

*“You could think of Will Bucklin as the Mother Theresa of grape growers.”*

San Francisco Chronicle  
THE LARGEST DAILY CIRCULATION IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Field of blends

## INTERPLANTED VINEYARDS PRODUCE SOME OF CALIFORNIA'S MOST CAPTIVATING WINES

Tim Teichgraber, August 24, 2006

When you uncork one of California's great old-vine Zinfandels, you're likely to get a lot more than just Zinfandel. The bottle probably contains some Petite Sirah, a little Carignane and a whole lot of history.

The post-Gold Rush, pre-Prohibition vineyards that produce those old-vine Zins are remnants of a very different era in American wine. Back then Zinfandel was the most popular grape and Cabernet Sauvignon was still a minor player. Growers throughout California were just beginning to experiment with grapes imported from Europe, from lesser known varieties like Alicante Bouschet, Durif, Grand Noir and Roussanne to modern standards like Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Most reds were vaguely labeled “burgundy” or “claret,” and you'd never know from the label which grapes made it into the mix.

Wines were made differently then too. Growers planted their vineyards as a “field blend” of different grapes that they figured would combine to make a good wine. Different varieties weren't always planted separately in distinct blocks, as they often are today.

In old field-blend vineyards, there can be several different varieties in a single row of vines, planted in a mosaic-like pattern. The growers would often pick all of the grapes at the same time, even if they weren't equally ripe, and jumble them into the same vat to ferment together -- a technique called co-fermentation.

By contrast, most of today's blended wines are made by fermenting varieties separately so that they can later be “back blended” by the winemaker depending on how the different lots taste.

You could think of Will Bucklin as the Mother Theresa of grape



growers. Bucklin cares for Old Hill Ranch near Glen Ellen, one of the oldest and most chaotically interplanted vineyards anywhere.

Zinfandel is the predominant variety in the dry-farmed, certified organic vineyard, which was planted in the 1850s, but there are at least 26 different grape varieties scattered around its 14 acres. The vineyard was diversified over time, with individual vines replaced over the years with new varieties. Peterson says he suspects that Old Hill might even have operated as a local nursery, providing budwood for other growers interested in planting unusual new grapes.

Bucklin was working as a winemaker for King Estate in Oregon when his family called him back to manage Old Hill, which his mother and stepfather had bought in 1981. Bucklin says he knew how to make wine, but hadn't spent a whole lot of time in the vineyards. He says that caring for Old Hill Ranch has been a crash course in viticulture.

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### 2004 BUCKLIN OLD HILL RANCH SONOMA VALLEY ZINFANDEL

“A unique wine from a historic vineyard, it's ripe and complex with a zesty core of blueberry, raspberry and blackberry-flavored Zinfandel fruit, then all sorts of subtle secondary notes, from flecks of rhubarb and brambly green notes to coffee, chocolate and black pepper flavors.”

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With help from UC Davis experts, Bucklin spent two years identifying each vine and made a color-coded map showing where different varieties were growing. "When I first started making the map, I didn't really understand how complicated (the vineyard) was. Now that I have a graphic image of it, I do." The map shows the mosaic of assorted varieties that make up the vineyard and explains why the Bucklin Old Hill Ranch Zinfandel (\$34) is more complex tasting than typical varietal Zinfandel wines. Bucklin wants to retain the historic composition of the vineyard, so as individual vines succumb to disease or old age, he tries to replace them with the same variety. Half of the vineyard's fruit is sold to Ravenswood for its vineyard-designated Old Hill Ranch Sonoma Valley Zinfandel blend (\$60), and Bucklin reserves the other half to make 600 cases under his own label.

Dividing up the fruit from interplanted vineyards like Old Hill Ranch is challenging. Zinfandel ripens early with a couple of other varieties, while most of the other grapes ripen a couple of weeks later. Each fall, Bucklin and Peterson agree on a picking date and then harvest the vineyard in two passes, usually 10 days or two weeks apart. To ensure that both wineries get a similar mix of varieties, the pickers alternate tubs -- one for Ravenswood, the next for Bucklin.

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Both Old Hill wines are aromatic, layered and complex with a great range of spicy, brambly notes that seem well knit together upon release. Those are qualities that you'll see in many field-blend wines regardless of the various different varietal components. Bucklin's Old Hill isn't as dense as some other famous Zinfandels. "Some describe it as claret-like, which I translate as having lots of things going on at once," says Bucklin. "The field blend is a wine that I can put in my glass, swirl and watch it evolve."

Bucklin makes another field-blend red from younger vines at Old Hill called Mixed Blacks (\$22), as well as a white field blend of Gewurztraminer and Riesling from the Compagni Portis Vineyard (\$20) in Sonoma Valley. White field-blend vineyards are less common than red field-blend vineyards, perhaps because some red varieties of vines, like Zinfandel and Mourvedre, live longer than most white varieties.



## BUCKLIN — OLD HILL RANCH

Glen Ellen, Sonoma Valley

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