

OTTIMINO

WINEMAKER

Ottimino's winemaker, William Knuttel, is uncompromising, ever curious, a winemaker's winemaker. For him, wine is terroir and style and technique, and it is more than that, too. Wine is geography and it is a study in psychology—geography because the land nurturing the grapes stamps a character into the wine, and psychology because the experiences of past winemaking ultimately find their way into the current endeavor.

Winemaking is Knuttel's second career. The first was rooted in hard science and left little room for artistic expression. The discipline of the former and a quest for the latter led to winemaking, which became the perfect passion. Since his first homemade Zins and Cabs in the late seventies, he has been on a mission to cram as many grape varieties, wine styles, and experiments as possible into each vintage. After all, a winemaker gets only one shot a year—and only thirty to forty vintages over a career—so breadth of experience is tremendously important. That experience has driven home two primary lessons. First, vineyard sources are critical, and never to be undervalued. Second—and this sets Knuttel apart from winemakers who lip-synch the marketing mantra “the wine is made in the vineyard—” there is no substitute for experience, intuition and innovation in transforming those grapes into fabulous wine. After all, no one credits the farmer for the wizardry of the chef, though the chef understands perfectly that his dish can be no better than its ingredients—likewise the winemaker, realizing that the growing of grapes is the first step of two in a highly subjective process. You must feel your way through the winemaking, guiding, shaping and molding by instinct, responding to the inherent beauty of the fruit.

Making wine, after all, is a process. But winemaking is an art.

Through years of perfecting Burgundian-style Pinot Noir at Saintsbury and through his own venture Tria, Knuttel brought this style to prominence in California, making perhaps more high-end Pinot than any winemaker in California. His Burgundian-influenced pursuits with Chardonnay had similar ramifications, with Knuttel experimenting prodigiously with the post-phylloxera Chardonnay clones and elevating Chardonnay quality to worldwide prominence at both Saintsbury and later at Chalk Hill. The Chalk Hill years also involved extensive experimenting with clones and wine styles with estate vineyards, many of which were planted to Knuttel's specifications. More recent projects have involved re-grooving the wines of Dry Creek Vineyard and spearheading a host of custom projects as a consultant.

The culmination is Ottimino.

Knuttel first visited the secluded Occidental enclave of the Russian River Valley at the behest of Brad Alper, who was planting a vineyard to Zinfandel. Seeing Alper's commitment to grape quality, the two quickly forged a partnership, and Ottimino was born. Knuttel is particularly entranced with the characteristics of Zinfandel in this appellation, and even more fascinated by the amazing variations on those characteristics found in vineyards only meters from each other. The first wines have fulfilled the promise, stamped with the uniqueness Knuttel has pursued his entire winemaking career—and it seems that Ottimino may well be that long sought winemaker's dream.