

Wine consumers in flux, California winemaker says

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

Chuck McKahn, the 28-year-old winemaker at McKahn Family Cellars in Livermore, Calif., says wine consumers have become more sophisticated in their drinking habits, but that's not good news.

"The wine-drinking community is at a crossroads right now," he said. "There is a significant gap between varietal sales in the wholesale market and in tasting rooms."

He said that people who visit tasting rooms want something new or unique, and people who buy wine at Safeway want Cabernet and Chardonnay.

Online wine sales are throwing a monkey wrench into the market as well.

"Young people are changing everything, but middle-aged and older people are still the bulk of the buying public, so everything is a mess," McKahn said.

McKahn grew up in Ripon, Calif., a small farming community just north of Modesto, and was exposed to the wine industry at an early age mainly because his mother worked in exports at a large Livermore Valley winery.

"I decided to become a winemaker when I was 18," he said. "I worked a harvest at McManis Family Vineyards (in San Joaquin County) before I moved to attend California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo and I was hooked."

"I received my degree in enology," he said. "Studying viticulture was part of my degree, but the core of my studies was in winemaking."

He fermented his first batch of wine on his own in 2014. It was also the first vintage from the McKahn Family Cellars, and all three wines



Courtesy of Chuck McKahn

Chuck McKahn, winemaker at McKahn Family Cellars, praises Syrah as his favorite varietal. "It threads the needle for me (as) a wine with a lot of natural complexity," he says.

turned out to be exceptional. Today the winery's tasting room hosts visitors for a seated, semi-private tasting experience in a relaxed setting.

The number of wines tasted is determined by availability, as the wines are produced in small quantities.

"For whites I like to make aromatic, fruit-driven wines with little to no new oak, and no malolactic fermentation," McKahn said. "For reds, I like robust age-worthy wine and I want them to be drinking strong past 10 years in the bottle."

Malolactic fermentation means the tart malic acid in grapes is converted into mellow lactic acid.

He doesn't mince words or hesitate when it comes to naming his favorite varietal.

"Hands down, it's Syrah, with Grenache being a close second," he said. "Syrah

threads the needle for me being a tannic variety with a lot of natural complexity. I also love how beleaguered its reputation is in the market these days. It's a 'black sheep' wine right now and I think that is awesome considering how many great wines are made from Syrah."

He expands on another area of the California wine industry that he sees as a huge challenge clouding the horizon.

"Large corporations buying every small winemaking or vineyard operation and burying them in a portfolio," he said. "The spending spree has been apocalyptic and it is going to homogenize our industry into a melting pot of mediocrity. Large corporations are inevitably concerned more with the bottom line than they are with quality."



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