

September 30, 2009

A 'mongrel' from Chaddsford

ROGER MORRIS

Eric Miller has been making wine for more than a quarter century at Chaddsford Winery, and, even though there are now other people making good wine in the neighborhood, he remains among the most innovative.

Miller can be very opinionated, but, at the same time, no one has more curiosity about how wine is made and grapes are grown. He likes nothing more than traipsing through vineyards and wineries from California to Catalonia, asking questions and getting ideas. He was among the first locally to produce an unoaked chardonnay and to make red wines from northern Italian varietals. Miller once vinified experimental red wines using barrels, each of oak from one of a half-dozen different states.

Eric's wife, Lee, who runs the marketing half of the winery, tells the source of his latest project -- a trip to a vineyard in Spain where the winemaker wasn't available, and the owner kept misidentifying grapes and vineyard facts. Eric being Eric, he corrected the Spaniard on each error. "Finally," Lee says, "the man told Eric in frustration, 'It's not about the individual vines; it's about the vineyard!'"

Thus, Miller's latest creation -- a truly terroir-driven wine using every red grape variety grown in the Miller Estate vineyard near Nantmeal and in the same proportion they're planted. "After 30 years, I think I understand terroir and the terroir of this vineyard," Miller says. "Terroir is whatever man doesn't influence."

Of course, Miller did decide which grapes to plant commercially, and, as there is not a production vineyard at the winery itself, Miller generally tests out vines first in the garden vineyard in front of his Chadds Ford home.

The result is the 2007 Chaddsford Miller Estate "Essence," a red blend of very unusual proportions -- 31 percent cabernet sauvignon, 22 pinot noir, 14 barbera, 10 cabernet franc, 10 syrah, 9 merlot and 4 sangiovese. "Essence," in short, is delicious and very satisfying, perfect to go with food but much better to sip and enjoy. It has dark flavors and excellent structure, but not in the least heavy, mixing together for a complexity of flavors -- peppery spices, tart blackberries, elderberry, smoky oak, tobacco -- that finish lean and with just a touch of tannin. In style, it is very much like a Super Tuscan.

It is not for the faint of pocketbook. Miller made only three barrels and is charging \$75 a bottle, less than many comparable wines from around the world. There will be no 2008, as hail destroyed that crop, and 2009 will be a low-yield vintage as well.

Perhaps Miller sums up his feelings best on the wine's back label: "This is my dirt. This is my climate. These are my grapes. In this mongrel blend, you can see the essence of who I am as a winemaker."
