

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

else who's doing a better job."

It's not surprising that this new winery would devote itself to America's recent enthusiasm for Pinot Noir. The winery makes eight different lots of Pinot Noir from different vineyards. "Cru is interesting because it's sort of a painter's box for people who love Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. We want to offer the consumer a place to come to discover the different faces of these two wines. They are interesting grape varieties because they express themselves so differently, depending on the *terroir* or specific place where the fruit grows."

Debra describes Pinot Noir as "voluptuous with beautiful aromatics when it's done properly, and with great acidity, which is part of what gives the wine its longevity. If you look at the great French Burgundies that have aged for a long time, it's because of that structure, that acid that gives the wines their liveliness and longevity. But it is a varietal that is very much driven by where it's from. She explains that the company has long term contracts with preferred growers. "We're in the process of searching out and refining those choices and picking more growers that we want to keep for the long term. A big part of the Cru portfolio is specific vineyard-designated wines. So we want to be very selective and continue to work with those vineyards in perpetuity."

Debra was responsible for the winery's Pinot Noir emphasis even though Richard Spencer's wine of choice is Cabernet Sauvignon. "He lets us decide. He knows that we know what we're doing, and he lets us do it. But everyone here agreed that we needed to work on our Cab program and deliver something that would make Richard happy." So this year, the Carmichael portfolio will include a new Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, a wine that will put a smile on Richard's face. The winery is buying Cabernet Sauvignon from the Yeager Family in the Oak Knoll District and buying other blending grapes

from the Premier Pacific Group, fruit such as Merlot and Petite Verdot from Combsville and Cabernet Franc from Sugarloaf Mountain, all Napa appellations.

Although Debra has worked for various wineries in sales and marketing capacities, her career at Kendall-Jackson prepared her most specifically for managing Mariposa Wine Company. "If you're a brand manager at Kendall-Jackson, your hand touches everything, the pricing of the wine, the grape source, the flavor profile. You write these brand plans for the winemaker and everybody else that spell it all out. We want it to taste like this. We want to sell it for this. You're very involved in the financial picture. I used to write the back label copy for all the wines at Kendall-Jackson while I was there, what the point-of-sale material looked like, what the sales people were going to do in the field, how they were going to present the wine, what their strategy was. It was really no different than running a winery. I would say the only difference is that now I actually have say-so in buying barrels and equipment. I didn't do that at KJ. I also didn't run the tasting room and wasn't responsible for scheduling staff and all events, which I now do. So I wear a few more hats, but for the important tasks, I got my training at Kendall-Jackson."

At Kendall-Jackson, Debra focused on big-production wines that needed to attract large segments of the wine-buying public. At Mariposa, she embraces the more authentic experience that the small winery offers. "When I talk about looking for a specific flavor profile, we're not creating it by blending a little of this and a little of that from different appellations to get a particular result. We're doing it by securing specific grape sources in a single appellation that will give us the flavors that we need to make a wine that will taste full of berries and have a smoky quality and might have a mineral edge." She tries to understand what buyers

are tasting, what they might appreciate, and also what flavors appeal to her. "Somebody's palate is going to have to be the driver here," Debra says. She and her colleagues at the winery analyze their preferences and expect that their customers are going to like those same flavors.

Debra emphasizes that the wine a vineyard produces is related not only to the appellation but also to the particular clone that is planted in the vineyard and to the rootstocks on which the clone is grafted. She talks about the experience that they had with their Pinot Gris from the Smith Family Vineyard in Monterey County's Arroyo Seco appellation. They wanted to make a richer wine than what the grapes were providing. Owner Jason Smith suggested another block in the vineyard that was planted with a different Pinot Gris clone on different rootstock, which produced a smaller berry. Debra says that the wine it produced was "fabulous," just what they wanted, but if they had not obtained the flavors that they wanted, they would have searched for different fruit from other vineyards.

According to Debra, making delicious wines at desirable prices is easy compared to finding distribution in this difficult economy. "Once the wines are out there, people are choosing them," she says. "But a lot of distributors and other gate keepers, like retailers and restaurants are saying, 'Look, you can make the best wine in California, but right now we don't need another wine.'" Debra is now beginning to see more interest from wholesalers and expects to find additional distribution after the first of the year.

"To sum up, we're trying to make thoughtful, hand-crafted wines that are priced within reach for most consumers. We want to be up there with the Kosta Brownes and the Siduris, all the people who get really high Spectator and Parker ratings. But more than that, we want to be the winery of choice for people who want nice wines. We have an owner who supports us and spares nothing to get there. We're on our way."



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California

Winery of the Month



Vineyards from the Mountain to the Sea Mariposa Wine Company

Debra Morris has the perfect job, in large part because she has the perfect boss. With 25 years in the wine business, she knows exactly what she's doing. She makes all decisions, what equipment to purchase, which wines to make from which grapes, how those wines should taste, what prices to charge, where to sell them, how to market them. She doesn't even have to show a profit, just demonstrate that the business is going in the right direction.

Her perfect boss is Richard Spencer. The owner of three different high-end development and construction businesses, one farming enterprise, a fertilizer business, and an industrial parts business, Richard shows up at the winery every couple of weeks to say hello. "We don't need to make a lot of wine," he tells Debra. "We just need to make enough to be a sustainable business and have some fun doing it."

What Richard Spencer might know about fun, is vague, given all of his responsibility, which includes six children. Debra describes him as a "great guy, very unassuming. I don't mean that he's a little mousy guy. He lets me know what he's thinking. But he's very gracious. He's not somebody who wears his ego on his sleeve and is always pushing it. This is not a vanity winery. He's not here because he wants to have a

toy. He wants it to be a viable business, but it's challenging. It's very capital intensive and not for the faint of heart, especially in this economy. It's hard to pony up some of the money that's necessary for stainless steel tanks, French barrels, premium grapes, and on and on.

In business since 2003 and now making 8,000 cases of wine, Mariposa Wine Company has three different labels. Yosemite View offers value wines, priced between \$12 and \$14. Carmichael features blended, European style wines from the Sierra Foothills. And Cru is the flagship label, featuring Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Monterey and Santa Barbara counties. While the company owns its own winery and tasting room, it buys grapes rather than planting its own vineyards, a business model that many wineries choose, including very high-end ones. "We have the flexibility to try different vineyards in different American Viticultural Areas," Debra says. "In any particular year, if we're not getting great fruit out of an area, we can go some place else. When you own a vineyard, you make what the vineyard produces every year. Let's say that we've been working with a vineyard for a couple of years, and we see that the quality is falling off. We can cancel that contract and buy from somebody

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