

Nebbiolo fans congregate to discuss their favorite varietal

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

Varieties of grapes and styles of wine often develop fan clubs.

There's Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, the International Riesling Foundation and the Rhone Rangers, to name a few that have been around awhile.

The most obscure and most hopeful just might be Nebbiolo Enthusiasts & Believers. It's a casual group led by Tom Hill, a New Mexico wine enthusiast especially keen on nebbiolo, and Ken Musso, a former Burlingame firefighter who tends a vineyard planted to nebbiolo in El Dorado County.

Once a year, they gather maybe 30 or 40 fellow travelers to talk about the grape and the wine it yields and to taste examples that range from old to new. This year's session was convened in late June on a patio of Karmere Vineyards & Winery in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley.

Participants were mostly growers and vintners, and much of their discussion focused on where and how to grow nebbiolo so it would produce expressive wines, how to handle the grapes so their wines would be commercially and critically successful, and how to persuade consumers that here is another wine worth making room for at the table.

Virtually everyone in the group developed their passion for nebbiolo by way of barbaresco and barolo, widely seen as the wines that show nebbiolo at its most profound. Barbaresco and barolo hail from the Piedmonte region in northwest Italy. They

provide the historic template, but it isn't necessarily fitting for California, where growing conditions and winemaking traditions are far different from what they are in Italy.

In addressing this point, Sacramento grocer Darrell Corti, long a student and advocate of Italian wines and the principal speaker at the NEB gathering, urged the assembly to get over whatever dreams they might entertain about producing barbaresco and barolo in California.

Nebbiolo in California may be capable of yielding a wine that is quite good, especially if it is treated like pinot noir, producing a wine light, graceful and charming, but it won't be barbaresco and barolo, Corti warned.

The subsequent tasting, involving about 20 nebbiolo-based wines, most of them Californian, showed that while the grape has potential in the state, its acceptance by consumers will take an attitude adjustment. The wines generally were bright but so thin in color that they could be mistaken for rosés – orange-tinged rosés. Yes, their tannins were fierce, but beyond them often resided a playful and refreshing cherry fruitiness.

Their smell often was enticingly floral as well as fruity. Their flavor sometimes carried a nuttiness evocative of sherry. Their structure was solid, their acidity zingy, which helped explain why some older nebbiolos on hand, from both California and Italy, had aged splendidly.

Ken Musso had a couple of his wines on hand, including his current nebbiolo, the Due Vigne di Famiglia 2008 El Dorado County Musso Family Vineyard Nebbiolo. Two years ago, I wrote here of his 2007 version of the wine, describing its smell as ripe yet fresh, its flavor juicy with cherries, berries and autumnal nuts, and its acidity surprisingly zesty for a California wine.

The 2008 continues that family resemblance, though the cherry fruitiness is more lush, the oak less pronounced. Both are sturdy wines, meant more for rich cuts of beef than seafood or poultry.

With the 2008, Musso blended 10 percent barbera into the nebbiolo, which he credits with giving the wine deeper color, a fruitier flavor and more complexity. He continued his practice of aging the wine in 300-liter hogsheads of Hungarian oak, a technique he learned of while visiting estates in Piedmonte.

Musso's nebbiolo vineyard is 2,400 feet up the Sierra foothills at Garden Valley. There, the soil runs to decomposed slate high in rocks and low in nutrients. Nevertheless, nebbiolo flourishes in that setting, at least when it comes to producing canes and leaves. As to grapes, his nebbiolo vines are stingy and unpredictable.

"It's vegetative as all heck. It enjoys growing leaves more than fruit. Nebbiolo is very difficult to coax grapes out of," Musso said. When he walks through his stand of nebbiolo as harvest nears, he no longer is surprised to find maybe half a dozen vines in a row with no grapes at all, then one with maybe 2 pounds of clusters, another with 6 pounds.

"They seem to take turns," he says of individual vines. "We'll get a good crop one year, but the next they'll take a breather."

Despite the challenges both in vineyard and in the marketplace, Musso is so committed to nebbiolo and so encouraged by results that he's grafted some of his dolcetto vines to nebbiolo, expanding his plot of the variety to 3 acres.

At his tasting room, people were enjoying and interested in his dolcetto, but when he brought out his nebbiolo, they got really excited. Curiously, tasters interested in the nebbiolo

have been younger rather than older, and they've come at it with an interest solely in trying something new, without barbaresco or barolo framing their expectations, says Musso.