



Cathrine Todd Contributor

Spirits

A storyteller who focuses on wine and the people who make it.

Two Women Leading Different Iconic Russian River Valley Wine Estates In California Discuss Neighborhoods Concept

When it comes to the idea of understanding a wine region there is the common debate of whether delving deep into the details of specificity ever crosses the line. When does it go from helping to show a better picture of the diversity of an area vs. making an already well-known wine region overwhelming when it comes to understanding its various styles and sense of place? This is something that the [Russian River Valley Winegrowers](#) (RRVW) group in Sonoma County, California, has started to tackle over the past couple of years and the idea of breaking up the various areas of the Russian River into “neighborhoods” has only been accelerated by a recent [UC Davis study](#) that was completed in 2019 indicating a commonality of elements found in wines from the same neighborhood.

The results of this study are certainly intriguing to many farmers and winemakers in the Russian River Valley and it could expand the idea of the range of the wines that the area can produce as a whole yet there are possible detrimental issues the neighborhood concept can inflict. Two female winemakers representing two iconic Russian River Valley producers, [Gary Farrell](#) and [Merry Edwards](#), discuss the neighborhood concept, approaching it initially in different ways.

Russian River Valley Neighborhoods



Rochiloi Vineyard in the Middle Reach neighborhood, Russian River Valley
RICHILOI VINEYARD

There are currently six neighborhoods in the Russian River Valley [as defined](#) by the RRVW yet both Theresa Heredia, winemaker at Gary Farrell, and Heidi von der

Mehden, winemaker at Merry Edwards, say that many of the neighborhoods have historical names that have been used for many years by grape growers. Some of the names are already known among Russian River wine enthusiasts such as the Middle Reach, having some of the most famous vineyards such as the Rochioli vineyard, or Green Valley since it became its own AVA (American Viticultural Area) the same year that Russian River Valley gained AVA status in 1983; only in 2008 did Green Valley start to promote that they were the Green Valley of the Russian River Valley as another wine appellation in California shares the Green Valley name.

The names of the neighborhoods are as follows: Middle Reach, Laguna Ridge, Santa Rosa Plains, Green Valley, Sebastopol Hills and the newest addition, Eastern Hills. The Middle Reach is known as the warmest and Sebastopol Hills as the coldest with Green Valley as a close second. Laguna Ridge and Santa Rosa Plains are cooler than the Middle Reach but warmer than Green Valley and so they will have both aspects of a warmer and cooler climate and their vineyards have their own cult followings such as the Ritchie vineyard from Laguna Ridge and Olivet Lane vineyard from Santa Rosa Plains.



Theresa Heredia, Winemaker at Gary Farrell

WILL BUCQUOY

Theresa Heredia noted that Gary Farrell has been conducting tastings that featured the different neighborhoods for about two years and it has become quite popular but she admits that one of the reasons for its popularity is that it is an opportunity to taste a bunch of vineyard designates and that at this time she hasn't received any real solid feedback to note if the neighborhood concept is working for consumers. But Theresa notes that there are lots of questions from retailers and restaurant buyers who see this as a good way to explain the differences from various vineyards.



Heidi von der Mehden in Coopersmith Vineyard in Laguna Ridge, Russian River Valley

Heidi, who started with Merry Edwards [over five years ago](#) after being a winemaker who was a fan of the wines for a long time and was eventually selected by Merry to take over the winemaking when Merry retired, said that Merry herself had expressed concerns about the neighborhoods initiative. Like Gary Farrell, Merry Edwards has devoted decades to building the name of the Russian River Valley by making great wines from top vineyards; Merry started making wine there in the mid-90s and Gary in the early 80s. She was nervous that each neighborhood would become an AVA and that the Russian River Valley name that they have given their sweat, blood and tears to would be potentially watered down by becoming extremely fractured and very confusing. And so Merry Edwards initially resisted the idea of the neighborhoods with Heidi completely understanding Merry's fears. But as the UC Davis study came out, the results of finding commonalities within the same neighborhoods started to get Heidi interested in exploring the idea.

Positives and Potential Dangers

There are many positives of talking about the idea of neighborhoods - as Theresa from Gary Farrell noted, this is "not a political movement" having no desire to add more sub-AVAs in the area but was "just educational and fun". When people know more about a subject, the more enjoyable the subject becomes and they invest more of their time and energy into it; sports being a great example. And so, depending on people's needs, whether they are wine trade colleagues or wine consumers, sometimes Gary Farrell's neighborhood tastings can be more formal with helpful information for the wine trade to sell their wines or it can just be a party where regular wine drinkers are discovering the differences with their own opinions as they taste them.

Also, sometimes there are misconceptions from wine drinkers who have only had one or two wines from Russian River Valley that are widely found on the marketplace. Typically they will categorize these wines as all being lush and fruit driven as many times those are the wines that will win over many wine drinkers yet this limiting stereotype doesn't encompass many of the wines that are made in Russian River and may wrongly deter those who prefer more acid, aromatically driven wines. The climatic differences from the Middle Reach vs. Sebastopol Hills can display wines that are quite structurally different from each other; Middle Reach richer, more opulent compared to Sebastopol more structured with higher acidity. And so just simply talking about the neighborhoods in general, which is less overwhelming than getting to know each vineyard, can be a way to express the multitude of subtle variations across the Russian River without losing the idea that they all have a common core that connects them.

Of course there is the danger that such a neighborhood concept could create more misunderstandings lumping vineyards, some of them unique on their own, within one neighborhood all together. Heidi pointed out that although the UC Davis study did show element similarities within neighborhoods, when the lab analysis was examined, there were different experiences for the tasters as wines can be similar on paper in a lab but have different aromatic and flavor profiles and so it is important to keep that in mind. Heidi has had experience with working with three different vineyards in the Middle Reach and although all did have lush tannins, each vineyard

was aromatically different and so to say each wine would taste the same is misleading.



Hallberg Vineyard in Green Valley, Russian River Valley, California
HALLBERG VINEYARD

Theresa is an advocate for the unique qualities of each vineyard and believes that soil, farming techniques, clones and winemaking will make wines from the same vineyard slightly different from each other. Theresa spoke about her Hallberg vineyard Pinot Noir from Green Valley being greatly influenced by the soil and farming technique as it has a significant amount of Goldridge series soil, found in other areas of Russian River, and it is like sandy dust so the roots can go down all the way to the water table in the ground so the owner of the vineyard does not irrigate. Despite it being a cooler neighborhood, she says there is a tremendous amount of concentration in the grapes from this vineyard.

Then Theresa spoke about how different winemaking practices can lead to varying differences of structure in Pinot Noir wines from the Middle Reach. Because the grapes are riper and typically have silkier tannins, it leads some winemakers to over-extract the tannins from the Middle Reach giving more of a “rustic” quality although she avoids over-extracting the wines so she retains the more lush quality of the tannins because as she said, the “palate steals the show” when it comes to Middle Reach wines.

When Heidi talked about the Olivet Lane vineyard she works with in the Santa Rosa Plains neighborhood, cooler than Middle Reach yet warmer than Green Valley, she spoke about the importance of the Martini heritage Pinot Noir clones planted back in 1973 as helping to shape the wine as well with giving more red fruit flavors and lighter tannic structure.

The Russian River Valley name was built by people who appreciated the idea that they had great vineyards that all had an affinity for expressing a sense of place but that idea could be challenged with the neighborhood concept. Heidi discussed how her California sales rep, who sells their wines to many sommeliers in the state, thought the 2017 vintage for their Green Valley vineyard Warrens’ Hill, one that was harvested earlier due to a threatening heat wave, was more in the Green Valley style as it had more linear tannins and just seemed more cool climate overall but the 2018 was noted by him as a wine that “doesn’t scream Green Valley anymore”. The 2018 had moderate weather throughout the growing season and so the vineyards were

picked two to three weeks later than 2017 giving the wines more complexity and concentration while still keeping enough acidity.

And it raises many questions about the neighborhoods concept: Could it push winemakers to force a style onto their wines year after year that fits the neighborhood? Or do they stand up to the market and selling pressures that such concepts can create to stay true to the expression of place that is produced from a particular year?

Never Losing Sight of the Foundation of Russian River

Theresa and Heidi are both firmly committed to being true to the land and alter their winemaking practices to express what each vineyard is producing in a given year instead of the other way around. They both came to the Russian River with the idea that every year is an interesting new adventure with these living vines and that they stay true to their founders' intentions – terroir trumps everything. But they also know that this neighborhoods concept will get out into the hands of salespeople and marketers whether they are a part of it or not and if they don't have their own say, as winemakers devoted to the vineyards and the grape growers who farm them, then the message can go down the wrong path. As they both want to bring their customers, whether it is sommeliers or wine consumers, along for the ride as they delve deeper into these vineyards and neighborhoods to explore the never-ending evolution and discovery of their beloved wine region without losing sight of what made it so special in the first place... it is all about what the land is telling them and not what a category on a wine list demands.



Gary Farrell Single Vineyard Chardonnay Wines

CATHRINE TODD

Tasting notes of some of Gary Farrell and Merry Edwards single vineyard wines:

Middle Reach

2017 Gary Farrell, 'Rochioli' Vineyard Chardonnay, Middle Reach, Russian River Valley: 100% Chardonnay. Rich, fleshy peach flavors intermixed with nectarine skin notes that had a saline minerality quality balanced by rich quince paste flavor.

2017 Gary Farrell, 'Bacigalupi' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Middle Reach, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Star anise, earthy, black cherry, velvety tannins and juicy fruit.

2018 Merry Edwards, 'Georganne' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Middle Reach, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Pretty red fruit, rose oil, ripe strawberry flavor on palate with lots of spice and round tannins.

Laguna Ridge

2017 Gary Farrell, 'Ritchie' Vineyard Chardonnay, Laguna Ridge, Russian River Valley: 100% Chardonnay. Zingy grapefruit flavors enhanced by lime blossom and wet stone notes.



Merry Edwards Single Vineyard Pinot Noir Wines

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2018 Merry Edwards, 'Coopersmith' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Laguna Ridge, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Ripe red and blue fruit on the nose with layers of licorice and forest floor with a plush body and a lifted baking spice finish.

Santa Rosa Plains

2017 Merry Edwards, 'Olivet Lane' Vineyard Chardonnay, Santa Rosa Plains, Russian River Valley: 100% Chardonnay. Chalky minerality on the nose, creamy citrus notes like lemon curd, a moderate body with a very energetic and focused finish with hints of hazelnut.

2018 Merry Edwards, 'Olivet Lane' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Rosa Plains, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Intense floral nose – violets, and flavors of black raspberry, fresh rhubarb and cinnamon – with silky tannins and complex smoldering earth notes.

2017 Gary Farrell, 'Olivet Lane' Vineyard Chardonnay, Santa Rosa Plains, Russian River Valley: 100% Chardonnay. Mineral nose, citrus blossom and peach pit with a honeysuckle finish.

2017 Gary Farrell, 'Martaella' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Rosa Plains, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. A wine with some muscle in the structure with warm plum pie and layers of forest floor and black tea leaves.

Sebastopol Hills



Gary Farrell Single Vineyard Pinot Noir Wines

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2017 Gary Farrell, 'McDonald Mtn.' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sebastopol Hills, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Sandalwood on the nose and deep concentration of dark fruit on the palate with black cherry flavors with a focused finish and racy acidity.

2018 Merry Edwards, 'Meredith Estate' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sebastopol Hills, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Extremely expressive on the nose with brooding black fruit and underbrush with a textured palate that had hints of dark cocoa, truffle and bright acidity.

Green Valley

2017 Gary Farrell, 'Hallberg' Vineyard Pinot Noir, Green Valley, Russian River Valley: 100% Pinot Noir. Aromatically complex nose of dried herbs, tobacco leaf and bright raspberry fruit that danced lightly on the palate with mouthwatering subtle fruit flavors.