

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

and I don't mean average. But what I like, most people like. So when I make the wines, blend the wines, the way I make them, they appeal to almost everybody.

Is your partner Tom Russell solely responsible for the farming?

He's 90 percent responsible for the farming, and I'm 90 percent responsible for the winemaking. But we share all these responsibilities. He knows so much about organic farming because of his produce business. He's been growing organic produce for 25 years. So the knowledge that he brought to wine growing was so far beyond what any other winery could conceive of. I'm guessing that just 20 percent of his business is organic row crops, but at 20 percent, he's still the third largest organic farmer in the country. The guy understands plants. He's seen them grow for 40 years. Although grape vines are a little different because their cycle is longer, he still on a very basic level gets it, which is unusual. The guy is really bright. He planted the De Tierra vineyard where he lives in a residential subdivision with 20, 30, and 40 acre lots. Being the type A, A, A personality that he is, he couldn't stand unplanted ground on his property, so he planted grapes, then olives, then lavender until he finally ran out of room. That's how the winery started in this little area Coral de Tierra, and that's where we got the name for the winery, De Tierra, meaning of the earth. Any great wine starts with a great vineyard, and any great vineyard starts with the ground, pretty much the starting point for any conversation about wine. It's a great place to be a vine. Those grapes live in one of the nicest places on the planet earth. Here's the fascinating thing. He planted the Merlot vineyard back into what's called a boxed canyon. It has little hills on either side of the vineyard and focuses the heat, which Merlot needs to ripen. So on any given day, if it's 85 degrees in the Merlot vineyard, and you walk 400 yards to the Chardonnay vineyard, it's 10 degrees

cooler over that small distance. This is pretty much the definition of a micro climate. He was bright enough as a farmer to know that the boxed canyon is going to have the heat focused in by the mountains, and a little further on the flat spot with a little bit of wind and fog the site will be cooler. He understood that he could do Merlot and Chardonnay in the same general area, which is by and large not normally successful.

In this slow economy with a glut of wine, you're planting Chardonnay, which isn't scarce in California. Why?

First of all, it takes four years for a vineyard to produce good fruit. You can't follow whatever six, eight, or 12-month curve that the economy is making. You have to think ahead. The pendulum swings. We're in harder times now, but good times are coming. It's just the way the world works. You have to plan and look forward to those good times. Because the economy is down right now, people are getting deals in terms of the costs of vines and trellis wires and so on. You can actually plant a vineyard now for the least amount of money that we've seen in 20 years because everyone wants the job. Everything about wine takes time. You can't be on a 12 month thinking cycle. That's inappropriate. And yes, we're planting Chardonnay in the Santa Lucia Mountains. For 10 years I'm been preaching, but no one listened. Everyone was planting Pinot Noir and forgot that the flip side of Pinot Noir was Chardonnay. They both need the same climate. So now there's a ton of available Pinot Noir, but we're hard pressed to find great Chardonnay. So we planted a bunch of Chardonnay in our Silacci vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands. Silacci produces some great Pinot, but it might produce even better Chardonnay. The first crop was spectacular, but we need to see at least two. There may be a revelation of Chardonnay here. I'm working hard on changing the attitudes of people who are not interested in Chardonnay. The pendulum is

swinging back. But people don't want those uninteresting, buttery, crappy Chardonnays. They want something with more integrity. The great grapes are the great grapes. People haven't stopped drinking Chardonnay. They haven't stopped drinking Cabernet, and they're not going to stop drinking Pinot Noir. Once they know the wine, it won't go away. Americans are always looking for the newest, hottest, coolest, best thing, and you can't change that. But when you do the right thing and make great wines, people will drink them.

There's a lot of quality competition from diverse California growing regions like yours. Do you think Napa will eventually lose some of its caché?

The pendulum always swings. I think they built themselves a house of cards, and at some point, it'll fall down. All Napa wine is not created equal. There are bad wines, good wines, and great wines there. But everyone is looking at the neighbor. 'They're charging \$150. I'll charge \$150.' We all know how much it costs to produce wine. At some point, you're pricing with ego, not reality. And that will correct itself. Napa produces absolutely great Cabernet, but no one has enough money to just waste it. Paying \$150 for a bottle of Cabernet, all things being equal, is a lot of money for a bottle of wine. Those wines have suffered most in this economy because there's no value there. I think Americans are in the steep part of the learning curve as a wine drinking culture, and it's been a long time coming. And actually, I'm all for it because we offer an astounding value, and we always have. We don't make wine for ego's sake. We make wine so that people can drink good wine. Tom is a capitalist, a business man from the word go. And that's what has made our winery successful. He's not going to give anything away. But he's going to be fair always. We laugh about this all the time. If in life, we could just get to what's fair so that you're not screwing someone, and no one's screwing you, that would be good.



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California *Winery of the Month*



Owners David Coventry and Tom Russell

De Tierra: Of the Earth *De Tierra Vineyards*

Partners David Coventry and Tom Russell have long histories in Monterey County. Tom farms thousands of acres of row crops there and elsewhere along with his two vineyards, Silacci in the Santa Lucia Highlands and the organic estate vineyard in Corral de Tierra. David began his winemaking career with two well-known Monterey wineries, Chalone and Morgan Winery, before he joined Tom as a partner at De Tierra five years ago. Both men are champions of Monterey County and feel that its vineyards are as good or better than any others anywhere else in California. Their wines prove the thesis. Generally considered a cool weather zone, Monterey County is known for its fine Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. But nearly the size of the state of Massachusetts, Monterey County has many climates and micro climates, and David insists that only imagination limits viticulturists and winemakers in the area, something he has plenty of. "Both Tom and I are contrarians. If someone says it's not possible to make a good Bordeaux varietal in Monterey, immediately we start to do it just because the attitude pisses us off." David feels that Chardonnay is going to enjoy a renaissance in the near future, and he and Tom are leading the way by planting new vineyards. And David is certain that Pinot Noir is here to stay, not a fad to be soon forgotten. So Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, together with Syrah and Merlot are the core wines of their production. With minor editing for clarity, I report my conversation with David Coventry.

vineyard in Monterey County. How did that happen?

With a lot of hard work, a lot of paper work, and an extra amount of farming that is amazing... 'The most important thing in the vineyard is the winemaker's shadow.' That's the rule of thumb for an organic vineyard. You have to pay attention to your vines. Organic farming forces you to be there, not once every three weeks, not once every two weeks, but every single week, every three to five days. You have to be watching for developing problems because the tools that you have to use are not sledge hammers, but much finer tools. So you have to be there more often to make sure that things are going correctly. And because you're there more often and paying more attention to the vines, you get a better quality grape. We buy fruit from other vineyards, too, and they are farmed sustainably. We have a commitment to that because we think it's the right thing to do. But on a rather selfish note, wonderful grape flavors come out of vines that are healthier homeostatic systems. I see certain vineyards, and I can't pass them up. As a winemaker, you have to do it. I have to make wine from this place because I just know it's going to be good. People tell me that I make Burgundian style Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but never for one second in my life have I said I wanted to make Burgundian wines. But if you source fruit from great vineyards, and you make the wine well and bottle it well, it will have some similarities to its French brethren. I have a very mainstream palate. I don't mean pedestrian,

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