

Will Bucklin's Old Hill Ranch is the oldest vineyard in Sonoma Valley. The ranch was established in 1885 and many of the original vines are still in production.

Bucklin has 30 acres of vines in production. The entire 14-acre ancient field blend vineyard is dry farmed. He also has newer blocks of vines, of which some are irrigated and others not. One day, he says, it will all be dry farmed.

His Vineyard

Bucklin's 14-acre dry-farmed vineyard is a field blend, but consists predominately of head pruned Zinfandel. Following the planting norms of the time, about 1/3 of the vineyard is comprised of other red varieties, such as Petite Syrah, Grenache, Alicante Bouschet, and Tempranillo. The vine spacing is 5 X 10 feet.



Bucklin Old Hill Ranch, Sonoma Valley

simply die. Bucklin stresses the need for healthy soils and nutrients to support the old vines.

Bucklin's stepfather farmed the old vines for 20 years in a very hands-off manner before Bucklin took over. When Bucklin acquired the ranch, the old vines were yielding only 1/4 to 1/2 ton per acre. He was told by many people to either irrigate the old vines or simply pull them out. However, since then, 30 years of adding compost and cultivating the soil has reversed the soil compaction, improved soil health, and increased vine productivity. The vines now yield, on average, 2 tons an acre.

With the old vines, Bucklin does not disk the soils. He plants a cover crop, flail mows down the cover crop in the spring and spades it into the soil. He then spreads 3 to 5 tons of compost per acre and calcium phosphate. His soils had low phosphates, so the addition of calcium phosphate may have been helpful in terms of increasing yields.

His younger vineyards include a ten-acre mixed red field blend planted in 1998, and a six-acre Cabernet Sauvignon block planted in 1983. Bucklin is also continually planting new 1/2-acre blocks of vines. His goal is to convert all his vineyards to dry-farmed vineyards, but it has been a slow road.

Cultivation and Old Vine Maintenance:

Vines that are 100+ years old present unique management challenges. Every vine ages differently, disease susceptibility increases, and sometimes the vines

Once he spades the rows, Bucklin tries not to drive on the rows for about a month, allowing the green fluffy dirt to retain air and compost. About a month after spading, he will make one or two passes with a harrow to finish off the surface of the rows.

Planting New Vines and Vineyards

Bucklin states that planting new vines and vineyards is a learning process. To plant new blocks and vines he uses St. George rootstock and cuttings from his old vines. Even if the vineyard or vine will eventually be dry farmed, he irrigates the vines for the first year. He grafts the cutting on to the rootstock in the fall.

Bucklin removes the fruit from the vine each year of early production. He does not want to stress the young vines, but instead, let the vines create substantial root systems. He says the difference between dry farming and irrigating vines is that he may even want to remove the fruit from the vine during the third year of production and look to harvest fruit for wine during the fourth year. However, he is experimenting with these time scales.

If he is planting new vines in the old dry-farmed vineyard, Bucklin will break up the soil around where the new vine will be planted to remove the competition from the older vine's roots. In the spring, he will plant the rootstock and water the vine by placing a five-gallon bucket with a hole in the bottom over the top of the vine. It is also necessary to keep track of the vines he replants in the ancient vineyard, because he needs to remove the fruit for the first few years to help the vine establish itself while surrounded by the root competition from the other vines.



Converting Vineyards

CAFF Field Day, Bucklin Old Hill Ranch

Bucklin's goal is to dry farm all of his vineyards. Even now, he minimally irrigates his newer blocks, having only started to irrigate on August 1st of 2012. This is in contrast to other vineyard managers who start irrigating in May. He is pretty sure he could convert his irrigated vineyards to be dry farmed in one year, but if he just turned the water off, he would experience a production loss. For this reason, he has been slowly weaning the vines off of water to ensure that the vines will not lose production when they are no longer irrigated.

Why Dry Farm?

Bucklin comments that if he could make his newer vineyards like his old dry-farmed block, then farming would be much easier. Dry farming produces vines that are resilient and self sufficient. Further, dry farming is fairly malleable to different vineyard sites and management systems. He is still learning the best way to farm and manage his vineyards.

Bucklin recalls a two day heat spell of 118 ° F on July 18th of 2005, which is outside of the normal temperature range for Sonoma Valley. He was worried

about his dry farmed vines; they were already a little stressed from the dry time of year. After the heat spell, the vineyard looked terrible. The leaves hung like tissue paper and lost color, turning yellow. But a week later, although the vines had lost some fruit that shriveled and fried in the heat, the dry-farmed vines quickly recovered, losing only 5% of their fruit. In contrast, the irrigated vines that received water during the heat event seemed to be unstressed at the time, but ended up losing 30% of their fruit.

Bucklin says that year he saw two different systems at play. When stress was applied to the old vines, the vines simply shut down and conserved energy. Conversely, the irrigated vines attempted to power through and try harder when stressed. Bucklin is quick to say that one system is not necessarily better than the other, but they do represent entirely different approaches.



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