



## VINEYARD VIGNETTE: ACORN WINERY

*By Jane Hodges Young*

ACORN Winery  
12040 Old Redwood Highway  
Healdsburg, CA 95448  
(707) 433-6440  
[www.acornwinery.com](http://www.acornwinery.com)

**Case production:** Less than 3,000

**Planted acres:** 27

**Varieties:** Zinfandel, Syrah, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, Cabernet Franc and a “field blend” of 60 different varieties

**Wines produced:** Zinfandel, Syrah, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, Cabernet Franc, Rosato Blend, Medley Blend and Acorn Hill Blend (every ACORN wine is a field blend of multiple, co-fermented varieties)

**Employees:** 2

A visit to tiny ACORN Winery is a step back to old Sonoma Wine Country. A single-lane, one-way gravel road winds past small homes and through acres of old vineyards—the last vestiges of rural Sonoma in the creeping development of Windsor and Healdsburg. Under majestic oak trees and within earshot of Highway 101, Bill and Betsy Nachbaur live in a modest home next door to their small winery, where they work full time producing some of the finest wines that will ever dance across your palate.

Bill is a former lawyer who worked for the federal government, a credit card company and financial institutions in both Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. Betsy was the public policy officer for Bank of America when it was still headquartered in The City. Both liked wine and gardening, enough so that Bill got in the car and motored up to Santa Rosa to take wine and viticulture classes at Santa Rosa Junior College. One day, on a class field trip, the bus passed by the historic Alegría Vineyard on Old Redwood Highway, and his instructor, Rich Thomas, casually mentioned that it had just fallen out of escrow. After class, Bill went back to look at what he describes as a “perfect existing 100-year-old vineyard” that was just waiting for him. “I could apply what I’d learned in the classes, and because of its age, the vineyard was immediately productive.” The vineyard promptly went into escrow again—this time with Bill and Betsy’s names on it. It’s been their baby since 1990.

At first, Bill and Betsy sold all their grapes. Bill contacted Ridge Vineyards, and the Zinfandel powerhouse made a vineyard designate from Alegría grapes, which helped put the vineyard on the map. In 1993, they decided to venture into winemaking themselves. By then, several wineries were putting the Alegría Vineyards on their labels, and the Nachbours wanted them to continue to do that, so they needed a different name for their winery. Because there are so many oak trees on the property, and because the wine goes into oak barrels, the couple settled on the name “ACORN.”

“Acorns are a symbol of prosperity, good fortune and potential,” Bill explains. An old adage is “Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.” So Bill and Betsy thought “ACORN” was the perfect fit for their tiny winery.

ACORN’s first release was a 1994 Sangiovese, which hit the market in 1996. Slowly, more varietals were added to the portfolio, and ACORN started developing a devoted band of followers who appreciated Bill and Betsy’s hand-crafted wines. They caught the eye of wine reviewers and wine competition judges, who, over the years, have been generous in their praise and abundant in their awards. A major milestone came in 2004 when ACORN’s 2002 Zinfandel—Heritage Vines, Alegría Vineyard—walked away with the biggest prize at the annual Sonoma County Harvest Fair: Gold Medal, Best of Class, Sweepstakes Winner Best Red Wine. And just like that, tiny ACORN Winery was catapulted to the big leagues.

“It definitely caught the attention of those who didn’t know us,” Bill reflects. “We had people come looking only for that wine. People still remember today. It’s been great for name recognition.”

The certified sustainable Alegría Vineyard—part of which is an astonishing 123 years old—is comprised of alluvial soil. “Every rock we turn up is rounded from being moved by water,” Bill says. There are four types of soil “but a lot of variability,” Bill explains. “If you dig a hole every six feet, you come up with something else. It’s kind of like taking all the soils of California and putting them in a Cuisinart.”

The couple practices sustainable farming methods. “We want to leave the land in better shape than when we found it. We want flowering weeds to attract beneficial insects. And we always have more good bugs than bad bugs.”

Because the vineyard is situated in Russian River Valley, it “has a cool climate character, which impacts the flavors of the wines,” Bill says. “Our Zinfandel is more restrained than a Dry Creek Zin—you get more blackberry and less raspberry and raisin nuances. Our Cabernet Franc is one of the few grown in the Russian River area. It’s late ripening and has nice flavors—spicy berry, dark cherry and currant.”

The Dolcetto is unique “because hardly anyone grows Dolcetto. It’s a great Italian variety and it’s my favorite pairing with duck. The Dolcetto acids cut the duck fat and the flavors are wonderful—black cherry, mocha and earthiness. It’s just great with Northern Italian foods that are loaded with mushrooms and truffles,” Bill says.

The Syrah is co-fermented with 2 percent Viognier, which adds aroma and enhances the color. “You get wonderful blackberry and blueberry flavors that aren’t overly ripe,” Bill adds. The Sangiovese remains a crowd favorite (one year it won the “Best of State” Award at the California State Fair) and Bill thinks it’s one of the most food-friendly wines he and Betsy make.

ACORN wines are made both at the Alegría Vineyard winery site and at Mauritson Winery in Dry Creek Valley, where winemaker Clay Mauritson advises them on production. “We value his input. He’s very respectful of our vineyard and the differences [from his own vineyards]. He’s not trying to make our wine taste like his,” Bill explains.

There are many things Bill and Betsy like about their remade careers, but what do they like best? “We like educating people and having them taste wines they haven’t necessarily had before to open their eyes to new flavors and experiences,” he says. “And another favorite part is growing the grapes and being outdoors.”

One thing is certain. He doesn’t miss the legal career. “Nowadays, I do have to worry about the weather, which is one big difference between being a winemaker and being a lawyer,” Bill says. “But Alegría means ‘happiness’ in Spanish, and I’m certainly happier in the vineyard than I was behind a desk.”

After all, he concludes, “No one ever *oohed* or *aahed* over well-crafted legislation.”

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