

# Making Sauvignon Blanc: Same Vineyard, Different Yeasts

Laura Ness

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**CALIFORNIA SAUVIGNON BLANC HAS** an identity crisis. The style is typically neither like New Zealand's hair-on-fire white grapefruit or stonily chalky, like Sancerre: it's somewhere in the middle, but the middle is wide.

## How Does a Winery Dial in Style?

When it comes to creating a regional style, there are many variables, from fermentation vessel to fermentation technique, that have caused California's Sauvignon Blanc identity crisis. During a recent tasting of five Sauvignon Blancs sourced from one vineyard and made by different winemakers, attendees discovered that the winemaker's choice of yeast is also a significant factor.

As part of Livermore's **Taste Our Terroir** event, which is held each July, participating winemakers all sourced their Sauvignon Blanc grapes from **Ghielmetti Vineyard**, a 64-acre site on a sloped alluvial bench that ranges from 500 to 1,000 feet above sea level. Planted over a two-year period by the Ghielmetti family, from 2001 to 2002, with help from Napa consultants **Jim Regusci** and **Cary Gott**, Ghielmetti Vineyard features 10 varieties planted in 19 separate blocks. It is one of the two prominent sources for Sauvignon Blanc in the Livermore Valley, along with **Del Arroyo Vineyard**.

Sauvignon Blanc is planted in Blocks 8 and 10, which are mostly clay loam and Perkins loam. Block 8 is planted to clone 317, which has distinctive grapefruit, lime and gooseberry flavors, while Block 10 is planted to clone 375, a tropical fruit bomb.

When **Steve Burman**, a winemaker for **3 Steves Winery**, decided to make a Sauvignon Blanc for the first time, he sought counsel from some of those who had been making whites for a while in the Livermore Valley. He spoke with **Dane Stark** of **Page Mill Winery**, who had been making wine from the variety for some time and had some experience with the Ghielmetti Vineyard.

Stark's view of Sauvignon Blanc is pretty much consistent with his view of any varietal. He wants to express its voice through its particular terroir. "For 23 years, I thought the Sauvignon Blanc I got from Paso Robles was the bomb," he said. "But after trying some Livermore examples, I knew I could stop hauling fruit from over a hundred miles away. Livermore Sauvignon Blanc is pristine."

His choice of yeast is simple. "Years ago, my dad [Page Mill Winery founder **Dick Stark**] and I did a bunch of yeast trials, and we came away with this conclusion. We simply wanted a yeast that does the job of fermenting, without adding anything."

Stark uses *Prise de Mousse*, EC-1118, the classic Champagne yeast, not just on Sauvignon Blanc but on everything. "I use this yeast for its resiliency. It gives a clean fermentation every time. I have become a single yeast winery."



THE STEVEN KENT WINERY

Ghielmetti Vineyard

The 2015 Page Mill Sauvignon Blanc (from the Ghielmetti Vineyard) was picked at 24.2° Brix on Sept. 1, 2015, direct-pressed, chilled and settled at 40° F for 24 hours, then stainless steel-fermented for around 12 days. When dry, the wine was sulfured to inhibit ML and was bentonite-fined for heat stability. Finished alcohol was 13.9 percent, TA was 5g/l with a pH of 3.7. This is a clean, crisp wine with a touch of spice and very little grassiness.

Burman also consulted with **Mark Clarin**, longtime winemaker for **McGrail Vineyards and Winery** in Livermore (prior to that, **Wente Vineyards, Picazo Vineyards** and **Bonny Doon Vineyard**) for some advice on yeast, barrels and so forth. Clarin uses VL3, a Bordeaux yeast known to enhance Sauvignon Blanc varietal characters and aromas. It's also suited to lees aging and delivers very low levels of VA and SO<sub>2</sub>. Clarin also uses Bio-arom, a glutathione-based compound that works in conjunction with the yeast to help preserve the aromatics. He used very neutral barrels for about 10 percent of the lot, which add just the right touch of texture.

## Same Vineyard, Different Winemakers and Different Yeasts

Winemaker	Winery	Wine (from Ghielmetti Vineyard)	Winemaking	Yeast	Supplier	Winemaker Comments
Steve Burman	3 Steves	2015 3 Steves Sauvignon Blanc	Processed in two batches, in two separate tanks with two different yeasts, QA23 and Cross Evolution	QA23 and Cross Evolution	Scott Labs	QA23 is the "D80" of yeasts, a workhorse... It adds tropical notes, gives big mouthfeel. Cross Evolution for roundness
Dane Stark	Page Mill	2015 Page Mill Sauvignon Blanc	Picked at 24.2 Brix, direct pressed, chilled and settled at 40 degrees for 24 hours, stainless steel fermented for 12 days. Sulfured to inhibit ML and was bentonite fined for heat stability. Finished alcohol was 13.9%, tA was 5g/l with a pH of 3.7.	Proise de Mousse, EC 118	Lallemand	A yeast for resiliency
Mark Clarin	McGrail	2015 McGrail Sauvignon Blanc	Neutral barrels for 10 percent of the lot for texture.	VL3	Laffort	Suited to lees aging, delivers low levels of VA and SO <sub>2</sub>
Earl Ault	Cedar Mtn	2015 Cedar Mountain Sauvignon Blanc	Brix of 23.8, pH of 3.45 and a TA of 0.54, sent straight to press and fermented in stainless steel with Vin 2000 yeast.	Vin2000	Scott Labs	Aromas of grapefruit, papaya and lemon peel; a slightly higher alcohol level
Craig Ploof	Steven Kent	2015SKW "Lola" Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon blend	60% blend of Sauvignon Blanc and 40% Semillon, neither went through ML	Zymaflore Delta  (CY 3079 for semillon)	Laffort  Scott Labs	Intensifies aromas of grapefruit and passionfruit; elegance  Recommened for barrel fermenting whites; aromas of honey and flowers

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The 2015 McGrail Sauvignon Blanc was harvested from the Ghielmetti Vineyard on Aug. 20, direct-pressed to stainless and 10 percent neutral oak, and finished out with a TA of 0.58, pH of 3.45 and alcohol of 14.1 percent. Flavors tend towards melon and tropical, mostly guava and pineapple, with a creamy mid-palate of white peach and vanilla.

Back to Burman, who began his own trials. “I started with six different yeasts, and quickly narrowed them down,” said Burman. One of the yeasts recommended was CY3079, but he found it went too fast, and the temps got too high. He also felt it added too much texture for what he feels should be a crisp white. So he settled on two yeasts that seemed promising.

The 2015 3 Steves Winery Sauvignon Blanc was picked on Aug. 18 at 4:30 a.m. By the time they processed the wine, at 7:30 a.m., it was 57° F degrees, and the mid-day high reached 91° F. The Sauvignon Blanc was processed in two batches, in two separate tanks with two different yeasts, QA23 and Cross Evolution.

Burman calls QA23 the “D80” of yeasts. It’s a workhorse beast, like the tractor. It adds a lot of tropical notes, including pineapple and banana, and most importantly, it gives the wine the big mouthfeel he desires.



“The mouthfeel is like that ‘thud’ of the door on the higher end Ford cars. It makes a bold impression. I’m going for that same kind of impact, like when you nudge the car door closed,” said Burman, who worked at **Ford Motor Company** in a past life.

The Cross Evolution yeast is used to add roundness, contributing to that “thud” effect. Burman notes that they added acid before the 20 day fermentation ensued. They did not induce malolactic fermentation and added bentonite. They also filtered with bentonite before taking the wine to Page Mill Winery for cold stabilization. The final alcohol was 14.1 percent from initial sugars of 23.8° and a pH of 3.42. This year, they have their own jacketed tanks, and the plan is for a longer, cooler ferment, around 65° F, which Burman hopes will yield more mango flavors.

Truly a pioneer of the modern Livermore white wine scene is **Earl Ault**, whose **Cedar Mountain Winery** operation grew to become one of the region’s most popular custom crush facilities over the last two decades. Ault and his wife, **Linda**, who opened Cedar Mountain in their garage back in 1990, sold their property on Tesla Road to **Darcie and David Kent**, who recently opened **Darcie Kent Winery** at the site. The Aults subsequently moved Cedar Mountain to a brand-new facility further out on Tesla to Reuss Road,



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adjacent to the Ghielmetti Vineyard. Earl says they get to watch the Sauvignon Blanc ripen under their very noses.

Ault said he's been making Sauvignon Blanc for at least five years and selected this vineyard source for its reputation. They also harvested on Aug. 18, 2015, with Brix of 23.8°, pH of 3.45 and a TA of 0.54. The lot was sent straight to press and fermented in stainless steel with Vin 2000 yeast.

The aromas are beautiful, with grapefruit, papaya and lemon peel, while the driving grapefruit and acid on the palate is caused by the yeast, which generally results in a slightly higher alcohol level (14.5 percent) and a tingling sensation in the mouth. This is a pretty wine that gets out of its own way.

The 2015 Steven Kent SB example, called "Lola," made by winemaker **Craig Ploof**, is actually a blend of 60 percent Sauvignon Blanc and 40 percent Semillon, also grown at the Ghielmetti Vineyard. Picked over two days, Aug. 17 and Aug. 18, the Sauvignon Blanc was done whole cluster, entirely in stainless steel, while the Semillon saw neutral oak for three weeks. The yeast for the Sauvignon Blanc, which came from Block 10, was Delta, chosen for its ability to intensify aromas, like grapefruit and passionfruit, along with developing complexity and elegance in aromatic whites.

CY3079 was used for the Semillon: this yeast is recommended for barrel-fermenting whites, and amps up aromas of honey and flowers. The pH was 3.27 and the TA 0.73, with a finished alcohol of 13.8 percent.

Neither grape was allowed to go through malolactic to preserve the racy fruit, and it is racy, with a precise linearity from the driving acidity, spilling over onto the palate with gooseberry, pear and lemon curd, despite the dominance of the Semillon on the nose, with its unmistakable church candle wax and honey character.

Sampling all these wines and hearing the back stories make one further appreciate the role that yeast plays in getting the job done. **WBM**

**Editor's Note:** See "Product Review: Yeast for Sauvignon Blanc," **WBM**, June 2009, in our online archives: [www.winebusiness.com/wbm](http://www.winebusiness.com/wbm)

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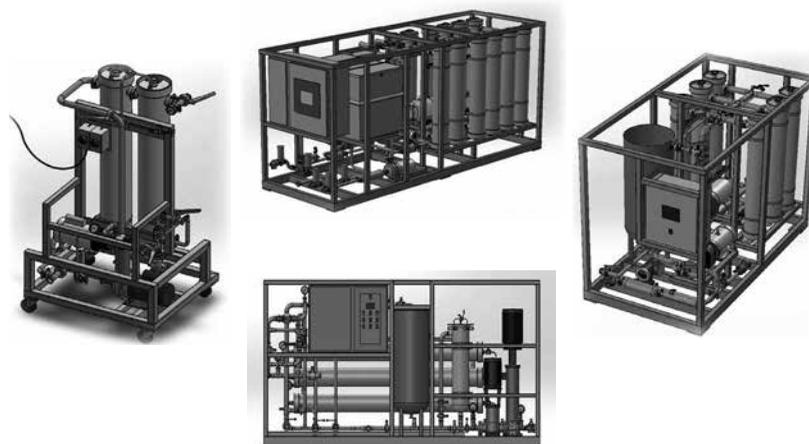
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