

ON WINE

How much alcohol?

Some people might define me as a binge drinker.

On average, I consume about two 5-ounce glasses of wine a day. Sometimes three. It varies, but I almost never exceed that average since in the course of a normal week I evaluate about 30 wines, expectorating almost all of it. (I cherish my coffee.)



DAN BERGER

By dinnertime, I can be a bit tired of wine.

As a two-glass-a-day imbibor, I know how variable the ethanol content of wines can be, so I monitor it closely.

Because of my love for Riesling, I consume a lot of it, and in most cases, those I prefer have about 11% alcohol, usually less. This is a far cry from the average amount of alcohol in a bottle of California red wine, such as Zinfandel. You'd be hard-pressed to find one that's less than 15% alcohol.

I began consuming wine in the 1960s, when almost all California wines were about 12% alcohol; 13% was considered late-harvested! We still have a few bottles left of some 1970s Zinfandels that are marked "late-harvested," even though the listed alcohols are well below 14%!

Higher-alcohol wines cost more to make because of taxation. I have long known of the connection between taxes on wine and their alcohol content.

Until recently, the federal government charged wineries an excise tax based on alcohol content. Any wine that was under 14% alcohol was taxed at \$1.01 per gallon. Wines over 14% were taxed at a rate of \$1.51 per gallon.

As a result, wineries knew that to pay less tax, all they had to do was keep their alcohols under 14%. But in the face of global climate change, often resulting in higher temperatures, sugars were rising, so wines had higher alcohols.

Wineries usually try to pick fruit based on flavor maturity. Since the usual alcohol was above 14%, many wineries had to resort to extraordinary tactics to get their wines under the extra-tax level.

Some used alcohol-removal systems (such as Spinning Cone or reverse osmosis). It's an arduous and costly process, but worth doing because the industry knows that excess alcohol actually robs a wine of flavors. Wines with slightly lower alcohols usually display better fruit.

Please see **BERGER**, Page C4



LISA DRINKWARD PHOTOS

Behrens Family Winery after the 2020 Glass Fire.

Rebuilding a Dream on the Mountain

Behrens Family Winery and the Glass Fire

TONY POER

For the last 20 years, Lisa Drinkward and Les Behrens have passed by an impressive Douglas fir near the entrance to their Spring Mountain winery, Behrens Family Winery. Shortly after the Glass Fire burned through their property, the tall tree was gone.

It wasn't engulfed by flames but, rather, caught fire from the inside, an effect of the intense heat. Because it was at risk of toppling over, someone thought to cut the tree down before the smoke had even cleared. But who that was, according to the wine-making couple, is anyone's guess — maybe Cal Fire or a work crew brought in to clean up the wreckage on Spring Mountain Road, or just a vigilant neighbor with a big chainsaw.

In a year of cruel surprises, the missing Douglas fir was fittingly symbolic.

"Let's face it: people aren't going to be super excited to have '2020' on their wine," said Les Behrens. "It's like, 'Well, that was a great year. The year of Covid and natural disasters.'"

Lisa Drinkward and her hus-



Destruction wrought by the Glass Fire at Behrens Family Winery.

band are the co-owners of Behrens Family Winery, one of more than two dozen Napa Valley wineries burned to the ground or badly damaged by the Glass Fire. The blaze that started on the last Sunday of September left a path of scorched hillsides and charred buildings, a scene grimly familiar across swaths of the West Coast and now inclusive of the heart of America's most famous wine region.

Much of upvalley is a tragically changed landscape, but on Monday morning after the Glass Fire began, the couple had reason to believe they might narrowly

avoid hearing bad news.

"Our neighbor got up the road with a firefighter buddy of his," Drinkward recounted, joining the phone call with her husband from their home in St. Helena. "It took them two and a half hours to do that 15-minute drive because they had to chainsaw trees and clear the road."

"He told me that he thought his property and ours were OK," she said. "And then we found out later that day that they were on fire. So, they didn't burn until Monday around midday."

The day before, from the parking lot at Brasswood Restaurant

just north of St. Helena, Drinkward and Behrens watched as fire engines cut across it from Highway 29 and disappeared on fire roads into the nearby hills. Those trucks were directed to the most pressing fire locations.

But for the couple and their neighbors, it meant disaster, as the emergency vehicles were drawn away from Spring Mountain. Not that it might have made any difference: with firefighters likely prevented from accessing Spring Mountain Road in the first place, Behrens acknowledged that the destruction was unavoidable.

He told the story of another winery neighbor whose own terrifying ordeal included driving down the road through flames, with fire on both sides. "It was not a situation where someone could go back up the road. And then because they were fighting the fire everywhere, no trucks came up that hill."

"We know that there were fire trucks all over the valley," he emphasized. "They were just working their butts off. You can't thank them enough."

Unlike at some wineries — the ones that lost everything in the Glass Fire in terms of buildings and wines in tank, barrel, and bottle — it wasn't all bad news

Please see **REBUILDING**, Page C3

PLEASE THE PALATE

Pinot, Pinot and more Pinot

Pinot is an old grape that is more than 2,000 years old, yet the origin of the name is unclear. It may be because the clusters resemble a pinecone or it may be named after a place in France, Pignols, where the first cutting came from. But regardless, Pinot is the parent and grandparent to as many as 21 offspring, including Chardonnay, Gamay, Aligoté, Auxerrois and Melon de Bourgogne.



ALLISON LEVINE

When I am talking about Pinot, I am not talking specifically about Pinot Noir. I am also talking about Pinot Meunier, Pinot Gris/Grigio and Pinot Blanc. These varieties all have identical DNA, yet they are mutations. The inner cell layers are composed of a Pinot genotype, but the outer layer is made up of a distinctive genotype.

One may think of Riesling when talking about German wine, but Pinot has also been in



ALLISON LEVINE PHOTO

German wines from a recent tasting.

Germany for a long time. The Pinot grape was first brought to Baden from Burgundy in 884 AD by Emperor Charles III (aka Charles the Fat). And in Germany, the Pinot trio of Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris), and Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir) can be found. I had the pleasure to enjoy four German Pinots this week as Wines of Germany hosted a series of "Wine From Home" events.

Pinot Blanc

Also known as: Weissburgunder (Germany), Pinot Bianco

(Italy), Klevener (Alsace) Pinot Blanc is planted in Alsace, France where it is typically blended with Auxerrois. And in the 1980s, Pinot Blanc grew in popularity in certain regions, such as north-eastern Italy. But Germany has grown to be the largest producer of Pinot Blanc in the world. Today there are 5,747 hectares planted.

Selbach-Oster 2018 Pinot Blanc, Mosel (\$20) — Selbach-Oster is a classic, traditional producer founded in the mid-1800s but with a family

Please see **LEVINE**, Page C4

THE WINE EXCHANGE

What does wine mean to you? Part 2

Several weeks ago, my column — "What does wine mean to you?" — immediately generated many interesting and touching responses that continue trickling in even now. It must have struck a similar chord with readers as did my initial column — "What was your wine epiphany?" — from February 2011, which, in some ways, was the inspiration for writing my follow-up piece a



ALLEN BALIK

month ago. Wine lovers and fans know wine elicits far more musings than other alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Wine is a living thing that continues to grow in the bottle. It is often a meaningful part of important moments in our lives and provides a complement to our mealtime enjoyment. And according to John Brecher, co-se-

nior editor of Grape Collective and past Wall Street Journal wine columnist, "It just tastes good."

Many of the comments I received related to special times where wine commemorated an occasion or evoked a wine revelation, while others expressed how it became a stepping-stone in their life's work. So in their own words, let's take a look at a cross-section of several comments I received from readers with varying levels of vinous interests and experience, each sharing a personal memory marked by wine.

Ted Latty is a long-time wine collector who, with tongue-in-cheek, "laughed at [Paul Frank's] 'just a beverage' analogy to air — something few on the west coast are taking for granted these days!"

Ted shared his own experience. "I have several stories on many levels that relate to what

Please see **BALIK**, Page C4

Rebuilding

From C1

for the couple. Behrens said that with their robust insurance, they're covered from that end. And, he noted with pride, they have the history of the Behrens Family brand on their side.

"Because we've been in business for so long, we have the good fortune of not having to release our vintages right away."

Another positive was the glut-inducing 2018 vintage, now proving to be a godsend after they lost virtually all of their 2019 and 2020 wine in the fire. Behrens explained that, with more than 7,000 cases of production that year, they made nearly double the amount of wine they would in a normal vintage.

"We still have one '16 and some 2017s to release," said the winemaker. "We probably have several years' worth of wine to release. Business-wise, even as we're rebuilding the winery, I think things will be as normal. The problem will come that we'll have to make it up somewhere because of the loss of the '19 and the '20. So, there's going to be an interruption."

As married owners of a small winery, Behrens and his wife share much of the load in running it. But the future challenges of back-to-back missing vintages will also get tackled by Schatzl Throckmorton, their longtime general manager. November will mark her 20th year at Behrens Family Winery. The industry veteran has been involved in every aspect of the business except for the winemaking itself.

"You know, there's a lot of rebuilding and a lot of work for us here in the near term. At the same time, we're incredibly lucky right now because we do have insurance," Throckmorton said on a separate call. "We hope to good news that we don't have any issues with that. And if that's the case, then, you know, we can rebuild and come back just as strong."

With her winemaker husband, Mike Hirby, she also owns and operates Relic Wine Cellars on Soda Canyon Road. The Glass Fire was not Throckmorton's first go-around with disaster. In 2017, the Atlas Fire wreaked havoc on Soda Canyon and other outlying parts of Napa.

"It just blew straight through the canyon and incinerated all of our neighbors. We were one of the few buildings left standing," she said, then compared that dire situation three years ago to the Glass Fire.

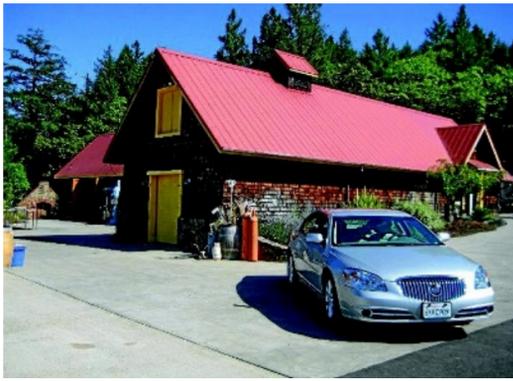
"Our hearts are truly breaking for some of our Spring Mountain neighbors, too. I mean, I'm not sure how they are going to move forward."

Throckmorton credited the ingenuity of Lundberg Design, the San Francisco architects who built Relic's largely fireproof, concrete-and-steel cave into the side of a hill on their property. After the Atlas Fire, it allowed Hirby and her to continue uninterrupted with their winemaking. As GM, Throckmorton's experience



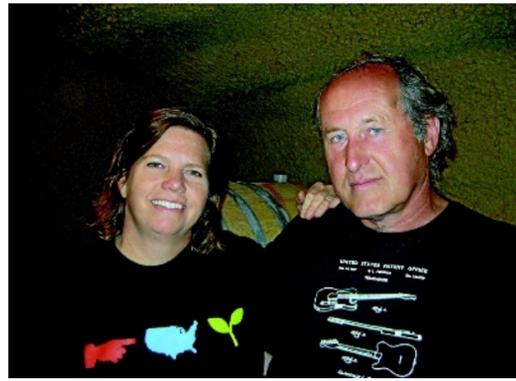
LISA DRINKWARD PHOTO

More of the aftermath of the Glass Fire at Behrens Family Winery.



LISA DRINKWARD PHOTO

The Behrens winery, before the fire.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Lisa Drinkward and Les Behrens

will accordingly come into play with the Behrens Family Winery reconstruction.

Behrens and his wife purchased their rugged, 20-acre Spring Mountain property in 1998 and over the years built it up to a multi-structure winemaking and hospitality complex. While the winery itself burned, the tank barn and crush pad did not. Nor did the tasting room, a brand-new building made from concrete and stone. Like the Relic wine cave design, fireproof materials made all of the difference.

The Behrens property also contained one of wine country's built-in firebreaks: a vineyard.

Drinkward described how their vineyard sits on a slope of the property, just below the tasting room. Below that, she said, "there was a stand of trees and a lot of heavy brush. That must have gone up like a torch. We have just over half an acre of vineyard. It got completely torched. There's maybe five percent at the top that still has green leaves."

But as her husband pointed out, the half-acre of vines sacrificed themselves for the greater cause of saving the tasting room, a years-long permitting project they'd counted on for future revenue. Their scorched rows of vines have now helped expand the couple's concept of defensible space.

"We're going to put vineyard all around the building," Drinkward predicted. "All of those dead trees are

going to have to come out. We're thinking this would be a great opportunity to plant more vines."

Back in 1997, when the couple moved down to Napa Valley from Arcata, they'd seized an earlier opportunity to pursue winemaking and viticulture. As the chef and sommelier owners of Folie Douce, a popular bistro in the Humboldt County college town, Drinkward and Behrens were exposed to some of the great California wines of the '80s and '90s that made it up to their corner of the state in wine sales reps' bags or were brought in by wine-loving customers and friends.

Sean Diggins, an Oakland-based importer with Banville Wine Merchants, attended Humboldt State as an undergraduate and afterward hung around the small coastal city long enough to become one of their customers — then an employee

and co-wine buyer — at Folie Douce. The three remain close friends to this day.

From his home-office, Diggins recounted Les Behrens' first forays into winemaking, which involved a lot of driving from Arcata to Napa and Sonoma to pick up grapes.

"I remember especially the first harvest. Les would be getting these phone calls from grower friends saying, 'Hey, we're picking at five in the morning. Get your butt down here!' He had a half-ton picking bin in the back of his truck, and he'd go down and get the grapes. In the meantime, I'd be getting everything ready to accept the grapes back at his house."

Behrens and Diggins used a small basket press that sat in the budding winemaker's driveway. "I remember waiting for Les to come back. And then we'd get the grapes and crush them. You know, it was just a real hands-on

operation," the importer recalled with a laugh.

Not long after the couple moved to Napa Valley, Drinkward started her own winemaking project with a friend and business partner, Françoise Peschon. The Drinkward-Peschon label has paced Behrens Family's development over the last two decades in terms of prestige and collectability. Sadly, those 2019 and 2020 wines, which were made at Behrens Family, were also lost in the Glass Fire.

The '20 vintage, such as it is with smaller yields around Napa Valley and the ever-present threat of smoke taint from the many North Coast fires, may never see much light or become viable to consumers. 2019, on the other hand, was looking promising to vintners like Drinkward.

"We were overall very excited about the quality of the '19s," she wrote in an email

about the other lost vintage. "After the abundant and also high quality 2018 vintage, we were very pleased by the flavor profiles, texture and structure that were presenting in the 2019 ... All the components were there for a really wonderful vintage."

Together, over the phone, Drinkward and her husband came across as upbeat, considering what has happened since those fateful days last month. They seem to be taking everything in stride — losing sleep, for sure, but also putting their situation in perspective. The would-be promise of the 2019 vintage is superseded by the actual promise of a rebuilt future.

Sean Behrens, Les' son from his first marriage, will continue in his longtime role as Behrens Family's assistant winemaker. Sean's son, Ethan, was working at the winery and is going to be out of a job for a while, according to his grandfather.

The couple's son and daughter-in-law, Rudy Behrens and Liz Noth, lost their jobs in Los Angeles back in March and had been living in the winery guest house, which also burned. The Southern Californians have an infant son who was born about seven weeks ago. "He's the bright spot in our lives right now," Behrens noted proudly. "We're concentrating on that."

He continued, "We've been saying this a lot, and we mean it sincerely. That is, in the end, we think we're covered financially. But emotionally, that's a whole other issue. But there are so many people who don't have any kind of means to get through it. You know, it's the people that have lost their jobs, and they didn't have enough money to get through the end of the week. Those people, it's just like, oh, my god, our hearts go out to them."

Then he reflected on the fire damage on Spring Mountain and what comes next.

"Was it a smart place to build a winery? I'm not sure. I think that going forward, when we rebuild, we will be rebuilding in an incredibly fire-safe way. Our tasting room survived, and whatever we build next, I believe, would survive a fire, because now we have hindsight."

Of the dead trees Drinkward mentioned needing to be removed, maybe that missing Douglas fir represents the first step towards creating space for the next version of Behrens Family Winery. In which case, the surprise wasn't so cruel, after all.



Big Green Egg
The Ultimate Cooking Experience

NAPA VALLEY HOT TUBS

Portable Spas & Swim Spas
Splash Pools
BBQ's & Accessories



Green Mountain Pellet Grills

Up To \$250 OFF



ARTESIAN ELITE

SERVING NAPA SINCE 1976
VISIT OUR SHOWROOM

2746 Jefferson St. • Napa • (707) 252-2441 • www.nvht.com



TREADWAY & WIGGER FUNERAL CHAPEL
FD2099

On the Grounds Of

NAPA VALLEY MEMORIAL PARK

2383 Napa-Vallejo Highway, Napa, California 94558

Serving Napa Valley since 1902

Complete Funeral, Cremation and Cemetery Planning

707-226-1828



The Berkshire

Peace of Mind...



Locally Family-Owned Senior Residential Care Facility Offering:

- Comprehensive personalized care services.
- Assistance with activities of daily living, dressing, bathing, toileting and transfers
- 24 hour trained, professional care staff.
- Medication supervision.
- Meals and snacks, hydration program; special diets offered.
- Activity program.
- Secured memory care.
- Housekeeping and laundry services.
- Hospice Care. • Respite Care.
- No Community Fee. • Affordable Rates.
- Emergency Call System.

We look forward to meeting you!

2300 Brown Street | Napa, CA 94558 • (707) 252-9037

RCFE License #286801095
Exceptional Infection Control Measures in Place!

berkshireassistedliving.com