Grenache takes California • The Mosel's Oldest Riesling Vines?

## The New World of Syrah

melville

2016 Syrah

Donna's

DEDICATED TO
MAX SCHUBERT

1915-1994

PROPOSED

Grange

BIN 95

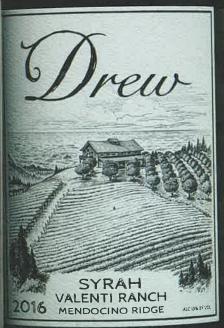
VINTAGE 2014

BOTTLE No. 4K054

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Bottled by PENFOLDS WINES PTY. LTD.

750ML



SCHIST

2016 SYRAH

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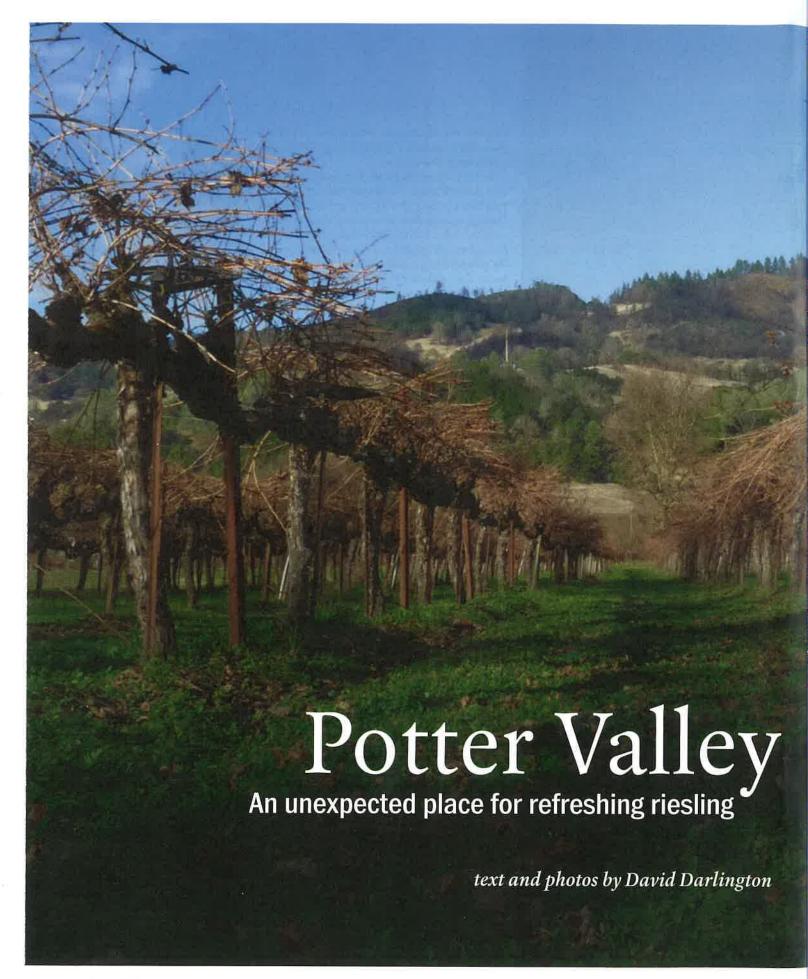
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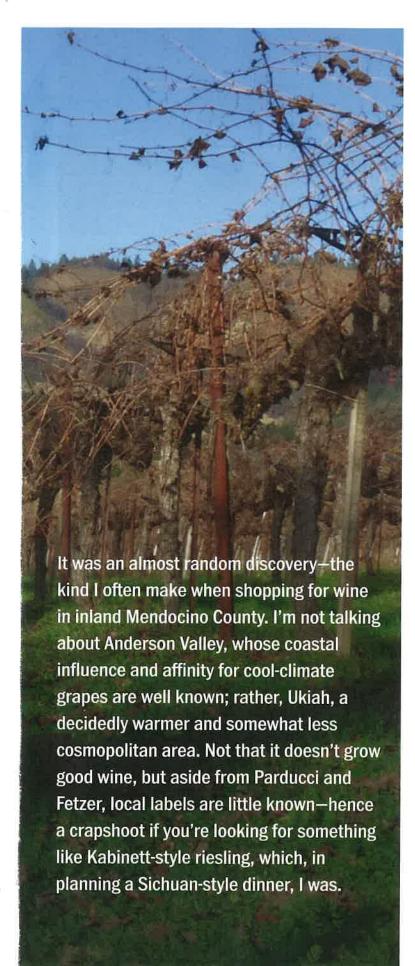
Hardwade and Bottled by Chris and Andrea Mulling



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The label that caught my eye on the shelf was "Blue Quail." The bottle, I report somewhat reluctantly, was, in fact, blue. But the contents were identified as "dry riesling," from vines that were 45 years old and organically farmed, and the origin was Potter Valley, which I knew as a source of surprisingly good pinot noir.

The counterintuitive element is that Potter Valley lies *east* of Ukiah and Redwood Valley—it's almost in Lake County, which for the past several years has been a literal inferno. You wouldn't expect it to be a place for pinot, but I'd been a fan of the version grown by Bill Pauli, a Potter Valley rancher who has served as chairman of the California Association of Winegrape Growers and president of the California Farm Bureau. I'd found that wine unexpectedly elegant, as opposed to overripe. Might Potter Valley riesling be similarly refined?

Sure enough, Blue Quail was a winner: clean, refreshing and true to type, enhanced by hints of petrol and—despite its "dry" identification—residual sugar. The proprietor was one Guinness McFadden, who, I subsequently learned, also provides riesling grapes to such esteemed wineries as Chateau Montelena and Dashe Cellars. I earmarked it as a go-to choice from the Mendocino interior, and set about sleuthing the puzzle of Potter Valley.

"When I first came here, I was under the impression that it was for robust red wine," McFadden acknowledged. "But the reds we grow are typically fairly light—not heavy and jammy—and the whites are well balanced. [The harvest in] Ukiah is ten days earlier; Hopland, two weeks."

Earthy, outspoken 80-year-old Eugene Joseph McGuinness McFadden is Potter Valley's de facto vinous patriarch. A native of New York City and graduate of Notre Dame (where he was on the wrestling team), he told me that he settled here in 1970, after several years in the US Navy chasing Russian submarines in the Atlantic. He served on a destroyer during the Cuban missile crisis (an experience he terms "pretty tense"), followed by a year in the Mekong River delta; in Vietnam he was wounded twice, which qualified him for a choice of other jobs, "if I survived," he said.

He escaped Southeast Asia alive and became an admiral's aide in Portugal. Perceiving that "bureaucratic bullshit wasn't something I'd be good at," McFadden opted for civilian life and Stanford business school, where he similarly figured out that an education in paper-



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—Bo Barrett

pushing wasn't going to do him much good.

Having gained exposure to wine as a naval officer in Mediterranean ports, McFadden thought that having a vineyard would be "a good way to meet girls." Finding Napa Valley already pretty well picked over, he was steered toward Mendocino County by Robert Mondavi ("the greatest guy") and Mondavi's financial backer and To Kalon viticulturist, Ivan Schoch.

"Roederer, Navarro and Scharffenberger were all in the future," McFadden says of Anderson Valley. He looked at a few properties there that didn't jump out at him, but the realtor knew of another place to the northeast—and upon visiting it, McFadden fell in love with Potter Valley.

Then as now, Potter Valley was a small and sleepy world unto itself, off the unbeaten wine track, between Calpella and Clear Lake—the kind of place where passing motorists wave to one another. Sharing status with Redwood Valley as a northern source of the Russian River, its cash crops are actually dependent on the *Eel* River, whose headwaters have been dammed for hydropower and diverted south since the early 1900s. Besides swelling the flow of the Russian River downstream, irrigation ditches have raised the water table to the point where vines and fruit trees can survive (not just drought, but frost). Still, when McFadden took up residence, agriculture consisted mainly of pears and cows.

Studying the local weather data, McFadden concluded that the climate was close enough to Napa Valley's to grow grapes. It turned out to be closer to Anderson Valley's, but as he says, "Potter Valley is not the same kind of cool as Anderson Valley. They have a maritime climate. We have a continental climate, with [large] diurnal variation."

The controlling factor in Potter Valley viticulture boils—or, more accurately, chills—down to one word: elevation. At 1,000 feet, it's almost twice as high as Ukiah, and three times the elevation of Anderson Valley. Potter Valley can be hotter than Ukiah (as in 95 degrees Fahrenheit) on summer days, but its nocturnal temperatures plummet into the low 50s and even 40s.

Two results are higher acid and a shorter growing season, thanks to later budbreak in spring. "Every

300 feet of elevation gain shortens the growing season by a week," explains Glenn McGourty, the Ukiahbased UC Davis Extension advisor. "And in October the day starts late, so there are only four hours of photosynthesis."

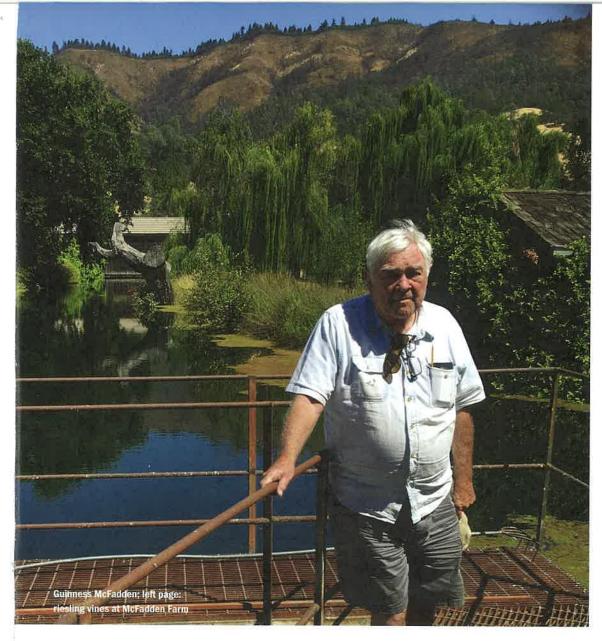
Early on, the two varieties that UC Davis recommended for the region were riesling and gamay beaujolais. McFadden complied with the former recommendation, but after being told that Potter Valley was too hot for pinot noir, he chose the red grape that was then taking California by storm.

"Our cabernet was real light and had a nice greenpepper nose," he recalls. In other words, "It was not what wineries wanted." Eventually he replaced it with pinot (both noir and gris), as well as gewurztraminer, sauvignon blanc and zinfandel. Until recently, Mike Dashe made a delicious carbonic-maceration wine from the latter called L'Enfant Terrible (a name he now applies to grapes grown on Signal Ridge above Anderson Valley).

"It's so cool [in Potter Valley] that zinfandel doesn't develop a lot of color," Dashe says. "But the wine was like a Cru Beaujolais. When you look around and see what else is planted there, it's mostly pinot noir and chardonnay."

"One of our mantras is 'The right grape in the right place,'" attests Bo Barrett, who has sourced Chateau Montelena riesling solely from Potter Valley since 1986. "Riesling is a cold-climate cultivar—it goes nuts in a warm climate, and in Napa Valley, it's too vigorous. The only good ones are on Spring Mountain, from Smith-Madrone and Stony Hill. The mesoclimate [of Potter Valley] is far better for northern European cultivars. Down here, riesling is the first grape to pick, but up there, it's the last. If you can get riesling ripe after Napa Valley cabernet, that's ideal."

Prior to the 1976 Judgment of Paris, where Chateau Montelena took top honors for chardonnay, riesling was its main white wine. Thus, when Barrett's grower replanted, he proceeded to scour Northern California for a suitable source. "The one we liked best by far and away was from Hidden Cellars [in Mendocino County]," whose winemakers, Dennis Patton and Greg Graziano, told him that the origin was Potter Valley.



"What's rare and special about Potter Valley riesling is that, when it doesn't rain, you can get it fully ripe with zero botrytis," Barrett says. "We definitely cannot make German- or Alsatian-style riesling in California, but I think we can make something that nobody else makes—except sometimes Austria in one of their magic vintages."

Montelena's version is suave and civilized—subtly floral, neither sharp nor cloying. In limited comparisons with Anderson Valley, I've found Potter Valley riesling richer and fuller, but also—counterintuitively—more enticingly acidic.

"Riesling is kind of an odd grape—but all of them are," McFadden says. "Sometimes it's ripe by flavor at twenty-two [degrees Brix], sometimes it's not. Two years ago ours was dry, but last year it had more fruit. I like it that way, but it didn't sell."

Sadly, the most recent crop didn't sell for a different reason: smoke taint from the Ranch Fire, which incinerated 400,000 acres near Potter Valley in midsummer. The year before that, the catastrophic Redwood Valley blaze surrounded McFadden's property on three sides, but the farm escaped damage—a fact

that, like his business, he attributes to Eel River water. "If we're going to get evacuated," he says, "we'll just run down to the vineyards where the sprinklers are."

Potter Valley's aqueous future is currently unclear. During the past century, overfishing and clearcutting devastated the Eel River salmon population, and as a partial consequence, water diversions into Potter Valley have been reduced by a third since 2007. Pacific Gas and Electric now plans to hand the hydro project over to a qualifying outside agency, such as the Mendocino County Inland Water and Power Commission; its board of directors includes McFadden, who believes that today the watershed is depleted primarily by outlaw marijuana growers.

As a result, "I don't wave to people anymore," McFadden reports. "It might be a dope grower who would think he's worth waving to."

It may seem counterintuitive that wine and weed should be battling for water in Mendocino County, where the two have coexisted for years. But maybe the fight is just getting started. Marijuana may now be legal, but without water, there would be no Potter Valley wine.