

THE CHALK REPORT

Food, Wine, Travel

WINE REVIEW: Checking in with Gary Farrell Vineyards and Winery

Gary Farrell has moved on from his eponymous winery after establishing a significant reputation there for the winery and his wine making. He sold the brand and winery to Allied Domecq in 2004, a time when it was popular for global liquor producers to add wine to their portfolio. Through 2011 it went through other owners before being purchased by Bill Price. Price, a founding partner of what was originally called Texas Pacific Group, a successful private equity firm, has invested heavily in several elite California vineyards and wineries including Three Sticks Wines, Kistler Vineyards and Durell Vineyard.

The winery produces a lot of wines but the flagship is clearly Pinot Noir. Winemaker Theresa Heredia recently took me and several other media through a tasting of seven of them over Zoom. She joined the winery in 2012, after a nine year stint at Joseph Phelps' Freestone facility. For me, it was a chance to find out what regularities characterized her winemaking technique because, as regular readers will know, I have interviewed two other Pinot Noir specialists in the past few months: Craig McAllister at La Crema, and Adam Lee, founder of Siduri and now pursuing a new venture, Clarice Wines.

Heredia went to U.C. Davis, the country's premier school of enology and viticulture. However, it was to take a Ph.D. in chemistry. In the labs she met students in the enology and viticulture program and realised that they were doing pretty much the same things as her -- but were having a lot more fun.

THERESA HEREDIA'S USP

We started with Heredia describing procedures that characterized her approach to Pinot Noir.

She seeks sight specificity. To this end her wines are made to lower alcohol levels than Gary Farrell's;

Most pinot noirs go through whole cluster fermentation (like all things in winemaking there is vintage variation) which, she believes, accentuates terroir;

There is extended maceration at 80 degrees, 7-10 days after fermentation has finished, for complexity;

She specifies light toast French oak barrels to achieve a wine where the oak embellishment is not dominant. This particular procedure, I began to perceive during the tasting, is one of the most important;

She eschews racking before blending, leaving the wine on the lees. This, she explains, helps fill out the palate;

She does not coferment different plots;

TASTING

The order of the tasting was cleverly arranged to take us from lighter to heavier, delicate to WWF.

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir 'Bien Nacido', Santa Maria Valley, Santa Barbara County, CA.

Harvested at 23 brix. 1973 pommard clone. 15-20% whole cluster

Nose: mystery spice.

Palate: Lean. Spicy red plum,

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir 'Fort Ross Vineyard', Fort Ross-Seaview, Sonoma County, CA.

Closest CA vineyard to the Pacific (Edna Valley vineyards may start a food fight over that). Clones: Calera, 777. She loves Calera.

15 months in 40 new French oak barrels. Light toast.

Nose: Ripe raspberries. Molasses. Raspberry preserves. Rose petals.

Palate: Great tannic backbone. Grippy.

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir Hallberg Vineyard, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County, CA.

Vines drenched in fog.

Darker profile. Blackberry, blackcurrant. More tannic. 667, 828, pommard, cruse, 777.

Wanted a more geeky wine. Mission accomplished.

828 defines it.

Nose: Raspberry.

Palate: Lean, supple tannins.

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir Hallberg Vineyard - Dijon Clones, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County, CA.

Clones: 667,777

Whole cluster used.

Nose: Savory. Ripe preserves.

Palate: Sandpaper tannins. Plum. More savory than Hallberg.

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir 'Martaella Vineyard', Russian River Valley, Sonoma County, CA.

Calera purchased from Benovia.

Nose: Rich red fruit. Floral and plum hints.

Palate: Supple fruit. Grippy tannin. Fruit forward. Chocolate.

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir 'Gap's Crown', Sonoma Coast, Sonoma County, CA.

Rocky soil. windy. cool.

Max. 2 punchdowns/day.

Nose: Intense. Dark fruit. Blackberry. Herbs (thyme, oregano);

Palate: Chewy. Blackberry. Closed in.

2016 Gary Farrell Pinot Noir 'Toboni Vineyard', Russian River Valley, Sonoma County, CA.

Late harvesting.

Nose: Closed.

Palate: Intense red fruit. Jumps out.