

VIGNERON

by Frank Deis

French and Italian don't have a commonly used word for "winemaker." *Vigneron* in French, or *viticoltore* in Italian, literally means "vine grower." The philosophy is that the job of the "vigneron" is to plant the vines and tend them. Once the grapes have been picked, the wine more or less makes itself. I read **The Vines of San Lorenzo : The Making of a Great Wine in the New Tradition**, by Edward Steinberg, and it is surprising how much of the book deals with fussing with grape vines. The specific wine he is discussing is a Barbaresco made by Angelo Gaja in Piedmont, in northern Italy. The grape is nebbiolo. The nebbiolo vine will grow like kudzu, if it's planted in fertile soil with lots of room. But when it runs wild, the grapes taste weak and thin. You have to take this vine and plant it in dry rocky ground, and trim it down to one or two canes, and only allow a very few buds to develop into bunches of grapes. Then each bunch carries the whole potential of the vine, each grape fills the mouth with huge flavor. When these grapes are perfectly ripe, they will result in great wine. So the tradition of centuries has been to focus on the "farming" involved, finding the right soil for the grape vines and keeping them properly pruned, and picking at the right moment. A lot of the task of the vigneron is planting in the proper place. Some of the best German vineyards, along the Rhine River (in the Rheingau or Rhine Valley) were planted by order of Charlemagne, who noticed where the snow melted first in the Spring. German vineyards are so far north that the grapes only ripen properly on south-facing slopes. Also, it is thought that the quality of the soil comes through as part of the "terroir." Chardonnay which is planted in the chalky soil of Chablis has a special taste that appears to relate to the soil.

Now, Italian and French have the word "Enologist" – a person who studies the science of wine, the biochemistry of fermentation and flavor and color. But why is the term "winemaker" so important in American wine production? The answer is that it has become possible to manipulate the course of fermentation, and various aspects of the final product, in ways that were never dreamed of in previous decades. Fermenting wine forms a "cap." You can decide how long to leave the cap in place, you may wish to break it up, or perhaps hose the wine over it so that the juice will pick up more color and flavor from the skins. That is the old fashioned way.

These days there are rotary fermentors, carbonic maceration, and a process called reverse osmosis which can actually remove water from the fermenting wine, leaving a more highly flavored and colored juice behind. When the fermentation is mostly finished, use of barrels or even wood chips can change the mouth-feel of the wine and add "toasty vanilla" elements. There is a recognizable style of California red wine which is very rich, drinkable when young, and rather expensive. Wineries around the world are learning to imitate these California reds, and there are good and bad sides to this. The good part is that there is a lot of nice tasting wine around. The bad part is that all of the wine made this way basically tastes like it came from California. Italian red wines have always been known for having a certain acidic bite. This is characteristic of these wines and makes them go very well with many foods. Buying an Italian wine that might be a California Zinfandel or Cabernet is a little distressing if what you wanted was something Italian!