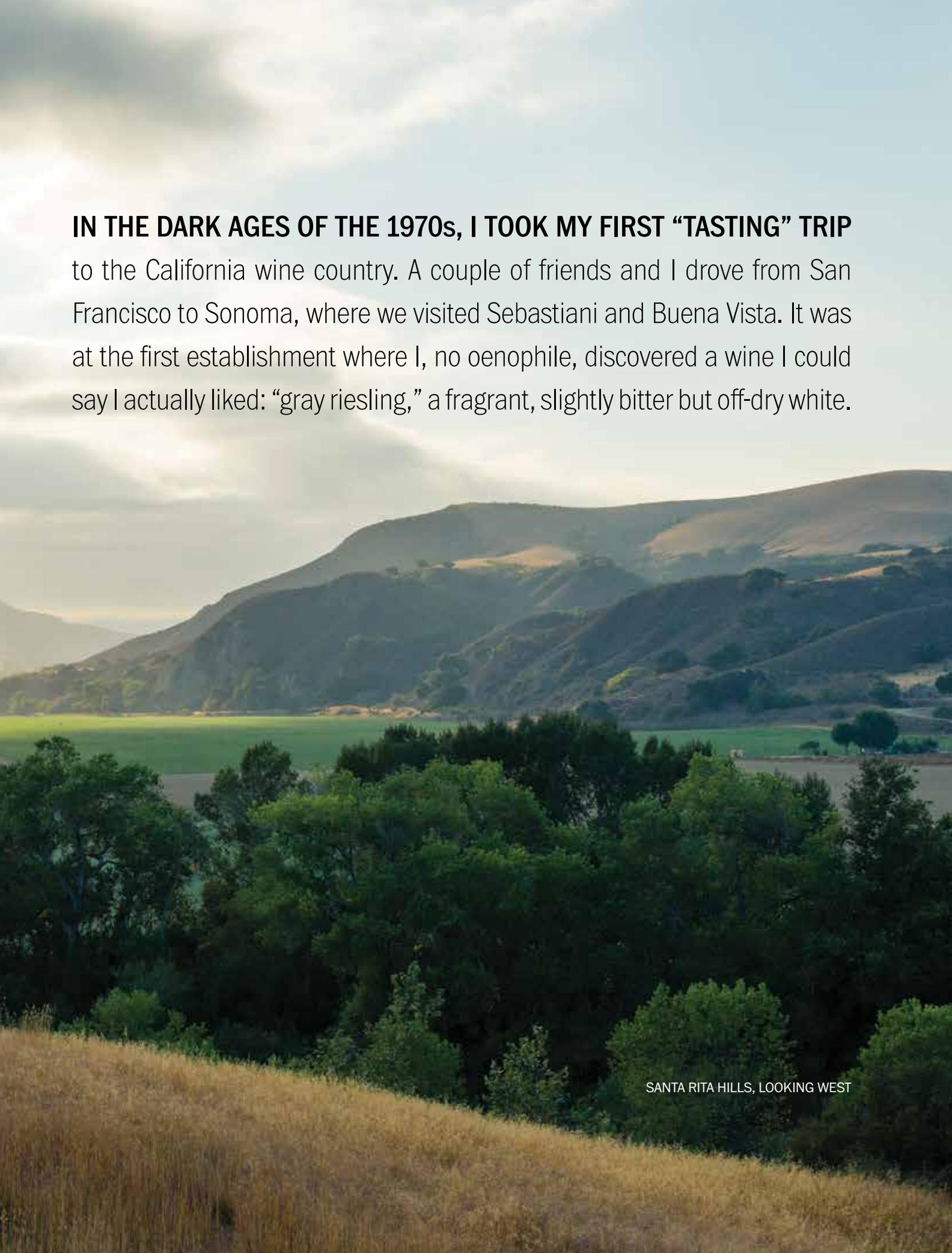


What Goes 1 Around

The Throwback White Revival

By David Darlington



IN THE DARK AGES OF THE 1970s, I TOOK MY FIRST “TASTING” TRIP

to the California wine country. A couple of friends and I drove from San Francisco to Sonoma, where we visited Sebastiani and Buena Vista. It was at the first establishment where I, no oenophile, discovered a wine I could say I actually liked: “gray riesling,” a fragrant, slightly bitter but off-dry white.

SANTA RITA HILLS, LOOKING WEST

W e're all aware of what's happened since then. The landscape of California wine has been transformed into a sea of chardonnay, cabernet and pinot noir, banishing the state's founding white grapes—from riesling to sylvaner, chenin blanc, golden chasselas, French colombard, muscat, muscadelle, trousseau gris and green Hungarian—into obscurity.

If there's one thing I've learned in three subsequent decades of watching California wine, it's that what goes around comes around. Too many grapes get planted; then there aren't enough. Public taste gets heavier; then it lightens up. Varieties fall from favor and get ripped out; then they get rediscovered and replanted.

It isn't surprising, then, that several grapes from the above Roster of Oblivion are now cycling back into vogue—and that this cycle conforms to a new wave of interest in higher-acid, lower-alcohol wines recalling not only the Old World but also old-time California. Chief among these, perhaps, is chenin blanc—the ubiquitous grape of the Loire Valley and, until the 1980s, of the Golden State as well. Before the chardonnay-cabernet coup, chenin was second only to colombard in tonnage harvested in the state. Today it prevails only around Clarksburg in the Sacramento Delta, but surviving patches in other places are drawing the interest of younger vintners—for example, Tegan Passalacqua, who's making chenin from a 30-year-old planting in Amador County.

As the winemaker at Turley Wine Cellars, Passalacqua is constantly scouting for old vineyards. He's also launching a label called Sandlands, named for the type of soil in which many century-old vines are planted. (Phylloxera can't survive in sand.) Moreover, in 2011 he worked the harvest in South Africa, which has the largest collection of old chenin blanc vineyards in the world. "They call them bush vines and we call them head-trained," Passalacqua says, "but it's similar to Amador County—dry farmed, in warm conditions, with schist soils and similar parent material."

Aside from basic pruning and picking, the Amador vineyard—which Passalacqua discovered while looking for old zinfandel vines—hadn't previously received much love. From vintage to vintage, its production had swung from one to seven tons per acre. But, he says, "I was intrigued by it, so I did some proper canopy management—shoot thinning and light leafing—adding organic matter and cover crops."

In 2012, Passalacqua got two and a half tons

an acre—and a beautifully balanced wine. Less than 13 percent alcohol, it has enough acid to enliven the mouth while filling it with varietal character—a trick he attributes to the warm Sierra-foothill climate, which, he says, confers more midpalate weight at lower sugar than might be typical of a Loire wine. "They have more acid and [thus] a more symbiotic relationship between acid and sugar. Here you can make a dry wine with 12.8 percent alcohol and it seems richer and fuller."

Passalacqua's wine updates a long California tradition sustained by the likes of Chalone (which farms a chenin vineyard planted in 1919) and Chappellet (which recently ripped out 50-year-old chenin and planted...chenin). Thomas Fogarty's associate winemaker, Nathan Kandler—whose own label, Precedent, like Sandlands, focuses on heritage varieties—makes a traditionally styled chenin from the 40-year-old Ventana vineyard in Arroyo Seco, while the 30-year-old Jurassic Park vineyard in Santa Ynez is providing chenin to several Santa Barbara County wineries. "At first my friends said, 'What?'" reports Jeff Fischer, who makes a Jurassic Park chenin under the Habit label. "Now it's: 'Dude, do you have any more of that chenin?'"

Fischer, 36, isn't a typical winemaker—he's a working actor with a regular role on the animated series "American Dad," and has voiceover credits on several movies as well as TV commercials for Budweiser and *Carl's Jr.* After he came to Southern California from

college in Arizona in 1990, he started making wine in his basement using Santa Barbara County grapes; 18 years later he started Habit. (The name, he says, is "an homage to William Burroughs, who grew up in my hometown of St. Louis. It's about my addiction to making wine, and his addiction to heroin and art in general.")

A card-carrying member of the high-acid fringe, Fischer picks his chenin early, ferments it cool and leaves it on the lees for a year before bottling. This gives the wine a beguilingly creamy scent, though it's so lean in the mouth as to be almost gaunt. "It's totally dry, very reductive and Old World-driven in style," he allows. "Maybe because I'm too new at the wine business, I just make what I like. But the reaction was incredible. Sommeliers really get it when they taste it."

Jurassic Park (originally planted by Firestone Vineyards) also provides chenin to the tiny Field Recordings label and to Lieu Dit, a partnership between sommelier Eric Rails-



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ERIC RAILSBACK AND JUSTIN WILLETT

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—Justin Willett

back and Tyler Winery’s Justin Willett. “Loire grapes are perfect for this terroir,” Railsback says, citing Santa Barbara’s predominance of marine sediment and diatomaceous earth. Thus, he and Willett also produce sauvignon blanc, cabernet franc, malbec and melon—but, Railsback says, chenin was the reason they decided to focus on the Loire.

In its first two vintages—2011 and 2012—Lieu Dit’s chenin, like Habit’s, tilts firmly toward the austere edge of the scale. “I like the leaner style,” Willett says, “the bright, mineral side. Richer wines have been the notion of California for the last twenty years, but looking back in history, some really classy wines were made. It’s refreshing to make wines that have a little more restraint.”

“THE TREND RIGHT NOW IS THAT YOU CAN’T HAVE TOO MUCH ACID,” GRAHAM TATOMER OBSERVES. “I BELIEVE MY WINES ARE ACIDIC, BUT IN A WAY THAT’S NOT TOO FAR GONE FOR THE CONSUMER. My softer vintages are still mouthwatering, but the sharp ones definitely benefit from having something to eat with them.”

Tatomer, 36, is that contemporary curiosity: a California winemaker who specializes in riesling. “First I got to like chardonnay,” he says of his earlier years, when he worked summers at Santa Barbara wineries. “Then I got to like the Chablis style of chardonnay.”

In 2003, after a sommelier friend turned him onto Austrian riesling, Tatomer took on a short apprenticeship at Weingut Knoll in Austria’s Wachau Valley. Ten weeks turned into a year, and by the time he came home, he was imbued with dry religion... er, riesling.

Tatomer’s commitment to the bone-dry style is impressive. He gets his fruit from several cool-climate sites, notably the 40-year-old Lafond vineyard, as well as Rancho Sisquoc near Santa Maria and Kick-On Ranch near Vandenburg Air Force Base. “With our [east-west-trending] transverse mountain ranges, there’s a dramatic shift [in style] every mile or so,” he says. “Riesling can be very intense if it’s planted close to the water.”

All of Tatomer’s wines taste pristine and elegant, with some—notably Vandenburg—exhibiting more botrytis (read: stone fruit) influence than others. As he learned to do in Austria, his picking team separates the botrytised parts of the bunches; also as the Austrians do, he leaves riesling on its skins for up to 12 hours after picking, because “the grape is so naturally acidic, the potassium in the stems helps to curb it.”

Even so, he admits, “I could easily get drawn into too much acid if I weren’t talking to people from different generations and



TROUSSEAU GRIS, FANUCCHI VINEYARD

Photo by David Darlington

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Colombard should be made like albariño, pinot grigio or sauvignon blanc. Refreshing, so that you can have three glasses with food by the pool. Some are charming and pretty in the nose, but too light and diluted in the mouth—they have acidity but no tannic structure.”

—Yannick Rousseau

regions.” A couple of Tatomer’s colleagues in Carneros, brothers Adam and Andrew Mariani of Scribe, have a more personal motivation for leading riesling down the lean-and-mean path. “We ate so many bitter almonds and walnuts growing up,” says Adam. “We can’t stand sweet wines.”

The Marianis come from a family of orchardists in the Sacramento Valley farming town of Winters. After traveling the world and apprenticing at wineries in Côte Rôtie and Stylida, Greece, they resettled on a turkey ranch next door to the Gundlach-Bundschu estate, southeast of Sonoma. From 1858 to 1919, the property had been a vineyard, pioneered by another pair of brothers: Emil and Julius Dresel, who smuggled America’s first riesling and sylvaner cuttings across the Atlantic from Germany in the mid-19th century. Thus, while it was pinot noir and chardonnay that drew the Marianis to the spot, they also planted three acres of riesling and one of sylvaner as an “homage to those dudes.”

“Most people say they don’t like riesling because it’s too sweet,” says Andrew. “But when they taste [the dry version], they love it. I like wines that are sharp as lasers: high-toned, bright, vivid and distinct.”

Scribe riesling is even leaner than Tatomer’s. Weighing in—levitating is more like it—at 11.5 percent alcohol, it’s actually outdone by their sylvaner (“Ode to Emil”) which at 11.2 percent gives new meaning to the term “white wine.” Almost devoid of color, it dares to follow suit in flavor and aroma; Andrew suggests green apple and stone fruit, though his most apt descriptor is “saline.”

“You want oysters,” he says, accurately. “It’s our breakfast wine, the first one we taste in the morning. It really wakes up the palate.”

“By picking early you risk some undeveloped flavors,” Adam admits. “But the cooler you keep the fermentation, the more you retain the aromatics and flavor profile.”

“If you harvest later, the wine has a flabby midpalate,” Andrew argues. “I want to capture acidity and get out of that dead [zone]. The idea of coming here and making wines the same as the next guy’s is of no interest to us—we want to express something distinct and interesting, showing that [Carneros] can still surprise you.”

“By doing what they did a hundred years ago,” says Adam.

“But,” says Andrew, “it seems really different now.”

YANNICK ROUSSEAU HAS AN ESPECIALLY GOOD REASON FOR MAKING WINE FROM A VARIETY THAT’S OUT OF VOGUE IN CALIFORNIA:

He comes from the part of France where it originated. Rousseau grew up in Gascony, home of the colombard grape, which is blended there with folle blanche and ugni blanc (a.k.a. trebbiano) to make Cognac and table wine. After he went to winemaking school and worked three vintages in France, he came to California in 1999, eventually landing at Chateau Potelle on Mount Veeder; when that property was sold in 2007, he started his own label, Y. Rousseau, while working for the French barrel company Ton-

nerellerie de Jarnac. One of his clients there was the Sonoma County winery DeLoach, which was making Russian River colombard from a dry-farmed, 35-year-old plot owned by Dorothy and Butch Cameron.

When those vines went into the ground near Fulton in the early 1970s, colombard was the most widely planted wine grape in California, prized for its ability to produce crisp wine in warm conditions.

“There was a lot of it in the Central Valley,” Rousseau says. “Gallo Chablis was 50 percent colombard, and 50 percent of Sonoma County was colombard.” Today the Camerons’ four acres of colombard are surrounded by 400 acres of pinot noir and chardonnay, but they kept the colombard “because it was Butch’s grandfather’s favorite wine.”

As it happened, in 2008 DeLoach—which had been blending the colombard into Russian River chardonnay—decided to stop using it. “I said, ‘From what I’m tasting, I think I could do something with this,’” Rousseau says. Using traditional Gascon methods, he left the juice on its skins for seven to ten hours to bring more “punch” to the texture. “Colombard should be made like albariño, pinot grigio or sauvignon blanc,” he says. “Refreshing, so that you can have three glasses with food by the pool. Some are charming and pretty in the nose, but too light and diluted in the mouth—they have acidity but no tannic structure.”

Rousseau believes this wine is now the only 100-percent colombard produced in the US. *Wine & Spirits* gave the 2010 vintage 90 points, calling it “bold, clean, and fresh...tangy, its alcohol in check.” Other vintages have fared less well, though the wine’s freshness is undeniable—and Rousseau himself is irrepressible.

“My mission is the renaissance of colombard,” he declares. “My wife thought I was



YANNICK ROUSSEAU



ADAM AND ANDREW MARIANI

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— Andrew Mariani



PETER FANUCCHI

crazy to make it, but sommeliers love it because they can pour it by the glass. And some of my best customers are winemakers.”

A MILE FROM THE CAMERON VINEYARD AS THE CROW FLIES, ALONGSIDE SEVEN ACRES OF 130-YEAR-OLD ZINFANDEL VINES, PETER FANUCCHI KEEPS LOVING WATCH OVER AN EVEN GREATER ANOMALY: a ten-acre, 30-year-old plot of trousseau gris.

Fanucchi’s property has laid claim to more than one place in my heart. For starters, it’s on Wood Road next door to the Rue and Belloni vineyards—the source of some of my favorite zinfandels, emanating as they do from a relatively cool climate. When the Fanucchi family bought property here in 1972, the old vines were barely a foot tall and their hanging fruit touched the dirt underneath. “My dad was going to pull all of it out,” Peter says, “but I like saving things, so I put in stakes and brought the branches up. I was the first one on this street to revive an old vineyard.”

A classic California field blend, Fanucchi’s zinfandel vines are accompanied by a smattering of petite sirah, alicante bouschet and some bigger vines that produce white fruit. More accurately, the grapes are gray—as in trousseau gris. “It’s probably a mutation of a red grape from the Jura called trousseau noir,” Fanucchi explains. “Every year we get forty or fifty pounds that mutate to the noir version, which is purple.”

Seven years after the Fanucchis purchased the property, ten plantable acres came up for sale next door. “It usually rained in October, so my dad wanted something ripe in September,” Peter says. “No one had even heard of chardonnay [at the time]. I voted for trousseau gris, because I liked eating it.” That might be because it isn’t overly acidic.

Trousseau gris was thought to make a pleasant wine that could be produced in quantity, but not a fine one. “A lot of it had a bitter aftertaste,” Fanucchi says, “but when I started taking care of the vineyard, I discovered why. Since only big wineries made it, they picked at low Brix and pressed the grapes hard to get out the juice—which gives you bitterness from the seeds. They thought it came from the skins, but when trousseau gris is ripe, it has a real floral, peachy, aromatic character. You just have to treat it gently, and use barrels and ML.”

For years, Fanucchi sold his trousseau gris to Gallo and Piper Sonoma, but recently the grapes have attracted a stable of smaller artisans: Zeitgeist, Wind Gap, Falcor, Two Shepherds, Iconic. The wines vary in character from Alsace-like to Mâconesque to Rhôneish—fragrant and sometimes slightly bitter, but luscious even when dry.

Does that ring a bell? I guess I forgot to mention the other reason I have a soft spot for Fanucchi’s vines. When the family planted trousseau gris—at just about exactly the time when I took that first tasting trip to wine country—it was called gray riesling. ■