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Coro Mendocino's inaugural participants, shown here at the Fetzer Valley Oaks Ranch in Hopland, are, from left, Sam Gabrielli of Gabrielli Winery, Greg Graziano of Graziano Family Wines, Fred Nickel of Brutocao Cellars, Casey Hartlip of Eaglepoint Ranch, Sally Ottoson of Pacific Star Winery, Bob Swain of Parducci Wine Estate and Dennis Patton of Golden Vineyards and Fetzer Vineyards.

Mendocino's chorus wants the world to know the score

Often-ignored vintners create wines that will sing to critics and consumers

By Thom Elkjer

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

People make wine for many reasons. Some seek glamour. Some are born into a winery family. Others just want a good job in Wine Country. In Mendocino County, a small band of veteran vintners has discovered yet another motivation—sheer exasperation.

“We want Mendocino to be known for something other than cannabis,” growls Casey Hartlip. “We’ve been giving away our best fruit for 100 years—we might as well see what we can do with it ourselves,” grouses Dennis Patton. “We want to get respect for tradition, not because some millionaire waltzes in and makes a \$100 Cabernet,” snaps Greg Graziano.

What’s eating these guys? Hartlip is partner and winemaker at Eaglepoint Ranch, one of the premier vineyards on the North

Coro's winemaking protocols

“Coro Mendocino” is a red wine blended from grape varieties with a heritage in Mendocino County. Coro means “chorus” in Italian and Spanish, symbolizing many

Mendocino only—Grapes must be grown in Mendocino County and wine must be produced entirely at a Mendocino bonded winery.

Zin rules—Coro must be 40 percent–70 percent Zinfandel, and no other grape variety can have a higher percentage of the blend than Zin.

A Mediterranean family—The “Second Tier” varieties include four from southern France (Garnage, Grenache, Petite Sirah, Syrah) and five from Italy (Barbera, Charbono, Dolcetto, Primitivo, Sangiovese). These can be used in any combination as long as none exceeds 40 percent of the overall blend. Another 10 percent of the blend can come from any vinifera grape grown in Mendocino.

Chemistry 101—Allowed ranges for alcohol, acidity and other chemical metrics

are middle-of-the-road, designed to keep Coro broadly appealing and food-friendly. An independent laboratory certifies compliance.

Barrel rules—The wine must age in barrel at least one year, and new oak must account for at least 25 percent of the cooperage, but not more than 75 percent. The wine must also age in bottle at least six months.

Peer pressure—A panel of five judges, including three participating winemakers, evaluates every proposed Coro blend at least three times and votes (via simple majority) to accept or reject it.

Dressed for success—All Coro bottlings wear the same label, differing only in the name of the winery and the listing of the varieties used in the blend.

—Thom Elkjer

Zin wins the grape debate as Coro's baseline

Coast. Patton is Mendocino's top independent winemaking consultant. Graziano has established not one but three different wine brands in the county. They work in a great industry, live in one of the most beautiful places on earth and are among its most successful vintners. What's the problem?

"There is tremendous professional frustration here among winemakers," Hartlip says.

"We feel we make wine as good as anywhere and the world ignores us."

Now they're doing something about it. Eight Mendocino County wineries have released the first vintage of "Coro Mendocino," America's first region-specific wine controlled by fixed blending and aging parameters. Top European wine regions such as Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, Chianti Classico and Rioja have been governed by such rules for centuries, but no one has tried it in the United States until now.

Coro means "chorus" in both Italian and Spanish, symbolizing many winemaking voices singing the same song. In this case, the melody is a blend of different grapes dominated by Zinfandel, a variety that has thrived in Mendocino for more than a century. The other permitted grapes include Zinfandel's traditional blending partners, such as Petite Sirah, Syrah and other Mediterranean varieties. Coro can be made only in Mendocino, using only Mendocino grapes. It's a bold attempt to create a signature wine that can stand for the entire county in the eyes of the world.

It's also a bold gamble. Most U.S. wine drinkers have been educated to look for

varietal wines (those with the name of a grape on the label). They've also been taught that geographic specificity is a good thing—a single vineyard is better than a sub-appellation, a sub-appellation is better than a whole appellation, and so on. In stark contrast, Coro is a blend that comes from anywhere in a large, diverse county, and any winery in Mendocino can concoct its own version of the wine as long as it follows general rules.

In other words, Coro is swimming against a very strong current. To succeed, the wine will have to be better than good. It will have to be distinctive, definitive and delicious. And that's just what Coro's ringleaders aimed for from the start.

A linebacker blitz

Coro was born in February 2002, when most Mendocino vintners put their 2001 crush into barrels for a long winter's nap. Patton and Graziano met with Fred Nickel, winemaker at Brutocao Cellars in Hopland, and Paul Dolan, then president of Fetzer Vineyards. Dolan says he believes that among the dozens of grape varieties grown in the county, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Syrah give the best expression and definition of the county's environment, or *terroir*. In fact, the year before he hired Patton to make a blend of the three grapes under the Fetzer banner. They called this blend "Comet". "We could have called it 'Linebacker,'" Patton jokes. "It showed us how big a big Mendocino wine could be."

When they met with their fellow vintners, Patton and Dolan posed a theoretical question. What would happen



The first eight Coro wines have similar packaging and are made predominantly from Zinfandel.

if a number of wineries in the county attempted a Comet-like blend? "Their response was immediate," Dolan recalls. They said, "Yeah! Let's do it!"

Easier said than done. One of the main reasons for Mendocino County's low impact on the wine world is that it's populated with rebels, iconoclasts, hermits and outcasts—not just in the wine-making community, but in every area of life. People don't move to the rugged, sparsely populated county to fit in, they move there to escape "fit" of any kind.

"I know from experience that it's hard to get the Mendocino wineries organized," says Norm Roby, who founded and directs Mendocino's charity wine auction. Winesong! "There are too many independent spirits, and the do-your-own-thing attitude prevails."

The same attitude prevails in the winemaking. Mendocino's best wines are unquestionably leaders in their categories—think of Roederer Estate sparkling wine or Navarro Vineyards Riesling—but scores of other wines could only charitably be called "rustic" or "individualistic."

Says Sally Ottoson, founder and winemaker at Pacific Star Winery in Fort Bragg, "Mendocino County is all over the map in terms of quality. The best wines can stand

with anything, but there are too many wines that get hammered in critical tastings."

Luckily for Mendocino wineries, the county's independent-minded residents are perfectly willing to drink up that rustic, individualistic local wine along with excellent values from Claudia Springs, Eaglepoint Ranch, Fetzer, Navarro, Pacific Star, Yorkville Cellars and Graziano's labels Monte Volpe, Fattoria Enotria and Domaine St. Gregory.

But respect from the world outside has been slow in coming. One of the most galling things for the county's winemakers is that for years, many widely praised wines grown in Mendocino have been made somewhere else. Whether it's Rosenblum Cellars' Annette's Reserve Rhodes Vineyard Zinfandel or Copain Wines' portfolio of Anderson Valley single-vineyard Pinot Noirs, outsiders keep cherry-picking grapes, trucking them south or east and getting the credit for the resulting wines.

This, then, is the challenge for Coro—it has to be as good as anything made inside or outside the county, while capturing something unique about Mendocino that no other wine can.

Fateful decisions

Once they made a decision to aim for this daunting target,

Coro gives ‘Mendo blendo’ all new meaning

Coro’s proponents had to persuade their fellow winemakers and establish the “protocol”, or set of rules, that would govern Coro winemaking. This process took two years. In the beginning, every decision required hours of argument. One of the biggest debates was about which grapes to include in the blend. Merlot is the county’s single biggest red variety based on harvest volume, representing 26 percent of the 2003 red-grape crush, but it was ruled out.

“This is about Mendocino’s enduring heritage, not current fashion trends,” says Graziano.

Pinot Noir is nearly tied with Zinfandel at 15 percent of the red crush volume, but virtually all the Pinot is concentrated in Anderson Valley. This sub-appellation within Mendocino County has its own winegrowers association, its own annual events and its own increasingly ardent following among the press and the public. In what may be a fateful decision, the group decided to relegate Pinot Noir to a minor, insignificant role in Coro—effectively cutting Anderson Valley out of the chorus.

“We’re disappointed they didn’t come up with something more inclusive of the whole county,” says Allan Green. He’s the owner of Greenwood Ridge Vineyards, which has vineyards both in Anderson Valley and above it in the Greenwood Ridge appellation. Coro vintners all say that their Anderson Valley colleagues can buy grapes from elsewhere in the county and make a Coro of their own, but that’s unlikely. If the wineries in Hopland, Redwood Valley and the Eastside Road area are already using their best grapes and barreled wines for their own Coro bottlings, what does that leave for others?

“It just shows that there’s

a clear divide in the county,” Green says affably, “We don’t feel competitive with them, we just feel different.”

In the end, the big winner of the grape debate was Zinfandel. It gets 40 percent to 70 percent of the Coro blend. The remainder can come from nine other Mediterranean varieties—four from southern France (Carignane, Grenache, Petite Sirah and Syrah) and five from Italy (Barbera, Charbono, Dolcetto, Primitivo and Sangiovese). The grapes in this “Second Tier” can be used in any combination as long as no variety exceeds 40 percent of the overall blend. The so-called “Free Play” tier, representing up to 10 percent of the overall blend, can include any vinifera variety grown in the county. In her 2001 Coro, Ottoson used her entire Free Play allotment for Pinot Noir.

Next came a tussle over quality rules. The group first nailed down ranges for all the key chemical measures used to gauge wine quality objectively, including alcohol level and acidity metrics. This was a deceptively important step, because for the first time Mendocino vintners were forcing themselves to stay within a range designed to rule out overly rustic, tart or flabby wines.

“Blending rules are infinitely elastic and subjective, because you can keep tweaking a blend until you like it,” notes Nickel. “Chemistry is chemistry, and the numbers don’t lie.”

Then came the real test—wines would only make it into the Coro program if a committee of five group members, known as the review panel, voted them in.

There were several rounds of review, and if the panel didn’t

like a wine for whatever reason, the winemaker had to try again or drop out. Patton was on the review panel, and he was also making two candidate wines for the program.

“It quickly became clear that a wine could make the protocol on the numbers but miss on the quality,” he says. “A couple times I found myself voting against my own wines.”

Some winemakers struggled. “This was the most confounding, head-scratching experience I ever had as a winemaker,” Hartlip admits. Others found the exercise easy. Ottoson and Graziano, for example, have been making unusual blends from Mediterranean varieties for years.

In the end, all the winemakers who survived the process praised it.

“Every time we had a panel tasting I found things in other wines that I wished I had in mine, and I would go back and look at it again,” Nickel says. “The peer review was a huge force for higher quality.”

It was also effective in identifying what Coro vintners call “the family resemblance.” The initial round of submissions included 25 wines from the 2001 vintage; only eight will be released Friday.

“Once that family resemblance became apparent in the early rounds,” says Dunnewood Vineyards winemaker George Phelan “the outliers who didn’t fit drifted away.” Phelan found the fit to his liking, however, and Dunnewood will release a Coro next March, from the 2002 vintage. McDowell Valley Vineyards will also join the program with a 2002 Coro.

One of the most

interesting aspects of the Coro protocol is what it doesn’t specify. Mendocino is believed to have higher percentages of old vines and organically farmed vineyard acres than any other county in the state, but those elements are not mentioned. Low vineyard yields are another key to quality in other areas, but the protocol takes no notice. Yet most of the Coro vintners admit that they made their wine from the best lots of low-yielding vineyards to which they had access, and looked for older, sustainably farmed vines wherever they could.

“We can always amend the protocol,” Patton points out. “This is a work in progress, and it could take a decade or more to get it right.”

Only if they have that much time. The Coro group’s final big decision was to price all the wines at \$35. Anderson Valley Pinot Noirs now fetch that and more, but the rest of the county has long been considered “value” territory.

“You have to swallow hard at the price point,” says Mark Bowery, who directs wine buying for some of Mendocino’s top wine purveyors, including a recently opened shop on Main Street in Mendocino Village. “We’ll work hard to sell it if the wine is good, but \$35 is a shot at the top as far as local prices are concerned.”

Most of the Coro vintners say they will sell the wine in their tasting rooms and through mailing lists, and offer the rest to retail and restaurant accounts. Excluding 500 cases made at Fetzer (always Mendocino’s 800-pound gorilla), the other Coro wineries produced an average of less than 135 cases each. But that sword may cut both ways. Charles Olken,

2001 Coro: meet the family

One of the goals of the Coro programs is to identify and bring to your glass something distinctive about Mendocino County's intermountain North Coast terroir, which includes a heritage of sun-loving Mediterranean varieties, highly varied microclimates, older vines and low-impact farming. The other major aim is to erase any lingering perceptions of Mendocino as the home of value-priced wines that belong only at a barbecue.

By and large, the first eight Coro wines achieve both objectives. There's a distinct family resemblance in the licorice-laced flavors, the full body and the surprisingly plush texture. Only two winemakers stuck to the combination that inspired Coro in the first place—Zinfandel with Syrah and Petite Sirah. Five other bottlings vary that recipe by substituting or adding another variety or two. Only one wine skipped Syrah and Petite Sirah entirely—and it turned out to be one of my favorites.

I tasted the wines three times (twice blind) with consistent notes. They are listed in alphabetical order. All are 2001s from Mendocino County, and all are priced at \$35 retail.

Gabrielli Winery (56 percent Zinfandel, 22 percent Petite Sirah, 11 percent Syrah, 11 percent Sangiovese; 105 cases)—Inviting brambly berry, cassis and tar aromas give way to focused rhubarb/berry pie flavors and engaging texture in your mouth. Oak influence dominates the finish, so you may want to lay this one down a year or two or decant well before serving.

Graziano Family Wines (55 percent Zinfandel, 15 percent Barbera, 15 percent Dolcetto, 15 percent Sangiovese; 168 cases)—Ripe plums marry with cherry hard candy and red licorice in the aromas—a sunny Mediterranean kiss for your nose. A flood of fruit and tannin in the mouth make for opulent chewiness, and the wine finishes with a return of cool cherry and bright acid. Made me hungry.

Eaglepoint Ranch (50 percent Zinfandel, 43 percent Syrah, 7 percent Petite Sirah; 71 cases)—Warm earth, mushrooms and milk chocolate aromas precede a truly juicy mouthful of red and black cherry flavors laced with lemony citrus. A bit warm on the finish, suggesting that you may want to decant well before serving or let the wine rest a year in the bottle.

Brutocao Cellars (59 percent Zinfandel, 36 percent Syrah, 5 percent Primitivo; 70 cases)—The aromas just well out of the glass—ripe red plums, red licorice, milk chocolate and baking spices. A great first impression in the mouth, with abundant fruit, zingy acidity and grip-and-glide texture. The finish is a lipsmacker, too. My highest-rated Brutocao bottling ever.

Golden Vineyards (40 percent Zinfandel, 30 percent Syrah, 20 percent Barbera, 10 percent Petite Sirah; 76 cases)—Concentrated aromas of chocolate-covered cherry, black plum and red licorice with a touch of earth to keep things grounded. A rush of ripe fruit in the mouth includes blueberry—that's Syrah talking. There's a ton of tannin behind the fruit, which indicates ageability for those who want to wait, or decanting to drink now. Either way, it's a complete wine.

Fetzer Vineyards (49 percent Zinfandel, 38 percent Syrah, 9 percent Petite Sirah, 5 percent Grenache; 500 cases)—Blackberry, blueberry and spiced warm milk aromas presage similar flavors in the mouth, along with a gingery zing that's welcome in a wine with more than 15 percent

alcohol. Chewy tannins in the mid-palate glide gently into the long finish, as the blackberry returns. I have to say it: This would be mighty good with barbecue.

Pacific Star Winery (40 percent Zinfandel, 25 percent Petite Sirah, 15 percent Charbono, 10 percent Barbera, 10 percent Pinot Noir; 95 cases)—Nice features all through, including earthy red cherry and licorice aromas, a spicy menthol quality in the mid-palate and mouth-watering acidity. The slight, intentional touch of rusticity suggests that someone had a friendly point to make about puttin' on too much polish. Drink now.

Parducci Wine Estates (68 percent Zinfandel, 22 percent Petite Sirah, 10 percent Syrah; 221 cases)—Dark spice, roasted coffee and toasted oak dominate the aromas of this Zinfandel-focused version, which offers a plush load of red and black fruit flavors in the mouth. It has more oak influence than generally I enjoy, but the tannins are polished and the finish is sweet. Another candidate to cellar or decant before serving.

—Thom Elkjer

editor of *Connoisseur's Guide to California Wine*, argues that “regional reputations are made when lots of people want the wine because there's lots of wine for them to want. With so little production, I don't see how Coro can make an impact.”

Nickel responds that sales volume is irrelevant. “The low production is intentional,” he says. “We want the scarcity to help generate demand from the public and attention from the press. The point of this whole

program is perception, not production.”

In other words, the Coro vintners want to win over wine critics and cult collectors—a fickle crowd even under the best of circumstances. The wine could be great and the strategy could still fail.

So Coro represents a reputational roll of the dice that few wine regions have ever made.

“The best result would be to create clarity in the minds of the trade and consumers

about Mendocino—the same kind of clarity they have now about Napa and Cabernet or Sonoma and Chardonnay,” Dolan says. “People should think of Mendocino as the traditional, natural home of the Mediterranean varieties we chose for Coro. If we achieve that, we've taken a huge step forward.”

Even if that never happens, the harmony that Mendocino vintners achieved with Coro might have an unforeseen benefit.

“If there's more focus on wine quality, now that people are working together and discovering how good their wine can be, then everyone will want to take it up a notch,” suggests Rosenblum Cellars winemaker Jeff Conn. “For Mendocino, that could be the real gain in the long run.”

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