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Labor of Love

From blue pinot to sheep tended vines at Antiquum Farm

BY RACHAEL CARNES | PHOTOS COURTESY ANTIQUUM FARM

Sitting 15 miles west of Junction City, Antiquum Farm bursts with life. In the spring, this gorgeous site, nestled in the foothills of the Coast Range, dappled with oaks and cut by Ferguson Creek, becomes a veritable farmyard nursery.

“April through June is just magical at Antiquum Farm,” owner and farmer Stephen Hagen says. “We have geese hatching, which is hysterical and a little terrifying. And right now the ewes are in their awkwardly adorable phase — all belly and skinny legs. They get really docile in the last month. It’s sweet.”

Wait — wine and geese and sheep?

“We farm our vineyard with a methodology that’s entirely our own,” Hagen says. “I call it grazing-based viticulture. These methods allow Antiquum fruit to grow in total isolation. No fertilizers, compost or foliar feed teas are used.”

Hagen’s approach borrows heavily from biodynamics — which treats soil, compost and animals as a single system — but at Antiquum, everything is happening live, in the vineyard.

“There are no compost piles or machinery required to move and distribute them,” Hagen says. “Animals are not housed in order to collect materials. Instead, they happily free-range on the site and leave behind their contributions to our cause.”

At Antiquum Farm, rotational cycles of grazing sheep, geese and hens provide all of the nutritional needs of the vineyard.

“We will start training the sheep against eating grapevines right before lambing begins,” Hagen says. “This training method allows us to graze our vineyards year-round and eliminate all other inputs.”

Hagen uses aversion training in which the sheep eat a small dose of the plant “to create a brief period of mild digestive discomfort.” He stresses that it’s imperative that alternative sources of palatable forage are constantly available for sheep to nibble.

Hagen named the winery’s two most popular varietals after his own kids, Juel (10) and Daisy (14), not just because he’s a proud dad but also because his kids play an integral role on the farm.

“We put our kids’ names on our signature pinot noir and pinot gris to honor their contribution to these wines,” Hagen says. “Juel and Daisy manage over 160 animals when they are out of school.

They work hard, and are proud of the work they do.”

Hagen says working the farm — and caring for its horses, sheep, chickens and geese — provides his kids with a sense of scale and responsibility.

“They are an important part of establishing this unique way of wine growing,” Hagen says. “I think it’s really cool that a 10 and 14-year-old are on the front lines of changing wine growing.”

Hagen and his wife Niki planted their first vines before their daughter was born. He says it took three years for the vineyard to become entirely self-sustaining and that this closed system has yielded some surprising results.

“On the third year we began to see some very peculiar things. Large amounts of the vines began mutating in their growth habits,” Hagen says. “Clusters began standing up on their stems until nearly fully mature, and the fruit uniformly changed color across the entire site.”

Hagen notes that Antiquum’s pinot is now a distinct blue color. “This is not the normal color for pinot,” he says. “But sometimes great things happen and we can’t, or don’t need to know why.”

He has a few guesses as to why the grapes are blue: Pinot noir is highly genetically unstable he says, and between isolation and a lack of industrial intrusion it “has allowed the genetic material on our sites to mutate. There is not one single clonal selection in our vineyard that now behaves in any way that might be associated with the parent material. And we see some really freaky cool things happening,” Hagen adds.

As he walks the rows at harvest time, Hagen frequently sees grape clusters that have a mix of berry colors from white to lavender.

“It was also at this point that we started seeing the most distinct thing about this site take place,” Hagen says. “Our acids began to lock up at a very high level in the ripening process.”

In other words, at Antiquum Farm acidity stops falling very early in the ripening curve, producing a wine with exquisite taste, color, aroma and mouth feel.

“Normally, one of the things that forces your hand to pick is plummeting acidity. Without those acids the wines will lack shape and focus,” Hagen says.