

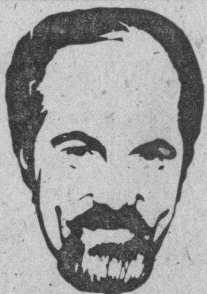
Wineries

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MEAD ON WINE

Focus On Soquel

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With wineries, as with people, first impressions are important, even if they may be unfair. An image, once developed, is difficult, if not impossible, to change.

Image is very often the difference between whether a winery can charge a few dollars for a particular wine, or whether it can charge many dollars.

Robert Mondavi, for example, is able to command \$35 for his 1974 "Reserve" Cabernet Sauvignon. Joe Heitz is able to ask and receive top prices for most of his wines, as are Chalone, Mount Eden, Martin Ray and a handful of others.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying these wineries do not make fine wine. I'm not saying the wines are not worth the asking price. That is a personal determination to be made between seller and buyer. What I am saying, is that there are many wineries in

California which produce wines of equal quality, but if they tried to price wines in a similar fashion they would languish on the shelf.

Why? They simply do not have a "high-priced" image, whatever that is. To the frustration of many struggling vintners, it is difficult to identify exactly what it is that creates a high-fallutin' image.

One of the latest image battles is being waged in the tiny community of Soquel (the natives get upset when I refer to it as Baja Santa Cruz), at the Bargetto Winery.

Bargetto is a small winery, by comparison to all but the tiniest of "boutiques," producing a mere 35,000 cases a year. Bargetto's image problem is not totally unique, but it is a special kind of problem, which I'll tell you about in due course, but I'm getting a little ahead of my story.

Bargetto is a family-owned winery, with a heritage dating back 300 years to the Piedmont region of Italy. To the best of anyone's knowledge there was no image problem that far back.

An uncle of the present owner came to California from Italy about 1900 and started a small winery in San Francisco. He was eventually joined by his brother, father of the current owner, and after a period of time the winery ended up at its present location on the bank of Soquel Creek in the town of the same name. This was about 1910. Still no image problem.

Prohibition came along, but the winery survived.

Unlike some California wineries which were licensed to make medicinal and sacramental wines, such was not the case at Bargetto. The fact is, I'm told by a descendant, that the winery was a bootleg operation and was never "busted" because two of the best customers were a judge and the local sheriff. Bootlegging might have caused an image problem, but it didn't seem to affect sales.

In 1964, the founder died, leaving the winery to two sons, Lawrence and Ralph. Both had big families to feed. By 1966, it became obvious that one small winery would not support two large families, and by mutual agreement, Lawrence kept the winery while Ralph went into real estate.

It was shortly after this that Bargetto began making fruit wines, as well as table wines and that's when the image problem started to develop.

The fruit wines were the only ones available in sufficient quantity to be marketed outside the immediate locale and therefore, Bargetto developed a "fruit wine image" with the public at large.

They were excellent fruit wines, to be sure, but the connoisseur crowd simply doesn't take fruit wines seriously. Image-wise, the public seems unwilling to accept the fact that someone who makes a great olallieberry wine can also make a great Chardonnay.

Bargetto is doing two things to solve its image problem. One, the winery is making, in my opinion, better table wines than ever before. And two, the fruit wines will soon see a new label, Santa Cruz Cellars, with the family name appearing only on table wines.

I recently tasted four new Bargetto releases, and

found three winners and one also-ran.

Bargetto 1979 "Selected Late Harvest" Johannisberg Riesling (\$10) recently earned a silver medal at the Los Angeles County Fair, and had I been a panel of one, it would have received a gold. From Tepesquet Vineyards in Santa Barbara County, the grapes were harvested at 30 percent sugar, fermented to 10 percent alcohol, leaving a residual sugar of 10 percent. It is lush with peaches and apricots in the aroma, with mostly peach in the flavor.

Bargetto 1977 Petite Sirah "Monterey" (\$4.50) Look for this one on my next "Insider's List" of wines priced under \$5, it is a "Best Buy" of the first magnitude. It is a big wine, but it is more than just brawn. There is fruit, some French oak vanillin and big tannins, too, but everything in balance with the whole.

Bargetto 1979 "First Picking" Chardonnay (\$8) is another very good value. The color is golden, almost Sauternes-like, with a very complex, earthy Chardonnay bouquet. It was aged in brand new Limousin oak just long enough to provide its buttery character. The wood does not overpower. The alcohol is high (13.5) but does not manifest itself in any negative manner.

Bargetto 1977 "San Luis Obispo" Cabernet Sauvignon (\$5) is a pretty good \$5 red wine. It isn't much of a Cabernet. The grapes were too ripe at harvest, in my opinion, giving the wine an overripe, plum-like quality.

Any winery that can bat .750 shouldn't have an image problem for long.