

Mike Dunne's Wine of the Week: 2008 Amador County Grenache

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Andis Wines 2008 Amador County Grenache (\$21)

Andis Wines is a striking new winery in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley. Before it opened this past Thanksgiving weekend, wineries in the area customarily occupied weathered old barns or utilitarian steel sheds. At their most ambitious, they resembled villas tucked into the folds of the Tuscan hills.

In sharp and original departure from all that, Andis juts from a knoll with the assured bearing and open sunniness of a post-modern art museum. It's all prefabricated metal and soaring glass, in misty silver, gray and blue.

It's big, nearly 17,000 square feet, but seems even bigger for the overhang of its immense canopy. It looks as if you could park an Airbus A380 inside, yet for all its starkness and size it doesn't feel out of place. In dramatic counterpoint, it fairly floats above the old, black and gnarled vines spilling across the slopes about it, a cloud casting a fleeting shadow.

It takes its name from the owners, Andy and Janis Friedlaner, who divide their time between homes in Sutter Creek and Honolulu. They've entrusted the winemaking to Shenandoah Valley veteran Mark McKenna, most recently of nearby Bray Vineyards, where he made the first Andis wines pending completion of the new facility in time for this past fall's harvest.

His inaugural lineup includes the usual foothill suspects - petite sirah, zinfandel, barbera - all turned out in a style more European than Californian, showing relative restraint with the ripeness of the fruit and the alcohol, tannin and oak in the resulting wines.

The standout for its complexity and persistence is the Andis Wines 2008 Amador County Grenache. While sunny and jaunty on one hand, the grenache also is assertive and meaty, resulting in a wine rich yet frisky. The smell is so forthright, the flavor so substantive you have to wonder why more California vintners don't release grenache as a varietal. Wine enthusiasts are discovering its facets and depths, however, helping make the grenache one of the more popular wines in the Andis portfolio.

It's a grape and a wine that clearly excites McKenna. "Grenache is better than most at really expressing terroir. We love working with grenache because it is such a high-wire act. It tends toward minerality, but what you try to do is tease out the background fruit. The key is to make any significant adjustments early and then leave it alone; bottle it earlier than other Rhone varietals and don't expose it to too much oak," McKenna says.

Grenache has been cultivated in California for decades, but not extensively. Only around 7,000 acres are planted to the grape in the state, and that total isn't increasing fast. Few wines made with grenache are sold as varietals, and when they are they likely will be as a rose, not as a full-bodied table wine. As a table wine, grenache commonly is blended with syrah and

mourvedre, the familiar practice in Europe, from which California vintners continue to take most of their cues.

While the grenache for this wine was grown in Shenandoah Valley, it isn't from the Andis estate, planted to 23 acres of older zinfandel, some of which is ailing from the root-lice phylloxera and is being replanted. Unless Andis plants its own grenache, McKenna is keeping his fingers crossed that he can continue to buy the grapes, which should be no problem given his early success with the variety.

By the numbers: 13.9 percent alcohol, 137 cases, \$21.

Context: "The grenache begs for pork in just about any form, from BLT to tenderloin," says McKenna. "Tomato soup and grilled cheese with Gruyere is a family favorite. And homemade pizza with sausage, spinach and shaved Parmesan is pretty tasty, too," he adds.

Availability: Because both winery and wine are new, distribution hasn't begun beyond Andis. It and other Andis releases, however, can be ordered online through the winery's website, www.andiswines.com. The 2009 version of the grenache, incidentally, is expected to be released in April.

More information: Andis Wines, 11000 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth, is open 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Friday through Monday.

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Long-time wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne continues his relationship with The Bee as a contributing columnist to the Food & Wine section and www.sacwineregion.com. His wine selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. Check out his blog at <http://www.ayearinwine.com>, and reach him at mikedunne@winegigs.com.