

Larner Vineyard: Sweet Spot for Syrah and Grenache Part 1

August 22, 2015

6:03 PM MST



View all
10 photos

The seven producers who poured their Larner Vineyard designate wines, Back Row (l-r), Mikael Sigouin, Russell From, Sonja Magdevski, McPrice Myers, Front Row (l-r), Seth Kunin, Michael Larner, and Paul Lato.

Patricia Decker

Larner Vineyard & Winery, nestled among the hills of the Santa Ynez Valley in **Santa Barbara County**, highlights the axiom that “good wine is made in the vineyard”. A 34 acre vineyard, with 24 producers crafting multiple expressions of **Syrah** and **Grenache** in over 30 different bottlings, seems to prove this theory. Situated in a sweet spot of climate, soils, geology, and geography, **Larner Vineyard** is coming into its own, receiving recognition from winemakers and the public, that this Ballard Canyon vineyard produces very good wine.

Breezy **Ballard Canyon** is Santa Barbara County’s newest American Viticultural Area (AVA), and home to small producers crafting very special vineyard designate wines. Rhône varietals reign here, with an emphasis on **Syrah**, and to a lesser degree, **Grenache**. The Larner family came here in 1999, and planted 34 of the 134 acres to grapevines. Syrah was their champion, with Grenache, Mourvedre, Viognier, and a little bit of Malvasia Bianca filling out the ranks.

Lots of thought went into the initial planting, with different clones and root stock combinations

adding to the diversity of the fruit, according to **Michael Larner**, who manages the vineyard. He says, “I was very adamant about making sure that the foundations we have planted, via the rootstocks, matched the soil, because that changes the water and the nutrient uptake”. On top of that, a variety of Syrah and Grenache clones were grafted, providing a spice rack for the wines. Michael, who also makes wine under his **Larner Vineyard Estate** label, says, “we have 11 different expressions of Syrah in a given vintage, that I try to harness, as the winemaker, by bringing each one in separately, fermenting each one separately, and then blending them back together. The complexity within that variety adds to the spice of that wine.”



Patricia Decker

Focused on customized winegrape farming for their clients, Larner sells 80% of their fruit to 23 winemakers, on a “per acre” agreement. For the small producers, this is an opportunity to call the shots, working with Larner to precisely fine tune their slice of the vineyard pie. Michael says, “they get the fruit no matter what because they’re buying it per acre, so we could do whatever they want us to do. If they want us to go nuts and cut off tons of clusters, and leave only a few, we can do it because it’s affordable for both of us at that point”. Moving from sustainable to organic farming will add a new dimension to their viticulture, with the transition to kinder and gentler methods a benefit, and part of their philosophy of “farming to a higher standard”.

So what makes Larner Vineyard wines so special? Michael says, “I think the signature of this vineyard is minerality, a crushed rock or sort of a chalkiness to it. I always see it in the wines. There is a characteristic of minerality, even at different ripeness levels”.

And the proof is in the glass. At the beginning of summer, Michael invited wine journalists for a tasting of Larner Vineyard wines by seven producers. In a fascinating comparison of varietals and vintages, the Larner minerality came through, expressed through each producer’s looking glass. Casa Dumetz, Paul Lato, Kaena, Herman Story, Kunin, McPrice Meyers, and Larner wines all proudly displayed the Larner Vineyard designate on the label of their Syrah and Grenache bottles. The wines were different, in style and winemaking, yet shared a sense of the earth from which they sprang. Also, the stand out vintage of 2009 consistently carried high quality across the board, with that year often being the producers’ best wine of their lineup.

Sonja Magdevski of **Casa Dumetz Wines** poured one wine, a 2012 Larner Vineyard Grenache. Sniffing the wine, Sonja says, “It’s clean and really elegant, which is why I love this fruit, it’s got a beautiful earth character to it. Even when you taste around, all the different styles, widely different, all delicious, but it’s that earth, and that texture, and that soil that completely comes through”. In the past 2 years, Sonja hasn’t been able to get enough Larner fruit to make a single vineyard bottling, since it sells out right away. She is hopeful to get enough for this year’s Grenache, the Larner Vineyard designate is popular, a top seller which sold out in her Los Alamos tasting room.

Paul Lato of **Paul Lato Wines** poured two Larner Vineyard Syrahs, a 2009 and **2012**

“**Cinématique**”, and a **2011 Lerner Vineyard Grenache “Lumiere**”. Lato fell in love with Santa Barbara County wines in another life as a Toronto sommelier 15 years earlier, so much so that in 2002, he packed up and moved to the area. He started working as a cellar rat, learning from local legends such as Jim Clendenen and Bob Lindquist, while making his own wine. He was one of the first onboard at Lerner Vineyard, pushing the Larners into more precision farming and viticulture. Michael acknowledges that, saying “I love having these kind of guys that sort of push us, that challenge us in the vineyard... because it’s elevated the brand even more”. Lato, who only makes a couple hundred cases of Lerner Vineyard wine, is their poster child, consistently scoring in the high 90’s with lots of wine critics.

Continued in **Part 2**



Patricia Decker

Burbank Wine Shopping Examiner