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Crush Begins at New Runquist Winery

Award-winning winemaker realizes long-time dream in Amador County

by Jon Tourney



Jeff and Margie Runquist mix beakers of yeast inoculant to start fermentations. All wines are small-lot fermented in MacroBins.

Plymouth, Calif.—Award-winning winemaker Jeff Runquist began the first crush at his new Amador County winery Sept. 19, realizing a long-time dream, after producing Jeff Runquist Wines at other facilities for 16 years. He plans to crush 190 tons and produce about 12,000 cases of the 2011 vintage.

Runquist began his career in Amador County, working at fabled Montevina Winery (now part of Trinchero Family Estates). He recalled his time there as a young winemaker, where he began sketching drawings for his own winery in 1979. He later worked throughout California, at the former Napa Valley Cooperative Winery in St. Helena, 1 million-case J. Lohr Winery in San Jose and Paso Robles, and McManis Family Vineyards in Ripon. Now the dream is reality. After crushing 6 tons of Petite Sirah one morning last week, Runquist said, “This is a dream come true. It’s been a long time coming, and it’s nice to be here.”

Runquist wines have won major awards in competitions throughout the past decade. The winery won the Golden State Winery Award at the 2011 California State Fair Wine Competition, receiving 12 awards for all 12 wines entered, including four double gold medals. Runquist wines have received Best of Show awards in recent years at the Pacific Rim International Wine Competition, the Orange County Fair Wine Competition, and the California State Fair. At the 2009 San Francisco International Wine Competition, Runquist received the “Andre Tchelistcheff Winemaker of the Year” award.

The awards have played a major role in promoting the Runquist brand, and helped increase wine sales and growth. Jeff Runquist Wines has been a profitable business from its beginning in 1995, and most releases sell quickly.

However, Runquist didn’t rush into building a winery. In addition to being a graduate of the University of California, Davis, viticulture and enology program, he received an MBA from Santa Clara University to gain business knowledge and management skills. Runquist commented, “I doubt I could have afforded to put together a facility like this before building the business into a bankable asset.”

Two Runquist wines are consistent winners in competitions: Amador County Barbera from the Dick Cooper Vineyard, and Clarksburg Petite Sirah from the Enver Salman Vineyard.



Bins of Petite Sirah await crush at Jeff Runquist's new Amador County winery

Winery built for function, wine style

Runquist and wife Margie purchased their 5-acre Amador property in 2006, part of the historic Peroni Ranch that included a farmhouse built in 1853. Located on Shenandoah Road, a main visitor route through Amador's Shenandoah Valley AVA, the Runquists first built a tasting room and office that opened in 2008.

Runquist continued as winemaker at McManis, where he also produced his own label wines from 1998 through 2010. With his new winery up and running, Runquist stepped back from full-time work at McManis and now acts as its consulting winemaker.

The new winery is architecturally modest, built for functionality and efficiency. The nearly 5,000-square-foot metal, insulated cellar building and adjacent covered concrete crush pad provide flexibility. Operations focus on small lot processing with bins and barrels. The only fixed equipment are 12 crush pad tanks, fabricated by Santa Rosa Stainless Steel, ranging in capacity from 1,000 to 4,000 gallons. These are used for racking wines after pressing, and for blending and storage prior to bottling.

Runquist wines are known for a fruit-forward, approachable style with soft tannins, but with good depth, balance, color and mouthfeel. Runquist dislikes bitter flavor and harsh tannins, and he takes great care to avoid seed tannin extraction. He refuses to use pumps for any product transfer until after pressing, or do mechanical pump-over during fermentation.

Incoming grapes are dumped from harvest bins into a hopper that feeds a Delta E12 destemmer/crusher. Crushed fruit drops directly into a bin for fermentation. All fermentations are done in half-ton plastic MacroBins. Each bin is inoculated with yeast culture and remains on the outside crush pad for one to two days to begin fermentation.

Custom punch-down technology

Punch-downs are done early in the fermentation process. Runquist designed a semi-automatic pneumatic punch-down device, custom fabricated on a movable metal frame to position over a MacroBin. The bins are then moved into the cellar building, maintained at 60° F; fermentations last about one week. Bins are then emptied directly into an older model Howard Rotapress—a horizontal basket press—that conservatively yields about 160 gallons per ton from two press cycles with gentle pressing to avoid seed tannins.

The cellar building provides barrel aging in stacks up to five high, plus case storage. The barrel program is a mix of new and neutral American, French and Hungarian oak. Oak influence and barrel aging are important elements of Runquist wines. Barrel aging ranges from eight months for Grenache to up to 30 months for Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. Most other varieties age from 14 to 17 months.

Runquist never tops barrels during aging. Each barrel is capped with a silicone bung after malolactic fermentation. Left sealed, a vacuum forms around the bung to prevent oxygen contact and microbial contamination. "I've seen research that showed that the greatest introduction of oxygen during barrel aging occurs from topping operations," Runquist said. "The fruit-forward nature of our wines benefits from preventing oxygen contact during aging, other than normal permeation through the barrel. If we made wines with more tannins, maybe more oxygen and topping would be appropriate, but this method suits our style," he summarized.

The winery is still not complete, and 2011 continues to be a transition year. Some case storage of past vintages remains at McManis. The Amador facility will soon need more space as new wines move through the production cycle. Construction will begin later this month on another 5,000 square-foot cellar building for barrel and case storage, a wine lab and offices.

Grower relationships key

Runquist has always focused on vineyard-designated, varietal red wines. During his career working throughout California, he met and developed relationships with growers who could provide quality fruit to match his wine style. He considers these growers part of his production team. The vineyard and grower's name are listed on the label of vineyard-designated wines.

Runquist has bought grapes from Amador grower Sue Fox since his first vintage in 1995. She provides the Massoni Ranch Zinfandel, a flagship Runquist wine since the beginning.

Three varieties—Barbera, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel—account for about 60% of total production. Other varieties include Syrah from Paso Robles, Cabernet Sauvignon from Paso Robles and Napa Valley, Pinot Noir from Carneros, Sangiovese and Primitivo from Amador County, and a Cabernet Franc from Clarksburg. The varietal lineup has expanded in recent years to include Carignane and Grenache from Lodi, and a Petite Verdot from Stanislaus County. Other additions are Portuguese varieties Touriga and Souzao, along with Tannat from Ron Silva's Silvaspoons Vineyard in the Alta Mesa sub-appellation of the Lodi AVA.

Unlike many wineries that dictate parameters for grape production and ripeness, Runquist trusts and relies upon his growers' vineyard management and harvest decisions. He recalled a conversation with a grower who asked what was expected for ripeness levels. The grower was surprised when Runquist told him, "I'm never going to know your vineyard as well as you do. When you think it's ready and the grapes taste right to you, that's when we pick."

Sales strong, growth anticipated

Margie Runquist manages the tasting room. Open just three days per week, it has seen traffic grow to 500 visitors each weekend. For the past year, wine sales had a healthy split of 5,500 cases in direct sales (tasting room, wine club, Internet) and 7,800 cases through distribution in 21 states. Prices range from \$20 to \$34 per bottle.

Runquist plans to move offices out of the tasting room building and into the new winery building to open up more space for tasting and visitor events. He sees potential for more promotion to expand visitor traffic and direct sales but said, "The last thing I want people to do is experience what I call combat wine tasting. We want them to have a positive experience when they show up."

Amador crush well underway

Like most regions of California, Amador County's 2011 harvest is later and lighter than normal. Although spring frost was not an issue here as it was in some parts of California, a Memorial Day weekend hailstorm wiped out some vineyard blocks that were in the middle of bloom. Varieties affected in some locations included Viognier, Primitivo, Barbera and Zinfandel. Concerns about rain forecast for this week have pushed harvest into full gear. Runquist expects to complete crush by Halloween, and hopes to receive his average overall tonnage. However, he said he may only receive about two-thirds of his normal crop of the prized Cooper Vineyard Barbera.