wine you have?

When I say "weird," I am talking about a wine that would be considered unique because of the grape variety or blend,



**ALISON LEVINE**

the region it is from, the packaging or label, or the story behind it. At this past week's Virtual Wine Tasting with my wine friends around the country, this is what I challenged everyone to do. I asked them to pull out one of the more unique wines in their cellars and share with us.

What inspired me to this theme is that I have a number of interesting wines here at home that I have acquired over the years. Some have been picked up during travels, others have been left over from events I have hosted and some have



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Allison Levine invited colleagues to share their choices in a Weird Wines Happy Hour.

been gifts. One of these interesting wines that I have been holding on to is a Greek wine called

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**THE WINE EXCHANGE**

## Wines for the 'new normal'

Our lives changed dramatically last month when the Bay Area's stay-at-home order was issued, followed closely by Governor Newsom's statewide declaration. Suddenly, we were not only



**ALLEN BALIK**

isolated from our co-workers, but we were also unable to congregate with friends and family in celebrating the joys of spring and the kickoff to summer. Since then, we've been figuring out a creative "new normal" that still connects us. Our wonderful neighbors thought of an idea that brings us together and returns some sense of normalcy to the week. On late Sunday

afternoons, we gather at the end of our cul de sac with our own glasses in hand and, while maintaining strict social distancing, enjoy a bit of wine together while toasting the week past and the one ahead.

A welcome moment that gives us all a chance to break away from our isolation and greet the new week with friends. While no one can accurately predict when our more familiar social, work and family time will return, the calendar marches on and summer is approaching.

Whether continuing the new normal or looking ahead to once again enjoying a private dinner at home or a summertime get-together, there are numerous affordable and

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## Hendry

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years ago.”

“That room” referred to by Hendry is an office, now repurposed as an online studio set, within the barn-like winery his uncle had built in 2001. The construction followed George Hendry’s mid-1990s purchase of a neighboring property to expand the ranch his parents — Mike’s grandparents — acquired back in 1939.

After an early-1960s stint in the navy and electrical engineering degrees from UC Berkeley, Hendry spent a successful career designing particle accelerators for the Cyclotron Corporation. Having grown up on his parents’ ranch, he also had farming in his blood. “When he wasn’t designing cyclotrons,” the winery’s website notes, “George was usually working on the ranch.”

The inventor and astute businessman took note in the 1970s of changes in Napa Valley’s wine industry, particularly a rise in wine grape prices and the increasing popularity of Cabernet Sauvignon. Between 1973 and 1975 he reverted most of the 200-acre ranch back to its earlier state as a vineyard and began to sell fruit to Robert Mondavi. This led to Opus One becoming a grape client in the 1980s.

Another important, if somewhat less-famous, customer at that time was the late Kent Rosenblum, who bottled vineyard-designated Hendry Zinfandel under his Alameda-based label, Rosenblum Cellars.

Among other clients, the high quality of the wine he made from the ranch inspired Hendry to start his own label in 1995. He was helped by a business partner, Jeff Miller, and his neighbor Susan Ridley, who ran sales for many years. The 1992 vintage wines they released included a pair of Zinfandels that, much like Rosenblum’s, turned heads.

The intervening years have seen less and less Hendry fruit sold to

other wineries and more turned into wine at the Redwood Road estate.

At 82, George Hendry still leads the winemaking, assisted by Cellarmaster Rafael Melgoza and his son, Luis. Miller and his wife, Jan, known around the winery as the “reigning queen of fermentations,” also play key roles. Production has risen to a substantial 14,000 cases per year.

Flashing forward to 2020, neither George nor Mike Hendry could have predicted the changes brought to the wine industry by the pandemic. The winegrower is taking it in stride.

“It’s interesting, the way that wine sales have been changing constantly,” he observed. When his uncle debuted the Hendry label and then built the winery, national distribution was the sales model for other Napa Valley wineries. “In the last 20 years, I feel like there’s been a trend toward less [distribution] and more direct-to-consumer. And then direct-to-consumer has turned into wine clubs and online sales.”

He added that, while he thinks sales channels will continue their web-based transition, “what’s different these days is that the sales aren’t just online; it’s the meetings and the tastings that are online. And that’s very new for us.”

If necessity was ever the mother of invention in the wine business, now is certainly the time. In this vein, Megan Carter, who doubles as one of Hendry’s wine educators, proposed the idea for wine club video conferencing to her colleague, Angela Douglass. That was on March 16, the day after Governor Gavin Newsom requested that wineries up and down California close their tasting rooms.

“I thought it was such a neat idea but then saw lots of other wineries roll out virtual tastings — so much for originality!” Carter half-jokingly wrote in an email. “Since then, the whole team has weighed in and helped get it to the point where we could launch it.”

That launch point was the first Friday of April, another date that will likely find a permanent place on the Hendry Ranch timeline.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that a winery so closely associated with Zinfandel had its best turnout yet for the second tasting, with more than 250 people logged on. That webinar featured Carter and Hendry sipping and discussing the two current Zinfandels from the excellent 2016 vintage.

“Open a Hendry Zinfandel and join us,” Angela Douglass urged participants from behind the scenes on the webinar chat screen. “We’re drinking the 2016 Blocks 7 & 22 and 2016 Block 28 Zins.”

Meanwhile, commenters typed greetings from their various locations: Seattle, Colorado, Montreal, Oklahoma, Oslo. And New Orleans, where, at 5 p.m. Central, they were getting a late start.

With a sleek, new microphone centered on a polished wood table that Mike Hendry built from a fallen bay laurel on the ranch, and a backdrop wall adorned with old black and white photographs taken by his grandfather, the “Hendry at Home” title could’ve been pulled from an HGTV menu screen: it’s a fitting theme for a homemade series that is both impromptu and well-executed.

Carter and Hendry have enjoyed an easy rapport during the tastings. Their exchanges of information, between each other and facing the camera, come without awkward pauses or stumbles.

Hendry pointed out, however, that “it’s difficult, because you have a completely unpredictable range of wine, experience, and interest among users on the other side of the computer.” So he and Carter have been meeting Fridays at noon to go over their notes on the wines to be discussed. The preparation is evident during the hour-long webinars.

“It’s kind of like putting together a lecture,” he explained. “Megan’s, you know, doing a bunch of research on the topics.

And I’m doing the same thing and coming up with sort of a pattern for what I want to go through.”

At the beginning of the Zinfandel tasting, George Hendry was introduced by Carter, who stepped out of the frame to give an appropriate six feet of distance to her boss. In jeans and a plaid workshirt, the elder Hendry looked more like a rancher and less like a science engineer. His appearance and comments were brief but heartfelt.

“We are doing well here. We’re very fortunate in that we’re able to keep all of our employees at work, in both the vineyard and the winery,” he said, standing over the mic, “and we are especially appreciative to you, because you are sending in the orders that actually keep this operation working, and that is very important. So, thank you all.”

The pleasing “quiet” that Mike Hendry had earlier referred to around the winery, and which would’ve been normal procedure for his uncle up until just a few years ago, cuts both ways: the coronavirus is hurting the winery’s sales. George Hendry’s message to the participants was therefore even more meaningful.

The virtual tastings have, his nephew noted, brought some sales. “It’s kind of filling a hole that’s left by no tours and no tastings. And, you know, that’s made a difference. It’s actually very important to our sales under the current circumstances.”

Few people connected to Hendry Ranch understand the challenging business climate as well as Sybil Ajay Sanford, founder of the Petaluma-based Springboard Wine Company, which has distributed the Hendry wines in California for the better part of the last decade. While Sanford can’t predict what lies at the other end of the coronavirus tunnel, she’s optimistic for the brand’s future, based on her past experience.

“If you look at the Hendry sales,” she said over the phone, “what you see is we have a broad

range of restaurants and retailers that support Hendry throughout the state. It’s not pooled in Napa or Orange County or Palm Springs. You know, it’s everywhere.”

The wholesale veteran added that, to her, “this is really sort of the through-line with this brand. Susan [Ridley] did a very good job of building an awareness around Hendry, and we’ve been able to take that up a bit and improve on it over time. They have a really good following.”

To wineries and distributors, it’s already clear that some of their restaurant and retailer customers won’t survive this enforced economic downturn. Sanford gets this, as do Mike and George Hendry.

But, at the appropriate time (in California, anyway), shelter-in-place will be lifted, and the numbers of dogs and joggers and families using Alston Park might actually start to drop to normal levels.

Just over the hill, Hendry Ranch visits will resume, along with those to other wineries around the state. On the phone, Mike Hendry wondered about the future relevance of non-viticultural terms and concepts like video conferencing and virtual tastings — and microphones.

“There’s a lot about this stuff that, you know, could ultimately be positive,” the grower said, expressing confidence in a technology-driven future at the ranch.

“I think we all agree that, in the right moment, there’s no substitute for sitting down face-to-face with somebody. But, you know, that’s not always possible or practical. So, I think that virtual tastings are something that people are going to be forced to get familiar with soon. And a bunch of them are going to ultimately become comfortable with it. I think that’ll have a lasting effect.”

Whatever happens, Hendry probably hopes to continue to put his bay laurel table to use, whether guests sitting across from him are three feet away, or 3,000 miles.

## Berger

From C1

sweetness, thus covering some bitter compounds.

— Make it with lower alcohol (see below).

— Press the skins very lightly so bitterness is mitigated.

— Work diligently in the vineyard to manage crop size to deal with potential bitterness even before the grapes are picked.

No matter which tactic is used to control bitterness, there are potential problems.

Some California wineries make a Pinot Gris using a technique they think helps mask bitterness. They harvest a bit late and the resulting higher alcohols (14% or more) add the impression of sweetness. It also gives the mid-palate a certain weight, so it “feels” like Chardonnay to some buyers.

But problems can arise. Higher alcohols act like a solvent. During fermentation, any juice-to-skin contact allows higher alcohols to extract more tannin!

Additionally, some winemakers age Pinot Gris in barrels to give it added flavor (many consumers appreciate oak flavors). Oak aging also can give a wine added mass, making PG slightly like Chardonnay. But I often find that the flavors of barrel-aged Pinot Gris are incompatible — sort of like a char-grilled steak with caviar on top.

Some winemakers reduce the acidity to make the wine more succulent, but that simply makes the wine less likely to go with food.

Perhaps a better technique is to age Pinot Gris in old vessels in which the wood imparts no flavors at all, and instead allows maturity to develop by letting the spent yeast cells (lees) to create a layer of flavor from the genetic material through autolysis.

One additional tactic is to treat Pinot Gris a bit like a red wine and not release it until it’s been in the bottle for a year. The extra bit of aging in bottle allows some of the wine’s aromatics to “knit,” giving the wine slightly more depth.

Jim Klein, winemaker for Navarro Vineyards in Mendocino, doesn’t like how oak works with the flavors in PG and instead uses extended lees contact to build the mid-palate with nuances of nuts. Navarro’s PG is sensational.

Some of the best Pinot Gris come from cool or even cold regions. In such areas, the grape can develop wild spice aromas not unlike carnations. As such the semi-aromatic variety

resembles a distant cousin of the German hybrid grape Müller-Thurgau with its Riesling-esque blossom-y aroma.

When the wild aromatics of Gris are coaxed out of a cold-climate vineyard, the main spice note is that of fresh fennel with a trace of white pepper. Other aromatics often seen are peach, pear, and a faint tropicality.

That sort of semi-aromatic spice typically doesn’t appear in most Italian Pinot Grigios that come from warmer Trentino. From there, the best wines display more minerality.

Some of the best broad-palate Pinot Grigios from the slightly warmer Italian Veneto can display a charming minerality, such as the handsome 2018 Ornella Molon (\$18), which we recommended here months ago.

Historically, among the most prized Pinot Gris are those from the top producers in France’s Germany/adjacent Alsace. Pinot Gris isn’t as widely respected in Germany, where it’s often called Rüländer.

The Alsace, however, rates it as a noble grape, and among the best PGs there include those from the respected house of Zind-Humbrecht. Its single-vineyard Pinot Gris sell for \$75 to \$90 per bottle.

These are fascinating stylized wines, best suited for those who have a long connection to them, and a budget to afford them.

Perhaps the single most important region for Pinot Gris in Italy is the cool/cold region of northwest Italy called Alto Adige, an Austria-adjacent district also referred to as Südtirol. A new regional designation is called Dolomiti.

**Wine of the Week: 2019 Alois Lageder Pinot Grigio, Dolomiti** (\$16) — Italy’s Alto Adige has a sub-region called the Dolomites (Dolomiti) that has a cool climate and limestone soils, which allow this respected producer to craft delicate, slightly spicy white wines. This youthful version with only 12.5% alcohol is subtler than some of the more widely seen Trentino wines. This classic version of that style is an astounding value. After trying it, I suspected it would sell for \$25. Perfectly balanced, it has no bitterness and no residual sugar! Dalla Terra (Direct) Imports, Napa.

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## Levine

From C1

Didimos that was given to me by Christos Taralas of Elinos Winery in Naoussa, Greece. Elinos Winery is a family winery run by Christos and his twin sister Nikoletta and their parents. I visited Christos and his family in Greece in 2015.

Didimos means “twins” in Greek. Christos and Nikoletta are twins, and it turns out that there are a number of Greek winemakers who had twins. In fact, there are approximately 15 winemaking families from all over Greece with twins. In honor of this anomaly, beginning in 1999, these winemakers, George Vassiliou, Thomas Ligas, Christos Aidarinis, Vassilis Kanelakopoulos, Dimitris Kiout-soukis, Leonidas Nasiakos, Thanos Dougos, Theodoros Pangalos, George Skouras, D. Taralas, created Didimos.

Didimos is a blend of wine from all of the families. And, the wine is a blend of the grape varieties Agiorghitiko, Mavrodaphne, Mavroudi, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Negroska, Refosco and Xinomavro from across Greece. The Didimos that I opened was a 2007 and the medium-bodied red wine drank beautifully with notes of cherries, plums, dried tomatoes, olives, leather, and spice.

As for my wine friends, here are the “weird” wines that they pulled out of their cellars and what inspired them to select that wine:

Katherine Jarvis of Jarvis Communications opened a bottle of **Andrea Occhipinti Alea Rosso** from Lazio, Italy. What is unique about this wine is that Aleatico is a native grape that is typically vinified into a dessert wine; however Andrea Occhipinti produces a dry rosé style that is not filtered or fined. As a rosé, it is not the typical pink color, but rather a deeper, almost reddish hue.

Fred Swan, wine educator and journalist, opened the **2017 Bryn Mawr Dolcetto** from the southern part of the Willamette Valley, Oregon. While Dolcetto is a prominent grape in Piemonte, Italy, there are only 92 acres planted in California and even less in the Willamette Valley. As 13 percent alcohol and with notes of dark fruit, tea and earth, low acid and fine-grained tannins, Fred described the wine as a “solid example of Dolcetto.”

Megan Kenney, a former wine blogger, decided that our tasting was the perfect occasion to open a strange wine that she had been hesitating to taste. It was the **Valiant Vineyards American Merlot**, a wine that is bottled and celled in South Dakota, but the origin of the grapes is unknown. Megan’s parents had picked up this wine on their travels to South Dakota but shipped it to her when

they could not send it home to Connecticut. The wine is the officially licensed wine of Sturgis, a town in western South Dakota that is home to the Sturgis Motorcycle Museum & Hall of Fame as well as the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. Megan reported that it did not smell like Merlot but rather charcoal-covered raisins. At least our group gave her an opportunity to open the bottle.

Jason Stubblefield of Cork-Envy opened the palatable **2016 Costieres de Nimes Chateau de Nages White Rhone** wine, a blend of Roussanne, Viognier and Grenache Blanc. While this rich, full-bodied wine with delicate acidity and an elegant, minerally finish is not a weird or unique wine, Jason selected it because he had no idea where it came from. He has no recollection of buying it or receiving it as a sample and found it odd to be in his collection.

Cindy Rynning of Grape Experiences selected the **Quinta de Santa Cristina Batoca** from Vinho Verde in Portugal. There are only approximately 52 acres of this variety planted in all of Portugal and it is typically used in blends. Quinta de Santa Cristina is the only winery to bottle this in a single variety and Cindy brought a bottle back with her after a trip to Vinho Verde two years ago. She explained that the wine was light and a bit frizzante, but the wine was simple, and she understands why it is typically used in blends.

Melanie Ofenloch of Dallas Wine Chick decided to open a bottle from Napa. But it was not a Cabernet or Merlot but rather a **2015 Tempranillo** from Vincent Arroyo. Vincent Arroyo was one of the first wineries Melanie ever visited and they only produce 16 barrels of Tempranillo. This wine is not only a rather obscure wine for the region but also holds a special place in her heart.

Thea Dwell of Vine Wire Consulting picked the **Idlewild Arneis** from Wild Ruth Ranch in Yorkville Highlands in the southwest corner of Mendocino. Winemaker Sam Bilbro specializes in Italian varieties in the California terroir and the Arneis is delicate with a fruity and floral character.

Helene Kramer, who lives in Contra Costa County, loves rosé wines and typically drinks ones from Provence and Tavel. But the **2018 Le Bastide Blanche Bandol** was recommended to her in her local retail shop, so she purchased it. She had never had a Bandol prior to this bottle and enjoyed her first one with our group.

Michael Wangbickler of Balzac Communications opened the **2014 Shelburne Vineyard Marquette** from Vermont. Marquette is an inter-species hybrid red wine grape variety that was developed at the University of

Minnesota. Michael loves to drink locally when he travels, and his passion is to collect wines from everywhere he goes. His wine collection has domestic wines not only from California, Oregon and Washington but also from Colorado, Texas, Michigan, Ohio, Mississippi and Vermont.

Patrick Llerena Cruz, a Healdsburg resident who works at Locals, a co-op tasting room, picked the **Mercury 2012 The Dark Side** from Alexander Valley, which was an odd blend of 34 percent Cabernet Franc, 33 percent Petite Sirah, 33 percent Syrah.

Julie Pedroncelli St. John and Ed St. John went into the back of their cellar to select the **1996 Geyser Peak Sparkling Shiraz**. Sparkling Shiraz is common to find in Australia, but this is domestic one. And, the wine had been sitting on a back shelf for years, so they did not have high expectations. Surprisingly, the wine had held up over the years and was a brick red color with leather and earthy notes and still some effervescence.

Mary Beth Vierra of MB Vierra Wine Education and Consulting was tempted to open the 2017 Sottimano Mate’ “Vino Rosso” Neive, Italia, a still, dry Bracchetto with high toned aromatics but as it was her very last bottle she decided to save it and instead opened her **Wine Academic Students 2011 Petite Sirah** from Dry Creek Valley.

Made by a “student” winemaker group in 2011, it was a wine made from multiple hands and has held up quite well for an experimental wine made as part of a team exercise. While it did not taste like a classic Petit Sirah, the wine had bright red fruit notes, high acid and a silky finish.

Amber and David Burke of Wine-Travel-Eats selected a **2016 Teroldego from Passaggio** in Sonoma. Not only are they big fans of the winemaker Cindy Cosco, but they love the unique Teroldego. Teroldego is a black-skinned grape typically found in the north-east of Italy. But, Passaggio sources their Teroldego from the 3.5-acre Hux Vineyards in Lodi who have a small amount planted. The resulting wine is a food friendly wine with flavors of sour cherry and apple combined with subtle tannins.

Justin Koury of BevFluence picked the **2012 Nottingham Cellars Grenache** from Livermore. Livermore is thought to be a hot region but there is a cool part in the western part that is influenced by the Bay and that is where cool climate Grenache is produced.