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## Savoring good science

By **GARY ROBBINS**

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Never listen to snobs. First, they're snobs. And second, they're usually wrong in their snobbery.

I'm thinking of Miles, the wine snob in the movie "Sideways." He said, in so many words, that only an idiot would drink Merlot, a wine I love.

A grape man tells me otherwise.

"Pinot is better, but Merlot is good, too. Enjoy," says Francisco Ayala, a UC Irvine researcher who earned the National Medal of Science for his pioneering work in evolutionary biology. Ayala also owns El Rio, a splendid vineyard in the northern San Joaquin Valley.

He's not some absentee landlord. Ayala is a keen practitioner of the science of horticulture, as I could tell in a recent e-mail. He wrote:

"El Rio is going through a full face-lift. Wine vineyards are ready for a face-lift much earlier than humans, just after passing 30 years of age. El Rio was first planted in 1972 and 1973.

"A few years ago I started a four-phase schedule for replanting the whole 400 acres. This spring we'll plant the 140 acres of phase three. In the fall, after harvest, we'll pull the remaining 75 acres of Zinfandel, which will be replanted in spring 2007, thus completing phase four, the final one.

"The vines planted one or two years ago are now very slender – thin as one of my fingers. But bud break happened in mid-March and the new shoots are 10 inches long. By late June these slender plants will have shoots six to eight feet long. The small grape bunches will be cut down to avoid stressing the vines. Grapes are first harvested in year four. The vines achieve full production by year five or six.

"Removal of old vines is done in October, right after harvest. Large tractors and other heavy machinery pull the vines with their 10-foot deep roots, widespread like the tentacles of an octopus that divide again and again into ever smaller roots, down to the terminal rootlets, thin as thread. Afterward, the ground is ripped down to six feet to break its compaction and expose the soil to the life-giving and invigorating effects of the atmosphere's oxygen.

"As I look from my living room, I see a geometric pattern in two directions, north and west, thousands of perfectly aligned 'milk cartons,' each encasing one vine protecting it during its first two tender years from rabbits, squirrels and the wind. The early shoots are starting to show above the cartons, softening the sharp, straight, horizontal lines of the planted vines that extend in all directions.

"Years ago wine vineyard growers started using half-gallon milk cartons opened at the top and bottom, two of them, one slightly inside the other, to provide an 18-inch high protective encasing for the young vines. Nowadays, encasing cartons are also specially made, but they don't hold up to the rain and wind as well as the milk cartons and they are slightly more expensive.

"To the east and south, I see the torn dirt ripped last October, densely covered with weeds which prosper in this fertile ground. In two months, the weeds and the soil will be disked and the precisely measured grid for planting the vines will be set, the future position of each vine marked with a two-foot-tall plastic straw. The straws are precisely aligned; as one walks along the field's edges, the straw lines, and later the vines, are perfectly straight at every angle.

"To the south and west I see the robust 33-year-old Zinfandel vines, with this year's shoots that have already reached 18 inches but not yet full-size leaves.

"I am excited about the new varieties we have planted. For several years, I experimented in small plots with wine-grape varieties little used in California wines. I have now planted 25 acres of each of four new varieties that yield top quality in El Rio terroir (soil and climate conditions) Malbec, Petit Verdot, Teraldego, and Touriga Nacional. The wonderful soils and climate of California, and the superb viticulture and enology technology allow for a much greater variety of wines, and thus a richer experience, than the wines made from the few varieties currently in fashion. Of course, I continue to grow Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, and other popular varieties.

"The vines we plant are hybrid. The roots and trunk-bottom (the rootstock in viticulturese) come from a native American species of Vitis. The desired variety of Vitis vinifera, the species coming from Europe and the Middle East, is grafted on top. This combination makes the vines resistant to phylloxera and other pests while providing the desired grape varieties growing from the graft. It is a practice followed in quality vineyards throughout the world.

"The vines I plant were grafted in the nursery and kept there dormant for a year. Thus, they are already strong when we plant them in El Rio and grow fast, with few failures. Only one or two percent of the vines need to be replanted the ensuing year."

Let us toast to the great wines to come from El Rio."