

The Corner Of Wall Street And Vine

Renwood Winery's Robert Smerling journeys from banker to vintner

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

It was love at first sip: "Zin just blew my mind," says Robert Smerling, whose fateful taste for Zinfandel exploded into an unexpected career change.

He first encountered the grape in the 1980s, when his investment banking job required frequent trips from Boston to California. After finding old-vine Zinfandel in the Sierra Nevada foothills, he started winemaking as a hobby. Unlike many hobbyists, Smerling demonstrated an aptitude for making tasty, meaningful wines. Buoyed by success, Smerling launched Renwood Winery in 1995; two years later, he left Wall Street to focus on wine.

Today, Renwood is a dominant force in Amador County. It owns 420 acres, buys grapes from 22 vineyards, and produced more than 125,000 cases in 2004.

Renwood produces six vineyard-designated Zinfandels, most notably Grandpère (grandfather), the oldest clone of Zinfandel in the United States. (According to local lore, the original vines bore fruit enjoyed by Mark Twain.) Renwood grows some proprietary clones of Zinfandel and also produces Barbera, Syrah, Viognier, Pinot Grigio, Syrah Rosé, vintage port, Orange Muscat and a unique ice Zinfandel.

Renwood is a triple-play word: It misspells the name of the bird "wren"; it nods obliquely to California's famous redwood trees; and it honors Smerling's wife of 17 years, Rene (short for Irene).

The Wine Report recently met with Smerling while he was in Atlanta.

THE WINE REPORT: *When you launched Renwood Winery, dry, red Zinfandel wasn't popular. What has your marketing strategy been?*

ROBERT SMERLING: Initially, I intended to strictly market where I traveled. Later, we helped start ZAP [Zinfandel Advocates & Producers].

We've marketed Zinfandel as an Amador grape. We always emphasized vineyard age, appellation, *terroir* — there's a running battle between Amador and Sonoma regarding who's consistently the best. We used descriptors like "old-vine Zinfandel." These kinds of descriptions are beginning to appear on Cabernet labels today, but 10 years ago you only saw them on Zin.

From day one, Renwood has been dedicated to the art of making wine. I believe what's in the bottle is the single most important thing in the wine business. I believe that quality sells. Still, I felt that there was one thing missing.



Zin lover, Robert Smerling.

TWR: *What was that?*

RS: Nobody was making quality appellation-designated wines at \$10. I thought you could make a great bottle of wine at that price. I wanted to make Amador or Sierra-foothill-oriented wines. So in 1999 we launched a line of value wines called the Sierra Series, competing directly against the California-appellation vintner blends.

TWR: *How is Renwood's approach to winemaking different?*

RS: "State of the art" doesn't mean that everything has to be modern and new. In my opinion, it means the best of everything available.

All of our fruit is handpicked, so we can control our sugars for better quality. I know of no winery our size that's 100 percent handpicked. We don't believe grapes should be discriminated against. We believe that a \$10 bottle of wine should be a great experience just like a \$30 or \$40 bottle.

Our 20,000-square-foot covered crush platform has no gondola hoist. All the fruit arrives in half-ton or less picking bins. No winery of our size does this. This makes our grapes more expensive, because handpicking is more than double and up to triple the cost of machine picking, plus it takes much more time to dump — a gondola would save probably a couple of hours over the equivalent volume in half-ton bins.

We're boutique. Those bottles of wine have our name on them. I have a very talented staff, but nothing is bottled without my personal approval. In our official 11-year history, we have had to ditch three wines that just weren't up to our

standards. That takes a lot of guts. Most people say, "Just sell it." I don't want to do that.

TWR: *How can you make a great \$10 bottle of wine?*

RS: We are able to save in some other costs. We're in Amador, so our real estate bill is not as expensive as some of those fancy wineries in Napa or those large plants in Lodi.

Our high-end wine sits in oak barrels for eighteen months, while Sierra Series sits for maybe eight months. High-end wines are in imported-glass bottles; Sierra Series is in domestic glass.

We don't make the same margin. Our bottle of wine probably costs us anywhere from 10 to 30 percent more than our competition at the same price point. But we're there to build a long-term business and educate people about our varietals.

TWR: *What are the grape-growing conditions in the Sierra foothills?*

RS: We're halfway between San Francisco and Lake Tahoe. From our vineyards, you can see the snow on the Sierras for about nine months of the year. We have very distinct *terroir*, elevations of 1,500 feet. In the summer we go from 30 degrees at midnight to 110 degrees at noon. Napa stays much warmer.

TWR: *What are your plans for the future?*

RS: Our growth plan is to keep making high-quality wine. We're not looking for any shortcuts. We want to be part of the momentum that gets Americans drinking more wine. We want to have more fun.

As one the largest employers in Amador, we feel a great deal of social responsibility to the community. We've worked with schools, set new standards for employee benefits, worked on promoting Amador County. We built an education center along with our tasting room. Last year we had 60,000 visitors. In the next two years, we'd like to open an Italian bistro restaurant at the winery.

Somehow, we've been able to build a business. Even the fact that we're sitting here talking about our brand is mind-boggling to me. My wife and I just laugh: "How did we get here?" But we love the life!

Hope S. Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

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