

MIKE DUNNE'S WINE OF THE WEEK 2007 El Dorado Estate Reserve Malbec

By Mike Dunne
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Just before a recent visit to wineries in El Dorado County, I sent Paul Bush an e-mail to ask him to single out the signature wine of his family's winery on Apple Hill, Madroña Vineyards.

"That is, which of your wines do you think says the most of the winery, the region, the evolution of the property, and the personalities of the principals?" I asked.

The question was prompted by earlier tastings at the winery, during which I was struck by both the wide variety and their consistent command. As do most other wineries in the Sierra foothills, Madroña makes zinfandel, but its portfolio includes numerous other varietals, including cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, gewurztraminer, nebbiolo, chardonnay, riesling and merlot. This time, I wanted Bush's take on what he thinks is the strongest wine in his strong lineup.



His reply was extensive and detailed, with the bottom line being that he and his wife, Maggie, also have a difficult time pinpointing one single wine that best represents the winery. In other words, even after 35 years, Madroña Vineyards continues to evolve and explore.

That said, Bush adds that Madroña's zinfandel, cabernet franc, riesling and port-style dessert wine look to have the most potential to heighten the winery's profile on the California wine scene.

He also mentioned malbec, a surprise, given that little of it is cultivated in the state and given that the grape has lost much of its allure even in France where it historically has been grown.

Granted, malbec is grown widely in Argentina, where it is

yielding several fetchingly beefy interpretations. But in California, malbec is a toddler still learning to walk.

The Bush family, however, has more experience with malbec than most California vintners who are being drawn to the grape by its success in Argentina. The Bushes have been growing malbec since 1993 and releasing it as a varietal since 2002. (At first, they used it in their Bordeaux-inspired blend.)

It's a challenging grape to grow, in large part because its vines are so vigorous. Paul Bush, however, is so excited about its potential here that he and his family are planning to spend three months next year at Cahors in southwest France, where malbec long has yielded a wine celebrated for its dense color, full body, firm tannins and longevity.

He visited the area this summer and was struck by how much the terrain planted to malbec resembled the higher Sierra foothills. He decided then to return for a longer stay to further study the region's viticultural and winemaking methods.

He's already pleased with the quality of malbec he's producing, noting its "good acidity, great color, intense fruit (dark berry, blueberry, plum) and relatively soft tannins."



He wasn't at the winery when we stopped by, but Madroña's longtime cellar rat, Tim Wright, guided us through a thorough tasting of older, newer and pending releases. The zinfandels, cabernet francs, rieslings and ports all were models of European restraint and finesse.

The Madroña Vineyards 2007 El Dorado Estate Reserve Malbec was no less balanced, but its assertiveness was more in your face, its build more muscular, its smell and flavor more complex. But given that added layering and weight, the wine nonetheless was agreeably supple, without the sort of rigid tannins its deep color and youth would suggest.

An aroma just as forestlike and earthy as it was fruity gave way to bright flavors of blackberries, sour cherries and blueberries, backed by a framework of oak more understated than intrusive. While the wine is nearly 80 percent malbec, Bush blended in 15 percent merlot and 5 percent cabernet sauvignon to round it out and intensify its complexity.

Whether malbec becomes the wine most closely associated with Madroña Vineyards remains to be seen, but for right now, it is reason enough for a trek to Apple Hill.

MADRONA VINEYARDS 2007 EL DORADO ESTATE RESERVE MALBEC

By the numbers: 14.6 percent alcohol, 151 cases, \$28

Context: Paul Bush recommends the malbec with hanger steak or sweetbreads, though the best pairing he's had with the wine was at the restaurant Zachary Jacques outside Placerville, where he tasted it with an endive salad with red-flame grapes stuffed with bleu cheese.

Availability: The malbec won't be released officially until November, though it can be bought at the winery or ordered now through the winery's website, www.madronavineyards.com, where it is listed, fittingly, under the "signature collection."

Information: Madroña's tasting room, 2560 High Hill Road, Placerville, is open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily

Read more: <http://www.sacbee.com/2010/10/27/3133409/almost-king-of-the-hillmadrona.html#none#ixzz13Zws10WQ>