



## A TRIP DOWN THE CENTRAL COAST

As told by Phil Burton

I had promised to teach an enology class at CalPoly so I built a trip to flesh out a week long run. It's about 400 miles from St. Helena to San Luis Obispo and I had a beautiful drive down and I left St. Helena at noon so I missed both halves of the rush hour. Heavy rain followed by luminescent cloud mountains and blue sky. Why is it that big trucks can't keep the spray from their tires confined to their own space?

I passed my favorite CHP truck scale in Morgan Hill where there's a four door inspection garage and on each door in big letters, "STOP. Wait until door is open". This slays me every time I drive by.

The first night I stayed at Townhouse motel in Paso, a place I remember from the 70's when we first started coming to Paso when the best entertainment in town was the bowling alley across the street. Bubble gum pink tile in the bath but it's clean. Could have used a heater in the room, though. When I got back to my room after a dinner at Subway, I decided to have a glass or two of wine as I made notes. I picked a bottle of Chrysalis 2013 Norton (Virginia). How is it that even expensive corkscrews, even the ones with two part pullers- can't have decent foil cutters? Out of several I have in my truck, I settled on a one that was a gift from Chateau Haut-Corbin when I visited two years ago. And the foil cutter still sucks. Go figure.



Leaving Paso in a cold fog, I drove down to Zaca Mesa. I love the area east of 101; there's hardly any traffic and the views go for miles. Lots of agriculture and there's always farming operations going on. The downside is the overgrazing that denudes many of the hills. Eric has been with ZM for close to 15 years and he's got a good handle on his vineyards. It's a good place to visit with a big open air courtyard and great wines. If you're a Syrah fan, you need to go there. He gave me several bottles and I opened the Reserve Syrah last night; silky and luscious.



Then over the couple of miles to Firestone where Paul Warson is one of my favorite clients; we've been working together for years. We had sent him a load of barrels but somehow one extra barrel got put on the truck. At \$900 a pop, it was nice of him to let me know. After chatting and meeting his new assistant, Dave, we tasted some of Paul's wines including his 2014 Estate Cab in some of our barrels. In a neutral barrel, the wine was stunning, even at this stage. Next we tasted the same wine in a new barrel and it's about as tasty as Cab gets.

From Firestone, it's a short drive to Rancho Sisquoc. Sarah and I chatted for half an hour or so and it's good to see them doing well. As soon as the county gives the green light (permitting a winery

takes literally years in Santa Barbara County- shades of Napa), they'll start construction to double the size of the winery. Sarah has a special place in my heart since she publically declared that "Marchive is my favorite barrel and Barrel Builder's service is the best". After more than 40 years of working with winemakers, it's gratifying to say that almost all my clients are also good friends.

From there I drove over to SLO where the Enology club at Cal Poly had gotten me a room at the Hampton Inn. Big rooms, about 200 channels on the TV, clean and everything worked. It even had a heater in the room that didn't sound like a jet plane. After I got settled, I drove over to the Crops building on campus where I gave a talk about wood and barrels to a group of students. I want to quit my job and go back to school. It was so refreshing to see the enthusiasm of the aspiring winemakers and vineyard managers. I think I had more fun than the kids. I put a barrel together as part of the demo; after years of practice, it looks pretty easy. Then I had a couple of the students put the second head in the barrel which they finally managed. The whole group will be up at the Unified Show in Sacramento next January and I'm looking forward to seeing them again.



After breakfast, I headed back to Paso to meet with Len Gelfand who has a winery with the same name. We haven't met and I'm always excited to see what people are doing with area fruit with hopes that our barrels can help. Len obviously retired with a couple of dollars and he's planted vineyard and built a small but well equipped winery. He only uses new French oak for a year and then sells them. Since we also sell used barrels, it looks like we'll be able to do some work together. If you get a chance, try some of his wine; the 2013 Cab/Petite Sirah is a beautiful wine, especially if you like big reds; all his wines are monsters but Len manages to tame the tannins.

Then I drove up to Soledad for a delivery to Boekenoogen, a fifth generation ranch. With 160 acres of grapes, all their wines are estate. Garrett Boekenoogen has been making wine since 1998 and his wines show a sense of place. Remarkably, he grows a successful Pinot Noir (done 100% in our barrels) that's a great expression of the fruit- I'm saving a bottle for our next tasting.

I wanted to visit Kristin, the white winemaker at J. Lohr the next day, so I needed a place to stay. I drove over to East Pinnacles to camp on a clear but cold night. This time of year, the

campground was almost empty and I had my pick of sites. I chose one under a huge oak and laid out my sleeping bag. I was glad to have my old expedition bag since it was below freezing and I didn't have a tent. I was warm enough sleeping but froze my fanny the following morning when I got a pre-dawn start to get some photographs of the sunrise on the rocks.



After a couple of hours warming in the sun and grooming as much as possible, I drove up to Greenfield to see Kristin. J. Lohr is on a roll and construction crews are busy doubling the size of the facility with an eye to consolidating some of the production. I hadn't seen Kristin since her days at Handley Cellars but her eyes are still that electric blue. We had lunch at a little Mexican

restaurant before I headed back up to St. Helena. I try to head north from the Central Coast to be over the Carquinez Bridge before 3 PM to miss the worst of the rush hour traffic but it gets harder every year; I just squeaked through and was back in the office by 5.