

## WINERY OF THE MONTH



### WINERY from cover

expect. Milla hired assistant winemaker Kristen Barnhise because, when she asked Kristen to describe great Pinot Noir, Kristen responded that the wine should be perfumed and that it should taste of red, blue, and black fruit. Other applicants stated that the wine should taste like dark fruit without understanding that the finest expression of Pinot Noir does not resemble Syrah in either color or flavor.

In 1981 when Scharffenberger purchased property in Anderson Valley for sparkling wine production, followed by the famous Champagne house Louis Roederer a year later, the world took notice of this small, obscure coastal valley. Champagne is made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, which then began to proliferate there. Transforming the grapes into sparkling wine requires that they be high in acid and ripen to lower sugar levels, because later more sugar will be added to the wine to stimulate a second fermentation that creates the bubbles. Because Anderson Valley was one of the coolest wine regions in California, it was ideally suited to Champagne grapes. During the growing season, day and night temperatures can fluctuate as much as 60 degrees.

But apart from sparkling wine, Pinot Noir made as a still wine reaches its highest expression only in cooler regions like Burgundy, France, where it is indigenous. California winemakers experimented for decades before finding suitable places to plant it. They complain that the grape varietal is challenging to grow and make into wine, but Anderson Valley growers had a head-start on the learning curve, cultivating Pinot Noir long before it enjoyed the appeal that it has now. More recently, other high profile producers have moved there, adding to the valley's renown. In order to produce world class Pinot Noir, Dan Duckhorn from Napa developed Goldeneye, and Ferrari-Carano owners purchased Lazy Creek. Today around 70 win-

eries occupy the Valley, most of them dedicated to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay although Gewurztraminer and Riesling have always been staples in Anderson Valley. Pinot Gris thrives there as well. "You have to make wine that works in your region," Milla says. "Our region is too cool to grow everything and even dictates wine styles."

From her student days at U.C. Davis, Milla remembers a class taught by famed Professor Maynard Amerine. The subject was sensory analysis and Pinot Noir specifically. Amerine remarked that a good wine should have a "come-hither" quality, because it should invite the drinker to return for more. The wine shouldn't "wow" the drinker initially, and then remain the same with each successive sip "that Texas thing," Milla says. "The wine should give you more as it goes along, kind of a tease, not all up front. I try to keep that in mind." In order to create the complexity and nuances of flavor that Amerine was describing, Milla blends fruit from different areas, different soil types, different clones, and different climates from her own 28-acre estate but also from other Anderson Valley vineyards, and sometimes from different appellations. And to obtain the complexity that she aims for, she prefers a range of ripeness. "I don't want raisins and prunes, dehydrated and cooked flavors, and I don't want green, hard flavors. I want to be in the mid range." Balance is the goal.

But without balance in the vineyard, balancing wine becomes difficult. Milla farms her estate organically because she feels that organic practice keeps the grower "honest." Since farmers can't apply quick-fix toxins to threats that appear in vineyards, they need to prevent problems by slowly building soils and balancing vines. In other words, they need to be very careful farmers. She feels that organic grapes are not necessarily better tasting than those pro-

duced by conventional farming. "Many non-organic farmers use good practices." But when a problem occurs, mildew for example, the organic farmer can apply only topical sprays, not systemic ones "like antibiotics that go through your entire bloodstream." So if contact sprays are the only permitted remedies, fruit needs to be thinned so that clusters don't overlap and either court mold or hide surfaces that might require sprays. In a cold year such as this one, thinning also regulates ripening. The vine produces sugar, which migrates to the fruit. So the less fruit that a vine must ripen, the greater the chance that the fruit will ripen properly. Yet thinning is the hardest task for farmers. Fruit represents money, and when farmers drop fruit, they literally throw away money. The task is difficult even for workers because they are paid more to pick fruit than to drop it. Even doing the job evenly without ignoring certain bunches is difficult, so the job might require two or three passes.

Thinning fruit so that it is properly exposed to sunlight and air circulation is vital but also directly related to quality. "A healthy vine is always going to produce more fruit than it can ripen," Milla explains. And in a cool year dropping fruit is crucial. Anticipating weather becomes an art form. "Everyone looks at satellites, TV weather, three days out, seven days out. Some people are very good at predictions, but no one's going to always get it right. We have a dial-the-weather for Mendocino County agriculture on Fox News. But he's a little excitable. His long range forecast is better than his three-day one." Programmed with information from various sources, including their own intuitions, farmers develop a sense for what the weather will provide in any given growing season, and if they're prepared and perceptive, they properly adjust farming practices to accommodate nature.



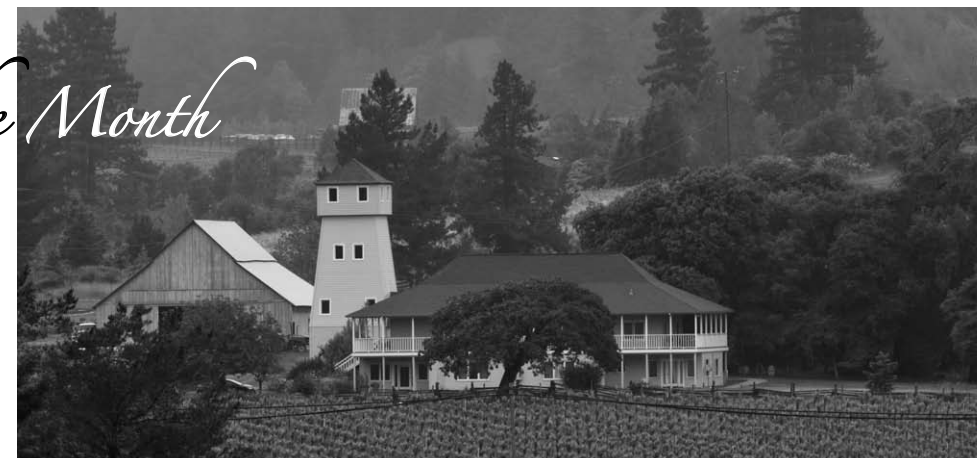
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### Winery of the Month



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Milla Handley's voice has a melodic soprano ring, enthusiast at some moments, reflective at others. As though affectionately describing unruly children, she precedes expressions of disapproval with a mischievous "bless their little hearts," whether she is talking about uncooperative adults or recalcitrant grapes. But beneath her ingénue exterior, exists unmistakable brawn. In 1975, Milla Handley was one of only three women in a class of 30 to graduate from the fermentation science program at the University of California, Davis, and soon after she became assistant winemaker at Chateau St. Jean, also a man's world then. "Young women have no idea what working conditions were like for women at that time," she says. During the first trimester of her pregnancy, she worked 120 hours a week for four weeks during harvest. Staying home with a sick child was not an option. One of the reasons that she developed her own winery in 1982 in her home basement was to eliminate some of the child care issues that she experienced working for others. Fortunately, her husband and father were both supportive, she says, but integrating work and raising children is a complicated dance. On the same day that she gave birth to her second child, she remembers that she and her husband were making decisions about the winery. But Milla resolved problems and made good decisions, perhaps because she knew who she was and what she wanted. "Figure out why

you're not happy and fix it."

Milla's attitudes toward humans and fruit are similar. She feels that both have innate essences, which should be respected. From the time that she was "in single digits," she knew that she preferred country living. The driveway to her home in Mendocino County's remote Anderson Valley is a half mile long. She has devoted her winemaking career to Pinot Noir because that grape varietal thrives in the cool temperatures of Anderson Valley. "You have to listen to the grapes, not force them to be something they're not. It's like mothering, bringing out the best. You give them guidance. But if you're making something that the grapes really didn't want to be, it's going to show." And further she says, "You can't make fruit from one region taste like fruit from another. The wine will be a knock-off just like a purse. Why would you want to do that?"

Yet winemakers can hardly be faulted for trying to please consumers, and consumers in the middle are still reaching for big, high-alcohol wines. Instead, Milla focuses on the grapes and makes wines that present varietal character. "You don't want to be forcing the wine somewhere." Pinot Noir is naturally light in color, and in order to express its characteristic aromas and smooth fruity and spicy flavors, it should be picked before it becomes overly ripe, which reduces the alcohol content that some people

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