

Ampelos Cellars: A winery that is cutting edge, passionate and proud



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Since the **Wine Institute** has designated April as Earth Month, I am exploring wineries that utilize sustainable practices in most aspects of their grape growing and wine making process. Each winery employs their own set of standards and principles to attain their goal of sustainability. One winery that is determined to pave the way to establishing a strong foothold in the green practices movement and a pioneer in the field is **Ampelos Cellars**.

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As a Wine Institute member, Ampelos Cellars owners, Peter and Rebecca Work take pride in the fact that they are not only sustainable but they are the first winery to have three different

certifications, SIP (Sustainability in Practice), Organic and Biodynamic. These three practices are evident in all facets of their winery and their passion for winemaking is enhanced by their determination to be green.

I have followed Ampelos Cellars since 2007. In fact I still have some of their earlier vintages in my wine cellar. When I first visited the tasting room the Work's were just beginning to venture into realm of being consciously green. They had just begun to apply biodynamic preparations and organic practices to their vineyard.

Peter and Rebecca Work came from the corporate world. They had purchased property in what is now Sta. Rita Hills in 1999. In 2001 they began planting the vineyard and in 2002 they uprooted their hectic lives in Los Angeles, opting for a more peaceful and what they feel a more fulfilling life. This all came about when Peter was suppose to be at a meeting in the World Trade Center on 911. Fortunate for Peter, his meeting was cancelled but the impact of that day made him re-evaluate his life and career.

In 2004 Ampelos had their first harvest. Throughout the years more acreage has been planted with different grapes with the most recent being Riesling, which is used to add another dimension in their Rosé.

After reading Goete and Steiner's work, in 2005 Peter and Rebecca decided to change the way they farmed their grapes to encompass a plan that approaches the vineyard as a whole organism that is self-sustaining. This strategy times cyclical activities such as planting and harvesting to the moon and planets. The idea is that the land works in harmony with the universe and all elements of nature. By 2006 they were utilizing biodynamic preparations and organic principles in the vineyard. Ampelos was one of the first fourteen vineyards to receive certification under SIP's pilot program in 2008. This was followed by organic certification in 2009. Today these three disciplines are an integral part of the winery, vineyard and tasting room.

The name Ampelos means vine in Greek. Peter and Rebecca have strong ties to Greece but it is there belief that the essentials of winemaking start in the vineyard with the vine, which makes this name so befitting. Thus it is no coincidence that Ampelos' green practices begin in the vineyard with soil management. Three biodynamic

preparations, cow dung compost for the soil, horn dung for the roots and horn silica to aid photosynthesis promote the health and maintenance of the vineyards.

You will find a huge compost pile, which is used to invigorate the soil each year. Being a biodynamic winery there are special ingredients that are used as part of the compost. These include Chamomile, Dandelion, Valerum, Stinging Nettle, Oak Bar and Yarrow. In the winter, horn dung, cow manure is packed into a cow horn and buried in the ground. In the spring horn silica, a fine ground crystal is packed into the cow horn and buried into the ground in a special place. This silica is later used as a spray on the vines. Besides the compost between each row of vines you will find sugar peas, fava beans, vetch and oak rye growing during the winter. This acts as a fertilizer and brings nitrogen back into the soil. In the spring these plants are mowed down and turned into the soil to further revitalize the soil. Ampelos employs chickens for insect control. You will see them following the tractor down each aisle as the plants are being mowed, looking for ants, mealybugs or whatever they can find. Throughout the vineyard there are select rows that are left untouched. These rows are unkempt to protect the good insects such as ladybugs, which work with nature.

Peter and Rebecca have a solar system that covers the energy needs of their home, vineyard and more. Two panels allow the entire property to be completely off the grid.

The philosophy at Ampelos is one where the winemaking process should be completely natural. The addition of yeast, nutrients, malolactic bacteria, enzymes, and artificial color are nonexistent. The idea is to let the juice develop into a wine in its own way. There is almost no sulfur additions or just enough to keep the wine protected from bacteria and oxidation.

The oak barrels come from select CO2 neutral coopers since the Work's prefer oak cut on the descending moon. The use of new oak is very limited. Major winemaking decisions like tasting and bottling are based on the phase of the moon and its position relative to the constellations.

Ampelos packaging is as environmental as possible. They use at least 45% recycle glass made in the United States for bottling. One will see that they are moving away from foil wraps since these cannot be recycled. The corks are Diam, which are TCS free

and are created with a process that efficiently uses cork bark. Gravity is used for racking.

Cardboard leftover from glass shipments is recycled for marketing material. Other cardboard is used for erosion control at the ranch. The refuse of stems, skins, seeds and lees from racking are returned to the vineyard to be used in the compost. All paper is recycled for office use. Even the décor for the tasting room is recycled material. Basically nothing goes to waste.

The wines are exceptional. Each wine has its own name, which is based on Greek characters used in math and physics. Peter states, "Each character is selected based on how it fits the profile of the wine." We started with the 2012 Viognier – Phi: the golden ratio. The wine is aged in stainless steel and fermented for one month without malolactic fermentation. The wine is crisp and exudes the flavors of peaches, apricots and green apples.

The 2013 Rose of Syrah –Upsilon: the charged is one of my favorites. It is refreshing with flavors of strawberry, watermelon and hints of spice on the finish. The wine is made up of Syrah, Grenache and a very small amount of Riesling. I think the Riesling enhances the spices that one perceives on the finish. Perhaps as Peter describes, "Upsilon is an electric charge – the Rose is charged with a lot of different flavors!" To me it is charged with the enhancement of the Riesling. This wine is co-fermented for a month in stainless steel and like the Viognier without malolactic fermentation.

Peter pulled out a wine that I never expected to be produced at Ampelos. It was a 2007 Dornfelder. As Peter says, "This wine makes Syrah look like Rosé." This is a big wine and is atypical for the area. The wine is called Epsilon, which means small batch in Greek. Every so often Ampelos creates a wine in small batches like the Dornfelder. It was a wine I was lucky enough to sample and one that is a must on anyone's list.

Although we also tried a Grenache – Delta: the difference and a Pinot Noir – Lambda: the magnitude, the above-mentioned wines were the ones that stood out for me on this particular visit.

I find the wines of Ampelos have intensity in both the depth and flavor of the wine; this is a common attribute with other biodynamic wineries. I got a sense of how the biodynamics responds to the grapes as I toured the vineyards and learned the principles of composting and other features of biodynamics. When I asked Peter about this intensity he responded by saying, “Absolutely! When you don’t apply a lot of artificial material (fertilizers, herbicide etc.) in the vineyard or winery but instead use good additions such as healthy compost and biodynamic preparations the soils and vines are healthier and less restricted from expressing the growing conditions and results in better tasting grapes – and wines.”

Ampelos Cellars and other wineries incorporating the principles and practices of biodynamics can truly say that their wines are expression of the land. They are expressions of not only the terrior but that of nature and harmony.

Three words come to mind after spending time time with Peter and Rebecca Work at Ampelos Cellars. They are cutting edge, passionate and proud. The Work’s principles and practices are cutting edge. They are passionate and at the same time proud of what they are creating and accomplishing using sustainability, organic and biodynamic methods.

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