American news source

27 May 2010 by Jancis Robinson

I seriously recommend the website of the American wine trade publication *Wines & Vines*. In the last few days I have come across two fascinating stories there. The first, Winegrowers cash in on other crops, was a survey of various California vintners who are deliberately moving away from monoculture and growing crops other than vines. Their motivations and compensations differ slightly but all are driven by the principle that monocultures are less healthy and sustainable both agriculturally and socially.

Ted Hall of the admirable Long Meadow Ranch raises premium cattle as well as making top-quality olive oil in particular. He points out that other crops can be grown on land that is unsuitable for viticulture because its proximity to creeks makes it a high risk for Pierce's disease, or on land with too high a concentration of boron for vines. Lee Hudson of Hudson Vineyards in Carneros, grows vegetables and raises poultry for eggs. He distributes them through veg boxes such as the one shown here and also sells them through the local Napa Oxbow farmer's market, which he has even gone to the trouble of acquiring. They all explain the benefits of their decisions but I found John Williams of Frog's Leap's' account particularly moving. He argues that growing crops which have different cycles from vines provides year-round work for his Mexican crew and therefore a firm sense of community and security for their families.

Then in Wineries rate their distributors there was news of a particularly worthwhile new website on which wineries can log and compare the performance of their various distributors. This is surely a particularly suitable and beneficial application of improved communications and gives much more power, or at least knowledge, to winery owners and sales people. Previously they had to depend on rumour and sporadic discussion with their peers, but www.nopaywinedistributors.com provides a permanent record of which distributors treat their suppliers particularly well or badly.

From the name of the site, the inspiration is clear. Its founder Peter Norris of Vino Family Vineyards of St Helena, Napa Valley, told *Wines & Vines* he was inspired to start the site after two Midwestern distributors of his 1,200-case brand started paying slowly or not at all. One, he said, 'screwed us out of $20,000.' Also the owner of a marketing agency, he outlined his motivation to *Wines & Vines*: 'The idea is to try to protect the little guys, who have so little leverage.' The site is free but voluntary donations are encouraged.