

A “DIFFERENT” CHARDONNAY

By David Lett

In late 1964 I followed Joe Torres, long time vineyard manager for the Draper Ranch in St. Helena, through the vineyard as he pruned the Chardonnay. Joe, for the previous 20 years, had selected certain blocks and vines from the vineyard which were favorites for quality wine production. A lot of these selected vines' fruit went to Lee Stewart's Souverain Cellars (now Burgess) across the valley on Howell Mountain. Lee made some incredible Chardonnay wines from these grapes. The cuttings I took from the Draper Ranch and Torres' selection became the basic vines of The Eyrie Vineyards.

Jerry Draper, Lee Stewart and Fred McCrea (of Stony Hill) all planted their vineyards on the hillsides of the Napa Valley in 1943. The original source for much of their Chardonnay cuttings came from Louis Martini's Stanley Ranch in Carneros which was planted from a diversity of European vines in the mid-30's. It was, and still is, a remarkable collection of clones of Chardonnay and other varieties.

The Chardonnays of Lee Stewart's Souverain are now legend (Lee sold the Souverain name to Pillsbury in 1969) but the Chardonnays of Stony Hill continue to be some of the most unique in the United States. So, too, the Chardonnays of The Eyrie Vineyards. Our unique source of Chardonnay propagation clones from the Draper Ranch makes them so. In 1967 UC-Davis isolated a clone of Chardonnay (Clone 108) and decided that it was the best clone for California conditions--high yield and low acid were foremost in this decision. About the same year Americans began drinking more table wine than American Sherry and Port and thus began the “wine boom”. Almost every vineyard planted to Chardonnay in California since 1967 (which is probably 95% of them) has been planted to Clone 108. As the wine boom extended to other states (Washington, New York, Texas, etc.), Clone 108 became ubiquitous. (It's even to be found in Australia, South America and New Zealand!). Well fine, but Clone 108 has a very distinct flavor and aroma profile which can get kind of boring. All of the wines made from 108 throughout the world are just variations on that profile. Our Chardonnay, made from a diversity of clones, yields a wine much more subtle in expression--also much more elegant. It is also a wine which lives in the bottle for a long time. (Our 1970 vintage is still alive and well--and lovely). Americans who know and love (and can afford) the white wines of Burgundy will find a great affinity for The Eyrie Vineyards Chardonnay (at a lot less cost). (Our 1985 vintage [\$12.50] a bottle tied for third place in a tasting at the International Wine Center in New York with a 1985 Corton-Charlemagne from Talot-Beaut [\$90.00 a bottle]).

In the winery we treat these grapes with great respect. The grapes are destemmed, crushed and pressed--all very gently. The juice is settled overnight to separate it from the heavy solids which can lead to “off” flavors in the final wine. The Juice is then transferred to new to-four-year-old French Tronçais oak barrels where it is inoculated with a variety of pure yeast strains. Cellar temperatures are low in Oregon in October when we harvest and thus we employ no temperature control. The wines ferment at their own pace and go through a complete, spontaneous (not-induced) malolactic fermentation throughout the winter and spring. The barrels are topped frequently and the wine rests undisturbed “sur-lie” (on the yeast sediment) until time for bottling eleven months after crush. The wine is not fined for protein stability nor is it tartrate stabilized. It is given only one moderate filtration and then bottled...when you have grapes this good, don't mess around with the wine!