

Russian River Monthly

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Wine Habitat

Putting the best feet forward

By GEORGE KLINEMAN

While most wineries embrace the latest in winemaking technology, there are a few that are going the other direction, back to the days when strong but gentle legs and feet were a winemaker's stock in trade. Before there were grape presses and pumps, it was the winemaker's job to practice and teach *pigeage*, the French craft of coaxing color and flavor out of grapes with one's feet. At **DeLoach Winery on Olivet Road**, winemaker **Greg LaFollette** values this centuries-old approach as a "diagnostic tool" for measuring temperature, feeling for uniform distribution of whole clusters in the mix, and for "identifying compositional changes in the must."

At Amphora Winery on West Dry Creek Road, owner-winemaker Rick Hutchinson relies on trained legs and feet to create 90 per cent of his wines. While embracing the principles of *pigeage*, he defies tradition by not limiting the legs and feet he recruits to men. In fact, he exclusively recruits women, who have been barred from this gooey craft since its inception for reasons which appear to be lost in wine lore. The legs and feet of women, he claims, "add sensuality and femininity to wine."

Both Amphora and **DeLoach** use *pigeage* for pushing down the cap, the thick crust of skins and seeds that floats to the top of fermenting wine, for the purpose of dispersing color and flavors from the skins into the must. Most wineries extract color for their red wines by the "pump-over" method, which involves drawing the juice from the bottom of the tank and pumping it over the cap until the desired color is achieved, but purists like **LaFollette** and Hutchinson believe that pumping robs the wine of its dimensionality. Another method in wide use is pushing down the cap with a device known as a "punchdown stick," which is actually a heavy stick with a perpendicular paddle on the end of it. Hutchinson argues that legs and feet are preferable to the stick because moving the stick through the cap requires considerable upper body strength to get the job done.

Although both **LaFollette** and Hutchinson agree that "no human pathogens grow in wine," they both take precautions to protect their wines from contamination. **LaFollette** prefers to use sanitized rubber boots, which he put into service for the 30th Anniversary Cuvee Pinot Noir from the 2004 vintage, of which 300 cases were produced. Hutchinson requires that his volunteers not wear any lotion or perfume on their legs or feet, and that they show up for their shifts in the fermentation bins with "a fresh pedicure." He also encourages participants to wear a blouse and shorts they "no longer care about" because the splashing must leaves permanent stains.

From a joke among friends when he started the winery in 1997, Hutchinson said interest in his Women's Stomping Event has grown to a list of 250 willing participants. Last year, there were 130, in three to four shifts a day for six weeks. To help make a messy and physically exhausting job more fun, Hutchinson has added the requirement that all participants must either be "a virgin, a born-again virgin, or revirginized." Pressed on what being a virgin has to do with schmooshing grapes, Hutchinson could only muster the observation that "being a virgin is virtuous." He explained that revirginization is accomplished by accepting his declaration that it is so with a toast.

Frivolity aside, Hutchinson provides a public voice to the private compulsions of winemakers who want to get physical with the must. Back in the '80s, I interviewed a winemaker who confessed, after a marathon private tasting of his wines, that he used one of his open

fermentation tanks as a hot tub late at night when everyone else had gone home for the day. He waxed poetic about how exhilarating it was to feel the warm, bubbling must on his naked skin. For Hutchinson, the physical connection is not about pleasure. "A lot of times," he said, "I just get in. You have to immerse yourself in it. Wine is a living thing; it reflects who touches it."

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