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Farm to Fork Across America: Amigo Bob... Influencing an Estate Vineyard of Napa Valley

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Co-authored by Lee Glenn



Remember a few stories back, legendary soils scientist, teacher, farming hero, Amigo Bob Cantisano. Bruce and Barbara Neyers of Neyers Vineyard certainly do... they remember seeking him out 15 years ago to dramatically change their approach to growing grapes.

Pre-Amigo Bob, the Neyers vineyard was cared for by farmer-to-the-stars, Dave Abreu. Back then, Dave was not a believer in organic solutions. To deal with a rash of thrips, he ordered up "some orange, syrupy stuff," Bruce recalls.

"I found the tractor guy putting on a white suit and helmet as he was preparing to spray. I was trained as a chemist in college and knew this wasn't good, especially since the vineyard surrounds our house and we had three kids."

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When asked about the effects, the tractor guy just said: "You should probably keep them inside today."

"We sent him home," Barbara adds with a wry smile.



The Neyers knew of Amigo Bob from Ehren Jordan of Turley Wine Cellars. "Fear of the unknown keeps many a great mind from going outside their comfort zone," Barbara notes with certainty. They called Bob for advice:

"Spray a dilution of apple cider vinegar, one hundred to one," was the answer they received. Poof... thrips gone, no harm, no foul, to soil or man.

"We became organic farmers that day," is Bruce's synopsis.

Now deeply embedded in the soil of Napa's Mayacamas mountain range, roots from Bruce and Barbara Neyers' famed vineyard are still nourished and strengthened by Amigo Bob's continuing influence, testing and advice. They consult with Bob eight times a year. Using a petiole analysis, a kind of blood test based on the fact that the nutrients go back into the stem system during dormancy, Bob can determine the nutrients in the plant... a medical checkup for the vineyard. The test reveals what was drawn from the soil. He uses this to determine the nutrients to be put back into the soil by defining the proper mix of cover crops for the winter.

"The essence of a sustainable system is that you replace what you take out," Bruce notes.

Reaching for his laptop, he calls up the very first custom cover crop Bob designed for them in 1998, which they planted instead of using herbicides. It also infused nitrogen into the soil, added bio-mass and attracted beneficial insects. The difference was apparent within a year.

"The immediacy still surprises me," says Bruce.

With Bob's approach, the soil's health is passed into its crops, helping the grapes withstand bacteria, fungus, mildew, pests and extreme weather conditions... pretty much like the benefits of a healthy human immune system. The health of the vines allows them to project a deeper, stronger root system, with more root hairs.: "More root hairs equals more flavor in the grapes."

Though he admits that the distinctions in the resulting wines are hard to measure, Bob is clear that "... the goal is to make better wine."



"Plus, organic is the right thing because we live there," Barbara adds. "In every way it's the right thing, it's the right thing for us, for the vineyard, for the earth."

Even with these benefits, only a small percentage of vineyards are organic. Unlike growing vegetables, there is no additional money in organic certification for wine, the transition is expensive and the certification process cumbersome. Problems in the vineyard, usually a fungus or mildew, must be anticipated ahead of time, requiring extreme involvement and vigilance.

Borrowing an old phrase, Bruce sums up the required dedication: "... the single best thing you can put in a vineyard is the

owner's footprints."

... but dedication and vigilance are not in short supply at the Neyers' Vineyard, in either the growing or the winemaking.

One of the Neyers' goals is creating distinct wines by using the things already existing in the grape, including wild yeasts clinging to the waxy bloom on the outside of the skin.

"Instead of killing the natural yeasts and introducing bio-engineered yeasts the way most winemakers do, we welcome them. Various yeasts produce various side products as they expire. This helps create complexity in the wine," Bruce explains.

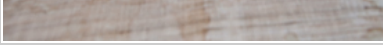
Using wild yeast is inherent in the Neyers' organic approach. No toxic agents are applied which might disrupt this function, impacting the natural flavor profile of the grape. The native yeast become partially responsible for fermenting the grapes and influencing flavor, creating a product not homogenized, more specific, more intricate... differentiating the good from the great.



The yeast in action is a proud part of the Neyers' process. Touring us through their fermentation room, Bruce demonstrates. Stored in the finest French oak barrels, the young wines are still alive as the yeast play their part in the transition. Lifting the carbon dioxide release stopper, the bung on a barrel, Bruce puts our ear over the hole. We can hear a distinct crackling sound in the barrel, the sound of the yeast at work making wine.

"That's the yeast eating the sugars in the grape," he





explains. "They eat the sugars and excrete ethyl alcohol. It's the core of the winemaking process. We love those little SOB's as they do their job."

Creating balance from complex natural forces is the essence of Amigo Bob's philosophy. Applied to grapes, the Neyers embrace Bob's teachings, striking a natural balance to create their legacy of signature wines, the product, exceptional.

Cheers...

Photography: Julie Ann Fineman & Lee Glenn

