



... WHEN THE CONVERSATION IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE WINE

SPRING 2015

# The Mad Scientist

## ...DIPS INTO ALCOHOL LEVELS

Wine without alcohol is just grape juice—which, let's admit it, isn't as fun as wine. The alcohol also keeps us from guzzling it down like, well, juice (moderate sipping everyone!). But there's a bit more to a wine's alcohol content than we think, and there's no better person to talk to about it than our own Mad Scientist. We caught up with Winemaker Chris to learn more about one of our favorite subjects.

**Q:** *I've noticed that the alcohol content in wine has gone up over the past years.*

**Chris:** It sure has. It's crept up from about 13 percent to 15 and 16 percent, and sometimes even more.

**Q:** *What's that all about?*

**Chris:** There are a lot of reasons it's gone up. In some cases, it's the result of consumer demand. People are looking for wines with richer flavors, aromas – more of everything. And that might be driven, at least to some extent, by wine critics who like the flavors and big, rich aromas that a high alcohol level brings out. High alcohol wines also tend to be a very deep color, which people find appealing as well.

**Q:** *I've heard that wines from warm climates tend to have higher alcohol content.*

**Chris:** Climate definitely has a lot to do with alcohol levels. In Temecula it's always warm, with spikes of really hot weather, so the fruit can ripen very quickly – and sometimes unexpectedly – resulting in a very high sugar content. Up in Napa, temperatures are more moderate, so it's easier to get the grapes to ripeness without sending sugar levels to the moon. It's all about the sugar because sugar

is what makes alcohol – during the fermentation process, the sugar is metabolized by the yeast and converted to alcohol. Not to get too technical here, but wine-makers measure sugar in brix. For every one degree of brix, which is roughly 1 percent sugar, you'll end up with just over 1/2 percent of alcohol.

**Q:** *What's the alcohol content of Middle Ridge wines?*

**Chris:** My whites are usually 12-13 percent. Typically white wine grapes are picked earlier than red varieties, so the alcohol content isn't as high. For my reds, I try to hit 14 percent because I prefer the way my wine tastes at that alcohol level. I say I try to hit 14 percent, because sometimes I don't!

**Q:** *I heard there was one time it missed the mark quite a bit.*

**Chris:** Yes, indeed. Our 2010 Old Vine Zinfandel ended up at 15.7 percent alcohol. It's a funny thing about nature; I do my vineyard samples best I can, where, before harvesting, I randomly select berries from all over the vineyard, mash them up and measure the sugar content. So, when I harvested the Zin I knew the grapes were going to have a little higher sugar content than I wanted but not that high. Maybe some overripe grapes got tossed into my bins by accident. Or maybe something happened on the road to Temecula (laughs). I really don't know what happened.



**Q:** *How did that wine turn out?*

**Chris:** The good thing is that it didn't taste like a high alcohol wine at all! I think that's because the acid structure was still good and that buries the taste of alcohol. It was very aromatic, with a really nice fruit taste. People thought it was great, and in fact, it ended up being one of the most popular wines we've ever had.

**Q:** *Can I try I glass?*

**Chris:** I wish you could, but it's completely sold out. It was that good!

*Wine in the Lines*

# Barrel Art

## CHALLENGE

Our Annual Barrel Tasting takes place every November, and it's our biggest event of the year. There's always so much fun going on, from tasting wine right out of the barrel to our Signature Aroma Table, great food and music, and displays of fine art created by the artists of Idyllwild. And this year was even bigger and better. When guests arrived, they were treated to something new and different...and very special: ordinary wine barrels that had been transformed into four show-stopping entries in our 1st Annual Barrel Art Challenge.

"I was blown away by the barrel art," said event attendee Vicky Cortez. "It was amazing to see the creativity and the fine details that went into each piece."

We had given selected local artists 59-gallon wooden wine barrels to turn into art. The rules were very simple: They could use all of the barrel or only part of it, and they could embellish their art with non-barrel materials up to 25% of the finished piece. Each person attending the event got to vote on their favorite piece for the People's Choice Award, and television's "Wheel of Fortune" Assistant Art Director and Set Designer Jody Vaclav was on hand to select the winner of the Judge's Choice Award.

"When I saw the different art pieces, I thought 'Wow, this is going to be hard to pick a winner,' said Jody. "I took my time and really looked at each one and spoke with all the artists. It was amazing to hear about their processes and how long it took them to make their barrel art."

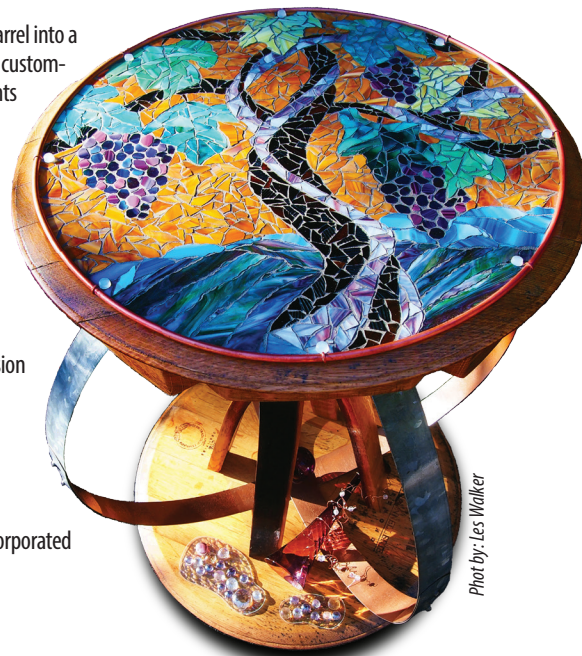
The time factor is also remarkable given that these artists are not just talented in visual arts — they also have creative day jobs that keep them very busy. One is a chef and another is a musician. A professional organizer, a photographer, a furniture-maker and a building contractor/ inn owner add to the eclectic mix. So, it's no surprise that the art gallery-worthy results were as creative and varied as the artists themselves.

### Barrel-ly Recognizable

By Shanna & Dave Robb  
artistscreatingchange1@gmail.com

Shanna and Dave Robb turned their barrel into a *FUN-tional Art* table with a removable custom-designed mosaic top that featured lights below the skirt. Details included oil-rubbed finish, spilt wine accent, and barrel stampings on the base. While Barrel-ly Recognizable, 90% of the pieces used came from the original wine barrel.

"It was fun collaborating as a husband and wife team, and this was our first art piece," says Shanna. "I loved the fusion of artistic talents and the challenge of creating a piece of functional artwork. The mosaic top, which took over fifty-four hours to create in addition to the table, is a custom design with thousands of hand-cut pieces that incorporated depth and a sense of shadows."



Phot by: Les Walker



SenA PHOTO

### Have a Taste

By Chef Martin Corso and PT Gray (Paula Gray)  
artbyptgray.com

Chef Martin Corso and PT Gray (Paula Gray) both love wine and they asked themselves, "If we had the opportunity to build a tasting room, what would it look like?" This diorama is the result of their tasting room fantasy.

"Marty Corso is a conceptual artist who does 3-D sculptures, and I'm a painter and photographer," says PT Gray. "I was going to paint the outside of the barrel but Marty said, 'Let's do a diorama.' It became a real scavenger hunt as I found everything I needed. For example, the little barrel tables are salt and pepper shakers, and the silver platters are actually wine tasting sippers I found at an antique shop. Everything in it has meaning."



Phot by: Les Walker

### Meritage

By Brad Rechtfertig  
grandidyllwildlodge.com

Brad Rechtfertig built a waterfall artscape using recycled wine barrel staves, a local Idyllwild Manzanita branch, copper accents, and a bottle that held wine aged in the barrel itself. It's amazing that this beautiful piece was created by someone who doesn't even consider himself an artist. "I'm a designer and a general contractor — I designed and built the hotel I own, the Grand Idyllwild Lodge," says Brad. "But I really wanted to create something 'outside the box' and do something no one else would do. I wasn't even sure it would work until it was done, since I needed to get the water flowing in just the right way."



Phot by: Les Walker

### Deconstructed

By Wayne Cameron

Wayne Cameron, a musician, furniture-maker, and all around "fix-it" guy, has used reclaimed wood and drift wood in his work, but this was the first time he tackled a wine barrel. Applying his extensive wood-working talents, he decided to deconstruct the barrel into an abstract sculpture. "The inspiration came from my first two failures to create my original design which was going to be a mobile," says Wayne. "I ended up dismantling that piece and just randomly started piling up the parts on a pallet. I walked into the house after the dismantling, came back out after a while and looked at the pile from a particular angle and said, 'hmmm, what if I...' and the rest is history."

We love working with artists. They put their heart and soul into each piece they create, and a little bit of them stays with their art wherever it goes. It's a lot like making wine — winemakers put their heart and soul into each wine created, and they take great pride in seeing others enjoy the results. So raise your glass of Middle Ridge wine and let's give a hearty "Cheers!" to the artists of our 1st Annual Barrel Art Challenge.

## AND THE WINNERS ARE...

In our book, anyone who can turn a wine barrel into art is a winner, so we were happy to pass the tough work of judging the entries along to our guest judge Jody Vaclav. It was a difficult decision but, after careful consideration, she awarded Shanna and Dave Robb's "FUN-tional Art" with the Judge's Choice Award.

"I kept coming back to Shanna and Dave's table," said Jody. "I thought it was so beautiful and innovative, and it could look amazing in anyone's home."

"Winning the judge's award is an honor," said Shanna Robb. "We are thrilled to have been part of Melody and Chris' vision!"

Event guests were also asked to vote on their favorite piece of barrel art for the People's Choice Award. "I voted for the barrel diorama because it was very inviting to me," said event attendee Christine Massa. "I wanted to get inside, hang out, and have a glass of wine!" Christine's husband Steve Massa voted for a different piece. "For me it was the waterfall artscape because I thought it was unique, calming and original." Other event attendees agreed, and Brad Rechtfertig's waterfall artscape won the People's Choice Award.

"I was really excited to win the People's Choice Award," said Brad. "It was really flattering. Now, next year I'm really going to come up with something mind blowing!"

Distinguished Artist Awards were given to Martin Corso and PT Gray for their diorama and to Wayne Cameron for his abstract sculpture.

"We are honored to receive the award but, more importantly, we enjoyed seeing how people seemed really drawn to the piece — it made people happy and that's what makes us happy. As artists, that's all we really need," said PT Gray.

**Top Left:** Brad Rechtfertig with Melody Johnston, **Top Right:** Guest Judge Jody Vaclav with Shanna & Dave Robb, **Bottom:** Marty Corso, PT Gray, Wayne Cameron, Melody & Chris Johnston



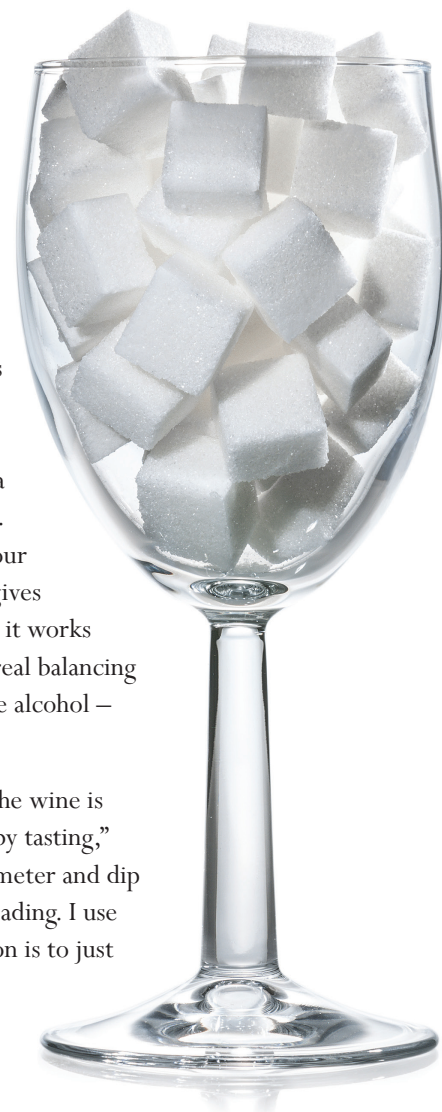
# The Sweet tricks our taste buds play

Even the most novice wine drinker will react to how sweet or dry a wine tastes. That sensation is one of the first things our taste buds acknowledge, which usually leads to a pretty strong reaction such as, “Oh, that’s too sweet!” or “This wine is too dry for me!” But guess what? Sweetness isn’t always about sugar levels.



Real sweetness is measured by the amount of sugar that’s left over from the fermentation process, which is referred to as residual sugar. Some people think our Pinot Grigio contains residual sugar. Check it out for yourself. Take a sniff and a sip and you, too, might think there’s a bit of sweetness. But...wait for it...our Pinot Grigio has almost no residual sugar. Surprised? “Our sense of taste is very complex,” says Winemaker Chris. “What you ‘taste’ is what you smell and what your mouth perceives. The Middle Ridge Pinot Grigio is very aromatic with a lot of fruit aromas, so the brain thinks it is going to be sweet. Then, you get in your mouth and the richness in the mouth also perceives sweetness.” But, in fact, our Pinot Grigio has less than 0.03% residual sugar in it which, by definition, is a bone dry wine.

Conversely, there are wines that have a relatively high level of residual sugar, but our taste buds tell us they’re dry. For example, some Rieslings taste crisp and dry, even though they contain higher levels of residual sugar than the average table wine. That’s because they have an acid level that counterbalances a sweet taste. “The acid in wines like Rieslings adds a sourness which gives the wine structure,” says Chris. “With red wines it’s usually the tannins that make your mouth feel dry. You know how strong coffee or tea gives your mouth a dry feeling? They have tannins, too, so it works the same way in wine. Creating a pleasing taste is a real balancing act between the acids, tannins, residual sugar and the alcohol – which, by the way, adds to perceived sweetness.”

So, when we’re drinking wine, how do we know if the wine is “really” sweet or dry? “There’s no way to know just by tasting,” says Chris. “You can go out and get a blood glucose meter and dip it in the wine. It’ll give you a fairly accurate sugar reading. I use one myself when I’m making wine.” The other option is to just sit back, sip and enjoy the tricks our taste buds play.



## LINKS

-  **Middle Ridge Website**  
[www.middleridge.com](http://www.middleridge.com)
-  **Facebook:**  
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Come taste Middle Ridge wines at Crush & Brew in Old Town Temecula, which serves as our tasting room, and at special events in Idyllwild.



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