

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



SCHAEFER ON WINE: Mercy, Mercy, Mercy

Dennis Schaefer
November 1, 2012

This is probably going to date me, giving you an idea of how long I've been walking around on this planet, but one of my first introductions to jazz was via a tune and LP (long playing recording, to you youngsters) by the Cannonball Adderly Quintet called "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy!" It's a classic Joe Zawinul composition that's still played today.

Likewise a new winery operation, called Mercy Vineyards, is also exploring new territory and, with the right players in the band, hoping to produce classic wines that stand the test of time. Interestingly enough, the principals in the new label have a Santa Barbara connection. Mike Kohne, Mark Dirickson and Alan Phillips all worked for Foley Family Wines back in the day. When they departed, they all went their separate ways, but still wanted to collaborate on a winemaking project where they could continue to enjoy the camaraderie and contribute their respective talents.

Being originally Santa Barbara County-based, they could have sourced their grapes from Santa Rita Hills. But they followed their intuition and sought out vineyards farther north in what is still a somewhat obscure area, the Arroyo Seco, near Greenfield in Monterey County. To them, it was like discovering Santa Rita Hills all over again, before it had a name. All their grapes are sourced from riverbed vineyards with rocky and sandy but well drained soil that limits grape yields. And with the wind and fog flowing in from Monterey Bay, it's a very cool growing region much like (surprise!) Santa Rita Hills.

Vintners Mike Kohne and Mark Dirickson felt it was only natural to tap Alan Phillips for the wine-making chores and his stylish stamp is on the wines, classically made with clean and elegant lines. A harmonious balance exists in all the wines, where everything is in its place and nothing sticks out. The fruit is direct and accessible, caressed by floral, mineral and earthy aspects as well. The name "Mercy," by the way, as explained on the website (www.mercywines.com), is from "the vine is always at the mercy of mother nature", which seems appropriate. Some thoughts on the newly released wines:

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- Mercy Sauvignon Blanc, Arroyo Seco 2010 (\$16): From the Musque clone, this sauvignon blanc marches to a bit of a different drummer. Green melon and lemon verbena aromas meld with grapefruit, the latter far less aggressive than in New Zealand types. It's very clean and refreshing, almost racy on the nose. The flavors follow the aromas with green lemon and lemon verbena and kiwi, as well as a sense of minerality and just a whiff of jalapeno and green peppercorn. Actually despite the description, it's a subtle and laid back wine best enjoyed with food.
- Mercy Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco 2009 (\$22): Here comes a great breezy nose of citrus, pear, pineapple, nutmeg and orange creamsicle. Caressingly soft in the mouth, this chard's flavors cut a wide swath across the palate. Creamy pineapple and citrus flavors with coconut, nutmeg, clove and vanilla are mouth-coating and extremely well-balanced. Deliciously seductive from the first sip, it can serve as a cocktail sipper but can make the transition to the table very easily. While it has the requisite acidity, it makes a pleasantly soft landing on the finish.
- Mercy Syrah, Arroyo Seco, Zabala Vineyard 2009 (\$28): Expressive aromatics of black cherry, boysenberry and black plum fruit mix are evident with the added savoriness of shoe polish, leather, flint and Asian five spice powder. Clean, clear, elegant and sophisticated on the palate, it shows good flavor concentration with the same dark fruit flavors in the mix. New oak is applied judiciously and supports the firm but supple tannins on the finish that give this wine a good grip.
- Mercy Pinot Noir, Arroyo Seco 2009 (\$28): Made from a broad mixture of pinot clones, this bottling features red cherry, wild blackberry, sage, cola and baking spice on the nose, with just a hint of Christmas fruit cake (and that's a good thing!). Sleek and racy in the mouth, it displays prominent flavors of red cherry, blackberry, boysenberry, tree bark and cola with a touch of vanilla and freshly turned moist earth. It's firm on the finish with finely grained tannins. The primary fruit flavors are the real attraction here; delicate but dense, it's a very elegant expression of cool climate pinot noir.
- Mercy Pinot Noir, Arroyo Seco, Griva Vineyard 2010 (\$38): This vineyard-designated wine is a more serious and focused representation of Monterey County pinot noir. Raspberry and cream are the first aromatic impressions, followed by both black and red cherry along with hibiscus as well as other floral and earthy notes. On the palate, the dark fruit, like black cherry and plum, come through first, then the raspberry and red cherry deftly slide in on mid palate. It shows a pristine sense of balance all the way around as well as being moderately bodied with a pleasant upbeat fruit tartness on the finish.
- Mercy Pinot Noir, Arroyo Seco, Cedar Lane Vineyard 2009 (\$38): A considerably darker fruited nose here, though it has had the benefit of extra time in the bottle (decanting would be appropriate). Dark raspberry, huckleberry and candied violets are the primary aromas as well as pomegranate and a varied amalgam of spicy and earthy characteristics. Rich and warm in the mouth, it has plenty of red berry fruit flavors, including all of those promised by the nose but also cranberry, cinnamon and white florals. Intriguingly, a deeper undercurrent of darker fruit lurks just below the surface, making the wine appealing on multiple levels. Perhaps that's because this bottling concentrates on just two pinot clones, the Pommard and Dijon 667, and it sees the most new oak (30 percent) of any wine in their line-up. Plus it was bottled on my birthday, so you know it's got a good pedigree!