

# Pressdemocrat

October 6, 2011 email Question & Answer between Peg Melnik, wine columnist, Santa Rosa Press Democrat & Randall Watkins, winemaker, Laurel Glen Vineyard

*Peg Melnik: What makes this cab a standout?*

Randall Watkins: The 2006 Laurel Glen Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon stands out because it shows a distinct sense of place. You can taste that the fruit was mountain-grown from its mineral-earth-inky character, and the wine is in perfect balance in terms of dark cherry ripeness, natural acidity and a hint of classic Cabernet Sauvignon herbs. The wine is not overly alcoholic, and it makes you want to pour another glass!

*PM: What is the house style?*

RW: The goal with Laurel Glen has always been to produce a terroir driven wine where excessive ripeness and oak do not obscure the complex flavors of the mountain vineyard. The house style is a Cabernet Sauvignon with balance, smooth structure and longevity.

*PM: With your approach, will you be trying to keep the same house style?*

RW: The stylistic goal continues to be elegance without over extraction, balance of acidity and fruit ripeness, finesse and ageability.

*PM: What, if any, changes will you be making in wines going forward?*

RW: We are going to improve the grape cluster sorting and destemming process, but not much else. We will continue with the traditional Laurel Glen winemaking techniques of native yeast fermentation, open-topped fermentation, hand punchdowns to target the elegant skin tannin and reduce seed extraction, aging 2 years in Taransaud French oak barrels. Phil Coturri has taken over as vineyard manager, and the vineyard is now farmed organically.

*PM: What is the most challenging part of making cabernet?*

RW: Finding a great site is the most important thing in making Cabernet Sauvignon. If the site is too hot, then you will end up with a tooty-fruity Cabernet Sauvignon without the depth of character brought about by sufficient hangtime. If the site is too cool, then the grapes do not reach physiological ripeness and will have more vegetal character. Laurel Glen Vineyard has an excellent combination of rocky well-drained soil, and a long even growing season. The vineyard benefits from being above the fog, allowing direct morning and midday sun and less direct hot afternoon light. The struggle of the vines in mountain vineyards results in smaller grape berries with more intense flavor and color.

*PM: What is the most exciting part of making cabernet?*

RW: Although the vast majority of wines are consumed when they are still young, Cabernet Sauvignon is one of the wines that people will take the time to age and watch how a great wine can evolve over time. It is fascinating to see the stages of Cabernet Sauvignon development – from big youthful tannin and lots of ripe fruit, to rich structure and balanced fruit and oak, to aged characteristics of leather and supple velvety tannins, to whoops it went too far! Depending upon the vineyard block and the winemaking style, a Cabernet Sauvignon can be more approachable and fruit driven like the Counterpoint Cabernet Sauvignon, or with more complex layering, structure and the ability to improve with age like the Laurel Glen Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon.

*PM: Why did you want to work at Laurel Glen? What about it enticed you?*

RW: There are not very many vineyards in California with 30 years of history of excellent quality. I jumped at the opportunity to work with the fruit of a long proven site with David Ramey as a mentor and consultant winemaker.

*PM: Where else have you worked?*

RW: I make Sonoma Mayacamas Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon for Bugay Vineyards and Watkins Family. I make the wines for Hauck Cellars, which has won the Best of Class Cabernet Sauvignon 3 different times at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair. I was the winemaker for Moon Mountain Vineyard and Carmentel. I worked under Alvaro Espinoza in Chile, Dan Goldfield at Hartford, Jac Cole at S. Anderson, and Judy Matulich-Weitz at Buena Vista.

*PM: What made you decide to become a winemaker? Was it an adventure? A particular wine? Tell us about your winemaking journey.*

RW: When I was 10 years old, my father made his first vintage of home wine. He bought Cabernet Sauvignon grapes from the Berger's Oak Shade Ranch on Sonoma Mountain near Laurel Glen Vineyard. Patrick Campbell advised my dad on winemaking and even sold him a barrel to age his wine in, and they became good friends. I grew up on a small vineyard in Bennett Valley. Family friends would come over each vintage and hand harvest the grapes and take turns cranking the hand stemmer-crusher into our food-grade garbage can "fermenters". Punchdowns were with a square of plywood nailed to an old axe handle. Pressing was done with a 50-gallon basket press bought from the garage of an old Italian woman. After the harvest party, my parents' friends would have a big picnic and enjoy wines from previous vintages. It was a great way to grow up!