

Home > Blogs > Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

stirring the lees with james molesworth

Another Sit Down with Paul Hobbs

The globe-trotting winemaker stops by to talk Malbec, Argentina, California and more

Posted: Sep 9, 2009 10:59am ET

Paul Hobbs has had a peripatetic wine career, one that doesn't show any signs of slowing down, either. The Buffalo, N.Y., native has recently taken on consulting gigs in Canada (with Stratus) and France's Cahors region (with Georges Vigouroux) while expanding his client base in Argentina (where he is a partner in Viña Cobos), and he's done this all in addition to running his California and Hungarian projects. So, I was happy when Paul took a few minutes to stop by and get caught up with me here at my office today.

While my colleague James Laube officially covers California for us, I was still curious to hear what Paul had to say about the impending harvest and the effect of the economy on \$100+ Napa Cabs (of which Paul makes a few). Hobbs noted that the high end has slowed down, yet growers are still pushing yields as they approach harvest this year.

"I'm being very aggressive in reducing crop loads, but most of Napa is at or above normal [yields]," said Hobbs. "If my growers aren't thinning as I ask them to, I'm telling them I'm not buying the fruit next year."

Hobbs' travels have taken him to many foreign markets, and he's begun to see how little California has penetrated beyond the U.S. Following a tour of high-end vacation spots in Mexico, including Cabo San Lucas and Cancun, Hobbs was surprised at how little knowledge of California wine there was there, as well as how little interest. Instead it's wines from Argentina, Chile and other places that dominate the wine lists there. He's seen the same in Brazil, another emerging market that's looking at many other wine regions before they look at California.

"We [meaning California] are going to have to open foreign markets if we want to succeed long term," said Hobbs.

In contrast, things seem to be moving well in the other direction. Hobbs' Viña Cobos project has enjoyed solid growth, from 38,000 cases in 2008 to 50,000 cases this past year (and aiming for 60,000 next). Yes, most of the growth has been in the modestly priced Felino line, as opposed to the high end, but it's growth nonetheless in a challenging market.

Hobbs of course is happy with the growth, but he does see it on a very distinct track.

"Malbec, Malbec, Malbec. It seems the market only wants Malbec," he said. "In the end, I still really believe that if Argentina is going to be considered an elite wine-producing area, it has to prove it can excel with Cabernet Sauvignon."

"We've been working on it for a while now and I'm frustrated we haven't turned the corner yet. I don't have a window on 'why' just yet, but it certainly boils down to [vineyard] management. With Cab, you've got to be on top of it. On Malbec you can get away with vineyard work that isn't done at just the right moment. But if you're two weeks late for some work in a Cab vineyard, quality drops. I've seen it everywhere—Argentina and Napa."

Terroir is also an issue as Argentina tries to build on its recent success while adding some much-needed diversity to the mix. To that end, Hobbs will introduce a new Malbec called Rebon, sourced from a vineyard in La Consulta (the wine is due out next year). It marks a departure from the Luján de Cuyo-only approach that he had been taking with Andrea Marchiori and Luis Barraud at Viña Cobos.

And in addition to trying different areas in Mendoza, Hobbs is trying other grapes with some of his other projects, including Bodega del Desierto in Patagonia.

"Pinot Noir and even Syrah can do better than Malbec in Argentina, depending on the area," said Hobbs. "For comparison, look at Bordeaux. All they basically did [in recent years] was start harvesting later and reducing yields, and the improvement followed. But

that's because the *terroir* was already figured out. Argentina still has to deal with both the site issue and quality issue. There's still a lot of sorting out to do."

For more on Paul Hobbs, you can reference my last 'Sit Down' blog entry with him. And look for my annual report on Argentina in an upcoming December issue.