



Convicts Do Time In The Vineyards

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W. Blake Gray

Grape pickers are always hard to find because the job is such hard work and pays poorly. One winery in Mendocino County, California is trying a new idea this year: prisoners.

Six inmates of Mendocino County Jail are picking grapes for Barra of Mendocino. They work alongside the winery's regular crew and are also paid by the bin.

"At first they weren't picking enough, so we had to pay them minimum wage, which in California is \$9 an hour," owner Martha Barra told Wine Searcher. "Our other guys were picking circles around them. They have gotten faster. They're doing just fine."

Barra and Mendocino County Sheriff Tom Allman came up with the idea when she was desperate to get people to pick the 175-acre vineyard she and her husband own in Redwood Valley, about 40 miles north of Sonoma County. Mendocino County, the northern limit of what most consider California Wine Country, is a major producer not only of wine grapes, but also of medical marijuana.

"Marijuana growers hire trimmers the same time of year as grape harvest, and they pay \$25 an hour tax-free," Sheriff Allman told Wine Searcher. Barra said she made fliers seeking pickers and posted them in restaurants and food markets. She even placed ads on radio.

"What really set me off was, there were guys at the grocery store with a sign saying 'Work Wanted'," she said. "I said, 'Fine, get in the pickup truck, we've got grapes to pick.' They said: 'That's not the kind of work we're looking for. We're looking to trim buds.'"

Barra is a long-timer in the wine business. Her husband Charlie Barra, 87, is working his 69th harvest this year. Martha married him 34 years ago so she's on her 34th harvest.

"We're not set up for mechanical harvest on most of the vineyard," she said. "Charlie thought we'd always have labor."

But grape picking is in competition with every other kind of manual labor. During a construction boom, for example, there's always a picker shortage. The situation is exacerbated in California by a federal crackdown on illegal immigration, which has prevented temporary workers from coming north from Mexico just for a season.

At the same time, there are more prisoners in county jails in California. The state has moved many non-violent inmates there because of state prison overcrowding. So a potential labor source was just sitting around all day, behind bars. Allman says the grape-picking program is just a trial this year. The inmates filled out regular applications for Barra, and six got the job. "A lot of people shy away from inmates. They don't think they're regular people," Allman said. "They're not bad people. We have some bad people in jail, but most of them are regular people who got caught."

Several of the prisoners were homeless and without any remaining resources before going to jail. Barra pays them – into a personal account controlled by the sheriff's office – and provides transportation. From their pay, the inmates pay \$11 a day for the ankle bracelet monitor they wear. The jail provides lunch. "It might be a bologna sandwich or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich,"

Barra said. Barra thought they might show up in orange prison jumpsuits, but she says somebody from the jail went to a local thrift shop and the prisoners turned up in regular work clothes, making them indistinguishable from the 14 year-round vineyard staff and the 10 pickers Barra hires from a company in Napa. "We have ordered t-shirts for everybody," says Barra, who adds that the inmates and regular crew ride the same trucks around the vineyards and seem to be getting along fine.

Allman said: "I saw them at the end of the day. They were all covered in sweat and mud and grape skins. I asked: 'Are you going to finish?' They all said they're getting something out of it. We want to make sure this is something they want to do. This is not a slave state. But grape picking, it's not for wimps."

Allman said the prisoners can use the money they earn inside the jail if they want, or have it waiting for them when they get out. While the pay might not sound like much, regular inmate jobs in the Mendocino County Jail pay nothing at all.

"It's to try to break recidivism," Allman said. "Give the inmates something to do. We told them if they finish, we'll have a big party for them at the end."

This year, inmates are only working at Barra, and Allman is aware that he might be open to criticism for that. He hopes to expand the program next year.

Barra said she's not at all worried about having prisoners working her vineyards. "It's a win-win for everybody," she says. "We need pickers. They need money. To me, it's a lot better than sitting in jail and brooding about it. Grape picking is hard work. I think they sleep very well."

BARRA

of MENDOCINO

Winery Events >>

November 9th

Wild Mushroom Cookbook Release Party/Signing and food & wine pairing with foragers and authors Alison Gardner and Merry Winslow (free admission)
3:00 pm - 5:00 pm

November 15th

Annual Winemaker Mushroom Dinner "Moulin Rouge Style" replete with dancers, live music, and of course, the almighty wild mushroom!
6:00 pm - 10:00 pm

November 22/23

12th Annual "A Taste Of Redwood Valley" Holiday Wine Sale
11:00 am—5:00 pm

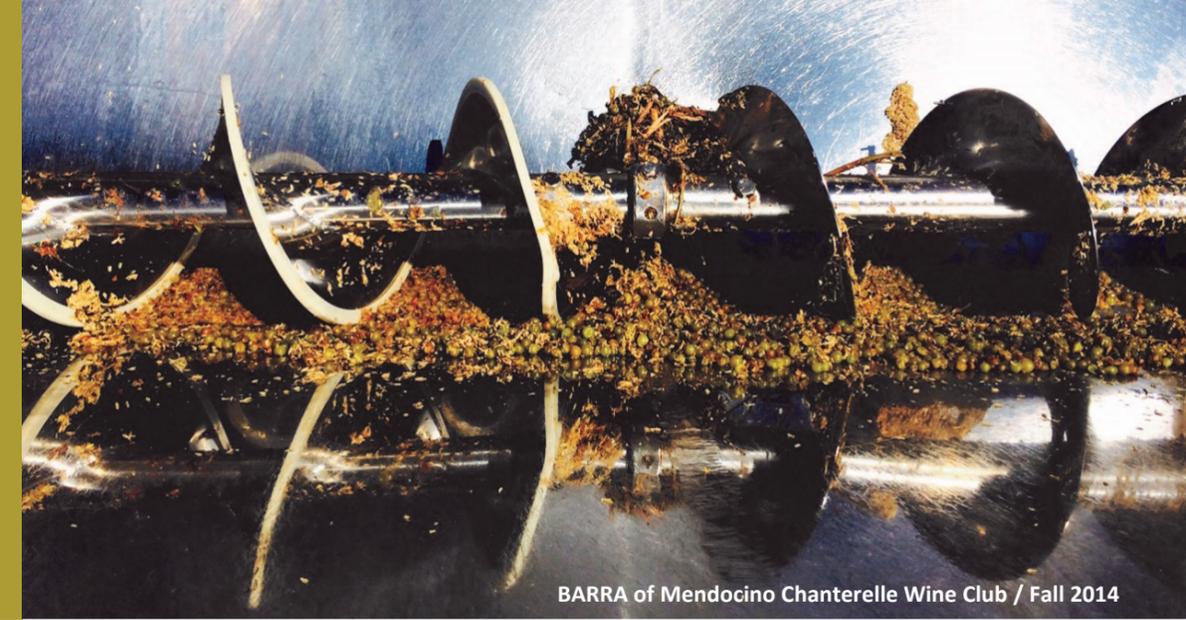
January 24/25

Barrel Tasting 101
11:00 am—5:00 pm

On The Road >>

January 24, 2015

Crab Cake Cook Off & Wine Tasting in Fort Bragg, CA
12:00 pm—3:00 pm



BARRA of Mendocino Chanterelle Wine Club / Fall 2014

Harvest in Motion

Harvest 2014 is officially underway as we write this quarter's newsletter! We kicked off Charlie's 69th harvest (and Martha's 34th) on September 3rd at the Redwood Valley Vineyards home ranch. The weather has been extremely warm so far this year, averaging 90+ degrees each day. With these hot days, it is very important that the winemaking team and the vineyard team are in synch with one another in order to coordinate picking times, sugar levels and priorities for the crews. The good news is that forecasts call for low 80's over the next ten days, so the rest of September just might end up giving us some ideal picking conditions!

As of this writing, we have picked all of our chardonnay, muscat canelli and pinot blanc. Our chardonnay tonnage came in 40% lower than 2013 (which was a bumper crop!), we believe in part due to the fact that we had a long cold spell in December that may have damaged this year's fruit buds. Our brix levels (level of sugars in the grapes measured in degrees by a handheld device called a refractometer) on the chardonnay, however were almost



Harvest 2014 begins!



Blessing of the grapes



Chardonnay at the home ranch



Charlie & vineyard manager, Roberto

identical to our 2013 crop, averaging out to 24.8 this year vs. 24.6 in 2013.

Next in the queue are the reds. We have finished the pinot noir and the sangiovese, and now we are waiting for the zinfandel, petite sirah, merlot and cabernet to reach maturity. It's important to note that maturity in grapes is about more than just sugar levels. A grape is considered mature when the seeds turn brown (at least 80-90% of them anyway), the flavors in the grapes taste ripe and sweet with no off flavors, and the winemaker gives his nod that they have reached the stage of phenolic maturity where they will make outstanding wines. Needless to say, making this determination is a talent that is developed after many, many harvests.

We anticipate picking through the first week of October, with our cabernet most likely being the last varietal to come off the vine. And although our tonnage may come in a little lower than 2013, it looks (and tastes) like Harvest 2014 will be delivering superior fruit that is going to make for a beautiful glass of wine in the very near future.

And what a summer it was...



We were thrilled to find out from Wine Enthusiast that they awarded TWO of our Girasole Vineyards wines with 88 points and a Best Buy rating! Our 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon (now sold out) and our 2010 Zinfandel were both featured in the September issue of Wine Enthusiast Magazine. Be sure to give us a call to order some of the 2010 Zinfandel before it too is sold out!

SANTÉ

We also received news from Sante Magazine that they would be featuring our BARRA of Mendocino 2009 Petite Sirah in an upcoming issue:

Barra of Mendocino 2009 Estate Grown Petite Sirah (96% Petite Sirah)

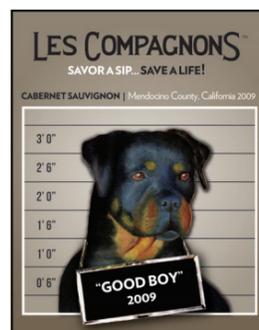
Ripe blackberry and raspberry aromas, with roast coffee, black pepper, and coffee notes. Full on the palate, showing concentrated black plum and blackberry flavors, over a spicy notes. Balanced, with a juicy berry finish.

Food Pairing: Espresso-rubbed venison tenderloin with black garlic, juniper red wine sauce and caramelized cipollini red onions

Price: \$\$



We had the privilege of seeing many of you this summer at our very popular "Pizza In the Garden" events. We hosted 8 different evenings in the garden, featuring wood-fired pizzas, live music, delicious wine and lots of friends and family. We want to thank you for joining us, and if you missed out, be sure to mark your calendar for next year as plans are already in the works for more fun!



For all of your canine lovers out there, we are pleased to announce the availability of two wines that benefit the local Humane Society! Les Compagnons comes in two varietals—Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Grigio. These wines are reasonably priced \$13 p/ btl or \$8.25/bottle when you buy a full case, mix-n-match). These are tasting room only wines, so give us a call at 707.485.0322 to place your order.

2010 Pinot Grigio -This lovely wine delivers notes of Guava, melon and spiced pear that explode from the glass. Upon taking your first sip, you will be rewarded with stone fruit, apple and pear, with hints of spice. The wonderful acidity and minerality that runs through this wine will lend itself to many wonderful food pairings.

2009 Cabernet Sauvignon -This Cabernet Sauvignon will delight you with wonderful aromas of ripe blackberries, dried cranberry and cracked pepper. Upon taking your first sip you will notice flavors of sweet red fruits, baking spice and just a hint of toasty French Oak. This lovely wine lingers on the palate and awakens the senses!"

Your Fall 2014 Featured Wines



2011 BARRA of Mendocino Zinfandel

pH: 3.38 **TA:** .61
Alcohol: 14.5%

A bright, medium-bodied wine with the spicy aromas that Zinfandel is known for. On the palate there are flavors of blackberry, complemented by notes of mint and cedar. A touch of new French Oak lends texture and weight to the mid-palate, while contributing a hint of sweet vanilla cookie.

Given that we're going to be entering into those cooler fall evenings but the backyard grill is still open for business, pop open a bottle of this lovely Zin alongside a balsamic marinated hanger steak and some grilled rosemary and garlic red potatoes.



2012 BARRA of Mendocino Pinot Noir

pH: 3.69 **TA:** .66
Alcohol: 14.2%

Ruby jewel tone in color, this 2012 Pinot Noir is clean & focused on the nose, with a lovely black cherry essence. The ripe cherry flavors continue through the palate, marrying with the light French oak to draw out a smooth, lengthy finish.

Because of its versatility, this wine will be a perfect complement to your holiday meals. And although it seems too early to be thinking about the holidays, please note that we have limited quantities available on this wine due to the Canadian liquor board selecting it as part of their holiday promotions. So be sure to use your 20% wine club member discount to stock up soon!

pH & TA-Revisiting High School Science Class

Because we talked a bit about ripeness in grapes in the opening section of this newsletter, we thought it might be fun to jog your memory a bit about pH and TA, and how these factors play into what we taste in the glass. If you recall, pH is the measure of the degree of acidity vs. alkalinity of any liquid. The scale goes from 0-14, with 7 being neutral. This is another one of the ways a winemaker determines a grape's ripeness in relation to acidity. According to the experts at Wine Spectator, most wine pH's fall around 3 or 4, with 3.0-3.4 being the ideal range for white wines and 3.3-3.6 for reds. TA (total acidity) measures acidity as well, but by volume. Most wines fall into the range of .6 to .7 percent.