

The End of an Era

By Nils Ahlgren

I remember the call well. Just a simple call really; to say hello and catch up after several months out of contact. I can't say that I was surprised to hear the news that it was time for Val and Dex to cut back production. Making wine is hard work at your prime, let alone for octogenarians! I was, however, surprised when they mentioned that they were interested in selling off some of their sizeable reserve of library wines. This would clearly be a major undertaking for them, so I immediately volunteered to fly out for a week to help move the collection and inventory it, preparing it for sale, in exchange for free lodging and a small sampling fee paid in wine tasting, of course.

If I only knew!

I booked a flight from Pittsburgh to SFO and agreed to meet them at their warehouse to begin the inventory process. On the way out, I recalled our first meeting nearly twenty years prior. I had just graduated college and was interviewing for a job in Palo Alto. I didn't really know anyone in California at the time, so my father gave me Val and Dex's number, just in case. He had connected with them years earlier by googling "Ahlgren," our shared surname and discovering the winery. I called and introduced myself, and they invited me to the winery for dinner after my interview. Wow, this was great! I had never been to a winery before but my father, Dr. James Ahlgren, is a serious wine connoisseur, collector and wine drinker, so I had been tasting critically since my teens. The interview went well, so I was in a good mood when I turned right onto Page Mill Road and began the 20 mile drive to the winery with nothing but a roadmap (this was way before Google or GPS mind you). Good lord that road was downright tortuous! Took me a damn hour to get there. I arrived just in time for dinner and little did I know that this would be the beginning of a cherished friendship.

On this trip, I arrived in San Francisco and drove down to the warehouse to meet Dex and Val. Upon arrival, we found 11 shrink wrapped pallets set out containing wines spanning their early years of production, going back to 1976. It didn't look so daunting, until I realized that each pallet held an essentially completely random assortment of wines. Some cases even contained more than one type of wine, or were only partially filled. With nowhere better to start, we took a pad/paper and moved one box at a time from the first pallet, beginning the inventory. We got through several pallets before we realized that we could not finish that day, so we agreed to have half of the wine delivered to the winery the next day, and the rest later in the week. We could finish the inventory at the winery, and besides, we needed time to make space for the delivery.

At the warehouse, I spotted some interesting items during the course of the day, and we took several bottles home to taste. A couple of wines had not been seen in decades and brought back many interesting stories. When we arrived at the winery, we quickly realized that there was nowhere near enough room to organize all of the wine,

and we agreed that the next day would be devoted to making room in the winery. We did some quick strategizing, broke for the day and started pulling corks.

First up was a 1977 Zinfandel Blanc that brought back some memories. From just their second vintage, the grapes came in not ripe enough to make a respectable red wine, so the juice was pressed off of the grapes immediately, and the wine made in five-gallon glass carboys. Handling it very gently, racking with nitrogen pressure to avoid pumping, the wine was beautiful and pink, slightly sparkling, and delicious as a dry, but light, fruity young wine. Thirty five years old, our expectations were very low. After all, this was White Zin before White Zin was cool! As it turned out, the wine is still sound; it has retained its fruit, shows no oxidation, and held up over the course of the evening. This would definitely be a harbinger for the rest of the older wines we were to taste. Also up was a bottle of 1998 Paso Robles Syrah. We had noted several cases of this wine, and wanted a quick assessment. This was also nice. The tannins were fully resolved, leaving a plump mature wine ideal for near-term consumption. We packed these up as ringers, and drove down for dinner with Beth and Matt, the Ahlgrens' daughter and son-in-law, with some great Vietnamese take-out picked up earlier.

Day two started out simply enough with breakfast and some Kona coffee I brought along to share. I am hard-pressed to choose between coffee and wine, but at 8am, it is no contest. We then went downstairs to the cellar to strategize. Unfortunately, space in the winery was so tight that we basically needed to deconstruct the entire space to make room for the incoming wine. The first step would be to remove some of the barrels. Then, some more. Finally, damn near all of them. I am hardly a cooper, but I learned a lot about barrels that day: why they are shaped the way they are, how to move them efficiently, and most of all, how much they weigh! More than 50 barrels later, and after moving a bunch of cases, the main area of the winery was clear and open.

By this time, we were pretty beat, and it was clear the delivery was not coming that day. So we called it a day, and tried some more wines. First, we opened a half bottle of 2001 Ventana Pinot which was surprisingly fresh, and I loved the idea that these were splits. This was Val and Dexter's first foray into the challenges of working with Pinot. The coolness of Monterey gives Pinot noir the long growing season it requires, and they had been making Chardonnay there already since 1976, so had contacts for getting the Pinot grapes.

The Santa Cruz Mountains are also famous for Pinot, and this led us to set up a vertical tasting of current releases from 2007-2009. These wines showed the fragrances that made the area famous, and were all drinking quite youthfully, with the tannins only starting to resolve in the oldest wine. I would predict a long life for each of these.

The next day began with a brief rant on our missed delivery, the promise of one the following day, and a lot of space planning. The barrel racks needed flooring to provide staging in order to set out and organize the wine. Thankfully, for this we had help. If I had done it, the place probably would have looked like the Mystery Spot down the hill!

We agreed that we would spread the incoming wines out by variety and vintage to make the inventorying go more easily. Didn't seem like much, but it took a whole day of moving case after case. Scandinavians aren't big complainers. Arguers? Yes. Drinkers? You bet. Stubborn? Damn straight. But, whiners? Never! We were, however, getting pretty sore and weary as this work day ended.

We retired to retaste the Pinots from the previous evening, all of which had softened and improved, and then opened a bottle of one of the crown jewels, the 1997 Bates Cabernet Reserve. We recalled how good this wine was from the barrel, and about thinking that it should become the first reserve bottling by selecting a few barrels and aging them for an additional year before bottling. This was an unusually ripe year (first over 14%) and the wine was almost syrupy in its richness. We both lamented that we were hoping more of this would turn up, but the stash added up to a pitiful 6 bottles.

Finally, on day four the wine delivery arrived. We began unloading the pallets and separated out each individual wine, laying them out in the winery by variety and vintage as previously decided, which worked out well. Individually moving 400 cases of wine in boxes showing various states of decay with god-knows what hanta-carrying (Only kidding. No health risk here.) Dust and detritus on them kind of sucked, but in the end it was surprisingly well organized. This process would continue into day five. Also, we saw that some of the previously inventoried wines had not yet arrived. A quick call to the warehouse confirmed an additional pallet and a half could not fit on the truck and another delivery would have to be scheduled. Oh well. We had most of it laid out by now and could begin to inventory the following day, and we had found some more goodies to try!

This evening, we would revisit some old favorites and taste some obscure finds. First up was a bottle of 1977 Paso Robles Petite Syrah. The only Petite Syrah the Ahlgrens ever made. This was expectedly dark and reminiscent of some of the burly Napa PS wines of the period. Next we opened two favorites: 1983 Ventana Chardonnay and 1981 Livermore Semillon. Both were delicious and showed no signs of tiring out. These old, golden whites are amazingly stable and consistent. Alas, the old Wente vineyard that was the source of several of the old Ahlgren Semillons is now a golf course! This is not progress, folks! Next up, a pair of 85 Cabs from Beauregard and Bates.' The Bates' was, not surprisingly, the bigger of the two, still showing lots of structure and tannin. It has, over the course of the years, been a very consistent vineyard and wine, and was the one that (via Parker) put Ahlgren Vineyard on the wine map. The Beauregard was also very nice, but the cooler climate of Bonny Doon made it come across as slightly leaner and more tannic compared to the Bates.' Finally, we opened a bottle of 1997 Harvest Moon Cabernet. This vineyard is directly adjacent to the Bates' Ranch, so based on the earlier bottle of Reserve, much was expected. It was not quite as rich as the Bates' on the palate, but had a very forward nose. It is slightly more tannic as well, perhaps due to the younger vines. In the end, it improved over the course of the evening and demonstrated how strong a vintage that 1997 was in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The next morning, for the most obvious time in my life, being organized actually paid off. In less than four hours, the whole collection had been inventoried and stored on the computer by merely walking down the rows, reading off the wine and number of bottles, and proceeding to the next until it was complete. Although the work was hard and some of the wine had yet to be delivered, in the end the vast majority of the collection was laid out, organized and prepared for sale.

Well, the work was mostly done, and my time was nearly up. I had to get back to my day job. This was one last evening to taste some additional wines and revisit many of those opened during the course of the week. As this was my final evening there, we were more absorbed in talking than note taking, but I can't remember any of the wines opened over the course of the week, having deteriorated. We talked mostly about the Ahlgren's experiences on the mountain, and about how much we had accomplished in the winery over such a short time. After more wine, we digressed into how to save the world, and other more mundane issues, until it was time to turn in.

The next morning, I packed up and said my goodbyes. I was sore in long forgotten areas, but happy I could help my friends. On my way back over the mountain to SFO to head to home in Pittsburg, I realized that over the course of the whole week I had not watched any television! We did a lot of hard work, but the evenings were spent talking and enjoying each other's company with little concern about what was going on elsewhere in the world. I began to understand how two suburban professionals left Silicon Valley all those years ago to move up to this peaceful sanctuary in the mountains and chase their dream in this place I have looked forward to visiting for nearly 20 years now, to visit with dear friends who, at first, seemingly shared little in common with me other than a name, but who have always treated me like one of the family. Thanks for including me in this adventure!

The result of the above (verbose) effort was the spreadsheet containing an amazing array of over 100 different wines, spanning four decades of winemaking from every premium wine-growing region in California. Of many, there is less than a case remaining. There are also a few cases of magnums and half bottles in the inventory. This collection represents a unique opportunity to purchase a portion of the legacy of two passionate winemakers working in a severely under-rated area of California. It is truly a small part of the storied history of winemaking in the Santa Cruz Mountains ... , and the end of an era.

A few general notes about the wines:

- The wines tasted over the course of the week showed amazing stability. Most wines improved on the second day and were still sound after three and four days open.
- Even the older whites showed no signs of oxidation. This is a testament to noninterventionist winemaking techniques, using well selected vineyards over the course of their career.

- The wines were carefully made and generally unfinned/unfiltered. As such, the reds have thrown some sediment and in some cases, a lot of sediment!
- These wines were in long term storage and were stored on their heads (cork down). This means that some of the older wines have substantial plugs of sediment adhered to the cork or bottle shoulder. To ensure the ability to decant these wines clear, we recommend the following process to prepare them for further cellaring:
 - Upon receipt, inspect your wines carefully, and if they have significant cloudiness or obvious sediment, stand them up for a day.
 - After that day, if there is still sediment along the cork, carefully swirl the bottle such that the air bubble alternates between the cork and the shoulder. Do not shake the bottle, but some agitation is required to remove the sediment from the neck/cork
 - The wine may now be cloudy and not ready yet for near term drinking. Stand the bottles upright for another day or two to collect the bulk sediment to the bottom of the bottle
 - Rack the bottles in your cellar label up and allow them to settle for at least a month to settle out all the fine sediments and clarify the wine.
 - Decant carefully after this time and enjoy the wine!

Nils Ahlgren