



by Randy Caparoso

Mission vines planted in Amador County in 1853 are now the source of highly sought table wines made by Sandlands, Miraflores, and Deaver Vineyards, among other producers.



PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

How to Drive a Mule Up a Ladder

by Randy Caparoso

WHAT CAME FIRST, the chicken or the egg? I think the open-ended question is analogous to this question about wine trends: Do we sommeliers and retailers start them, or do they start themselves?

I can think of many beautiful wines, for instance, that I made huge efforts to sell during the 1990s: Biancolella from Ischia, Baroque from Tursan, Grechetto from Umbria, Zweigelt from Austria, sparkling Shiraz from Australia . . . the list goes on and on. I also remember the early 1980s when Bandol was a hard sell, but then again, those were funny times; we struggled to move varietal Chardonnay at the same time we were going through cases of German Riesling every night.

But no matter how many newsletters I would write or how many events and tasting menus I'd concoct as a pretense for shoving certain styles of wine down my guests' throats, it was, generally speaking, like getting a mule up a ladder. That's why it's been amusing to see many of these wines selling so well today.

If there's any wisdom to be gained from my experience, it's this: For the most part, consumers are receptive to new and unfamiliar wines when they are good and ready for them. By the same token, your own guests will never be ready unless you put those wines in front of them. It's not a "chicken or egg" thing, it's a "chicken **and** egg" thing—one doesn't happen without the other. And in the restaurant setting, there is always one rule to go by: If there is a newfangled wine that makes your dishes taste that much better, then it is worth all the time and effort it takes to get your staff and guests riled up about it.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about Mission, a varietal that the entire California wine industry has been trying to sweep under the rug ever since the state joined the Union in 1850. Mission has long been perceived as a thin red wine that's weak in color, tannin, and alcohol as well as almost neutral in aroma. It was good enough for pre-statehood Franciscans, but not for a burgeoning class

of discriminating wine lovers, especially as newly arriving entrepreneurs began bringing in "better" grapes such as Palomino, Colombard, Riesling, Zinfandel, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Which is why it's also been amusing that, just over the past five years, red table wines made from Mission have started to rank among our bestsellers, at least here on the West Coast. There is now a small but growing segment of consumers who prefer refreshing alternatives to the overbearing reds that dominate the commercial market. Not surprisingly, some of the ex-sommeliers who have recently started wine brands, such as Christopher Miller, MS, of Bold Wine Co. and Patrick Cappelletto of Monte Rio Cellars, have also jumped on the Mission bandwagon. As the old saying goes, expect the unexpected.

Whatever the case may be, it's as much a sommelier's job to respond to consumers' needs as it is to be a part of their process of discovery—no matter how hard or frustrating that may be. **SJ**