

2010: Year of the Woman in Wine

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Amelia Ceja
President, Ceja Vineyards
Napa Valley

As one of the few Latina women in wine in California, Amelia Ceja is determined to help shape the future of the consumer's comprehension of—and abilities in—pairing food and wine.

"I want to be thought of as being instrumental in breaking down the barriers of the mystification of wine," says Amelia, who was appointed President of the Carneros-based winery when it was founded in 1999.

"Before we even press our fruit, we know the elements that we want to show up in the wine," she insists. It is Amelia's culinary expertise that gifts her with an insight to work with winemaker (and brother-in-law) Armando Ceja to help discover similar flavors in the wines that also exist in food.

"It was that knowledge that gave me the confidence to run the business," she points out. "There are not a lot of women in power in our industry, so I am proud to be one of the female leaders to promote the wines, through my on-line cooking show and our wine-related blogs, showcasing global cuisine and wine exploration."

The first vintage of Ceja, released in 2001, consisted of three varietals—Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Merlot—totaling 750 cases. Today, the winery produces over a dozen varietals and a growing production of 10,000 cases.

Flagship wine: "Armando tells me the Ceja Pinot Noir reminds him of me," Amelia laughs. When asked to describe it, she says, "Well, it definitely has some tannins present—but that doesn't mean it's not feminine in style. I would describe it as silky and velvet-textured, but with a firm grip." We would describe it as a Pinot with personality. —M.M.

Sara Quider
White Wine Winemaker, Ferrari-Carano
Sonoma

Sara Quider's first job out of college was working with the fisheries commission to remove the earbones from Pacific rockfish—a task that today, she can only refer to as "horrible." A Sonoma County native, Sara turned to the local paper for a job she might find a little bit more palatable, before landing a position as a lab intern at Ferrari-Carano in 1995. "I couldn't believe it," she exclaims. "I began to smell things like apples and pineapples and flowers—there were no fish there!" After putting in some time at Ferrari-Carano and other Sonoma wineries, Sara returned to school to earn her fermentation science degree before returning to her roots at Ferrari-Carano and following her heart into a job she truly loves.

"I love the whole process of winemaking," she says. "There are so many people involved in making a bottle of wine that it is unbelievable, and the end product is so fun! It's not like being an accountant or something, and when we all get together to have the wine and enjoy it, it is amazing." For Sara, sharing her passion with her

friends and family is also key, including her two children, who have already begun to refine their palates and have been perfecting the art of tasting. “My seven year old daughter wants to be a winemaker,” says Sara, who as a child was one of six girls in a family that promoted the strengths and abilities of women.

“It was instilled in me that women can do anything,” the winemaker quips. Sara brings this can-do attitude to winemaking, and admits that there’s a certain female sensibility she brings to her wines. “I’ve been told that the Chards we make have more of a feminine touch, a bit of delicate elegance that is new to the wines. Like many women, I’m super-sensitive to smells, and I think that plays a big part in my success as a winemaker.”

Flagship wine: The Ferrari-Carano Fumé Blanc is made with 100% Sauvignon Blanc grapes, but Sara has focused on bringing out the most tropical notes in the fruit. “It is very fruit-driven, with pineapple, guava and grapefruit citrus,” she says. “Partial barrel fermentation softens and rounds the fruit, and it is just lovely, with easy-flowing tropical flavors. I love it.” —Rachel Burkons

Carolyn Wente
Vice-Chairman, Wente Vineyards
Livermore Valley

As Vice Chairman of Wente Vineyards, Carolyn Wente heads up worldwide sales and marketing for California’s oldest continually operating family winery—with “family” being the operative word. Carolyn is a fourth-generation winegrower who works closely with her brothers Eric and Phil, along with fifth-generation members of the Wente family, nephew Karl and niece Christine, to bring the Wente brand to the world.

While Carolyn’s favorite wines include Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, her current Wente Vineyards favorite is Morning Fog Chardonnay. “Wente was the originator of Chardonnay in California and this beautifully balanced wine hails from our Livermore Valley estate vineyards.”

Morning Fog Chardonnay is a stylish blend of 65 percent barrel-fermented and 35 percent stainless steel-finished Chardonnay, 65 percent of which undergoes malolactic fermentation. “Morning Fog is not overly oaked or high in alcohol; its ripe apple and citrus flavors are balanced with bright acidity.” As the cookbook author in the family, Carolyn considers this wine “a great foil for many different foods.”

The Wente family is synonymous with fine wine and the thriving arts community of Livermore, where Carolyn grew up in the family business. Since the 1970s, she has driven global sales of the brand to an industry high and used her perspective to differentiate Wente Vineyards with lifestyle businesses like their restaurant, golf course and a concert series, all of which have become touch points for consumers that help create the impression of a complete lifestyle.

“It’s been exciting for me to build cachet for the Wente Vineyards brand with new audiences based on family history and the tradition of our estate-grown wines,” says the exec. “These authentic values and our sustainability are particularly meaningful to the Millennial audience that is now gravitating to our brand.”

Flagship wine: As the cookbook author in the family, Carolyn considers her current Wente favorite—Morning Fog Chardonnay—to be a great foil for many different foods. “Morning Fog is not overly oaked or high in alcohol; its ripe apple and citrus flavors are balanced with bright acidity that makes it ideal at the table.” —Deborah Parker Wong

Alison Crary

Winemaker, Sterling Vineyards

Napa Valley

Alison Crary is a Southern transplant—she’s spent time in both Baton Rouge and North Carolina—who caught the wine bug early on and has been making a name for herself in the business for the past 14 years, first on the sales and marketing side before making the leap to production. “I decided that if I have to work for the rest of my life, I want to do something I love,” she says. “Winemaking captured my imagination and stoked my love of science. As the daughter of a finance professor and an artist, I have a very analytical and an artistic side, and winemaking is the perfect combination of those two traits!”

Alison has used these abilities with great success at Sterling, where she continues to find inspiration from the vineyards and terroir around her. “Working in Napa is so much fun,” she gushes. “There is a lot of exploring to be done in a rather small area, which I love.” That adventuresome exploratory spirit follows in the footsteps of female winemaker pioneers, whose efforts to gain a foothold for women has not been lost on her. “I think we owe a lot to the women who originally decided to forge a path into winemaking in the 1970s,” Alison admits. “I feel fortunate to carry on that pioneering spirit.”

Alison may be representing women winemakers well, but she’s also keeping the ever-growing base of female consumers in mind as she crafts each blend. “I think a lot about who is going to be buying our wines, and there’s a large group of women who are buying and consuming wines; I’m always thinking about the kind of wines they might be seeking,” she explains. “I don’t know if it is only women who are seeking balance and grace and diversity in their wine, but that’s sort of a vision I have.”

Flagship wine: “The Sterling Vineyards Napa Cabernet Sauvignon represents the best of Napa,” Alison says. “It captures that mountain herbal perfume character, as well as the plump, juicy, black cherry from the southern part of the Valley. I wanted to capture the freshness and ripeness of the more fertile growing areas and the perfume that’s at the top of Diamond Mountain to create a balanced and graceful Napa Cab.” —R.B.

Jennifer Wall

Winemaker, Barefoot Cellars

Modesto, CA

Like many young people fresh out of college, when Jennifer Wall graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz, she moved back in with her parents, who had recently relocated from Sacramento to the heart of wine country: Sonoma County. Having earned her degree in biology with an emphasis in medicine, when Jennifer got a job at a custom wine processing facility, her true passion was unleashed; she devoted herself to learning as much as she could about wine and winemaking. “I started at the very bottom, at the ground floor,” she explains. “I decided to take the biggest detour of my life, and thank god I did!”

Nearly 20 years later, the winemaker’s unexpected path has taken her to great places, namely Barefoot Cellars, where her wines have become the most-awarded portfolio in the \$15-and-under category. Jennifer takes much pride in watching her wines’ success, but she’s always got the end result and customers in mind. “One of the best parts of being in the wine industry is putting together a final blend and knowing that people across the country are going to enjoy that bottle with their friends and family,” she explains. “I get to be a part of their lives and in their homes, and that is very special.”

Although Jennifer cherishes the role she plays in people’s everyday lives and embraces her femininity, she’s not convinced that her gender has been a key factor to her success. “I’m very proud to be the Barefoot winemaker,

and I just happen to be a woman,” she explains. “I don’t think that being a woman and a winemaker make me something special; it’s all about the wine!”

Flagship wine: Since its release in 2006, the Barefoot Cellars Pinot Grigio has not only been a hot seller at its price point, but it has also introduced consumers to a new California-style Pinot Grigio that bursts with fruit on the nose and has a lush, full mouthfeel. “I love it because it is easy to drink alone and pairs well with food,” says Jennifer, whose perfect pairing is Barefoot Pinot Grigio and a flavorful pesto pasta. —R.B.

Gretchen Roddick

General Manager, Hope Family Wines

Paso Robles

Straight out of college, Gretchen Roddick was hired by the Hope family when Treana was just a start-up brand and Paso Robles was a mere blip on the world wine map.

It’s twelve years later, and Gretchen, 38, oversees five wine brands—Treana, Liberty School, Candor, Austin Hope and Westside, each with a different price point and label to fit the market—and 40 employees, from administration to sales and marketing, through to the bottling and production line.

“My office is a revolving door,” she notes; “who am I going to see and what am I going to do next? There’s never a dull moment!”

Her day-to-day may change from hour to hour but she still has time to serve on the Board of Directors of the Wine Institute, promoting California wines on a global scale, as well as on the Board of the Horticultural and Crop Science department at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

“Education is one of my driving forces,” she tells THE TASTING PANEL, and it’s that kind of philosophy that keeps the interaction with her staff so important. “I want people who are not only interested in what they are doing, but really like what we do here; part of my job is to make sure the working atmosphere at Hope Family Wines is fun.”

Flagship wine: With a total case production of 350,000 for the five wine brands, Gretchen still points to Treana Red. The Cabernet-Syrah blend is grown from eight vineyard sources in Paso Robles. —Meridith May

Holly Turner

Winemaker, Three Rivers Winery

Walla Walla, WA

Having spent more than a decade as winemaker at Three Rivers Winery in Walla Walla, Washington, Holly Turner has witnessed an explosion of wine culture in Washington State and in Walla Walla Valley in particular. Three Rivers, located just a few miles southwest of Walla Walla’s thriving town center, is poised to hit some new watermarks of its own. In February 2008, the winery became part of the Foley Family Wines portfolio and is now making its debut as a national brand.

“Three Rivers has a very solid regional following, and we’re excited about seeing our wines reach a much larger audience,” says Holly, who has seen an astounding seventy percent leap in wine club sales with an emphasis on reserve wines over the last two years.

“We are definitely evolving our consumers; they enjoy our Rivers Red as an everyday wine, but they are coming to the winery in search of our reserve and tasting room wines.” That trip will be made even easier during the peak months of March through September with the expansion of nearby Highway 12 and a new exit to the winery.

Three Rivers is well known for its single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, sourced from Champoux Vineyards in Horse Heaven Hills, and for Cabernet Franc now sourced from the Weinbau Vineyard in Wahluke Slope; both sites proffer concentrated varietal expression, vibrant acidity and underlying minerality that distinguish them from lesser vineyards.

Flagship wine: Svelte, an aptly-named blend of Petit Verdot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo and Malbec that spends a lavish 28 months in new oak is tops on Turner's current list of favorite wines. The components of this regional blend are beautifully married by well-integrated oak for a wine that's as innovative and successful as Holly herself. —D.P.W.

Alison Green-Doran
Winemaker, Levendi Wines
Napa Valley

For Alison Green-Doran, answering the ever-changing challenges and questions that accompany winemaking are among the most important and exciting lessons she learned from one of the world's most famous enologists, André Tchelistcheff. "He was so curious, and always asking questions," she explains of the man who worked as a consultant at Simi Winery in Healdsburg, owned by Green-Doran's family. "I really learned from that to let no idea go untested. I've got André's picture still on my wall, with his one raised eyebrow and look inquiry to keep reminding me to have good ideas and to play with them."

Green-Doran has brought this questioning sensibility to Levendi, where she's helping take the portfolio to the next level. "I try to help my clients take that leap from making a really nice wine, to a really great wine," she says. And although this is the Year of the Woman at THE TASTING PANEL, according to Green-Doran, we shouldn't be too quick to assign this wine industry veteran's success to her gender. "I've tried to stay out of the whole 'you're a woman' thing in winemaking. I'm trying to be known as a great winemaker, not a great woman winemaker," says Alison, whose pioneering spirit helped pave the way for a generation of woman winemakers hard at work today.

"I think I was the fourth woman winemaker in California, and in the beginning, if you worked really hard and didn't mind everybody swearing and could lift heavy objects, you were considered some sort of mascot. Nowadays you hit another woman winemaker every five steps."

Flagship wine: "The Sweetwater Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon was a wonderful opportunity to make great wine out of a new vineyard and a new area, Oak Knolls," Alison says. "The fruit gets so much time on the vine before it hits harvest sugar, so it collects all of that flavor and color, giving it this wonderfully love, luscious and soft profile that has made it one of my favorite wines to work with." —R.B.

Katy Leese
Co-Founder, 585 Wine Partners
Sonoma

Katy Leese says her love of wine sprang from her close relationship with someone who works in wine—her husband Dan Leese was formerly President of Beringer Blass Wine Estates. "It was a dream of ours to do something together in the wine business," she muses in retrospect. "We work well together; it's a nice combination of the male and female attributes."

Katy has grown gracefully into her busy role as Director of Public Relations and Packaging (among other tasks) at 585 Wine Partners, the company she co-founded in 2005 with Dan and their partners, Doug and Becky Walker. Katy's background as a professional interior designer gave her the right artistic eye to oversee the creation of the labels for the group's brands, which include freewheeling Red Truck, Russian River-based Picket Fence and zippy Italian import Bivio.

Katy's favorite project is the company's most eco-conscious brand, the all-organic Green Truck. "We were very excited about the whole organic side of winemaking," says Katy, "and are completely committed to it now." Having secured long-term contracts with three well-known Mendocino County organic growers, Katy notes that 585 Wine Partners can now boast being the country's largest producer of wines made from organically grown grapes.

The entire line-up of 585 Wine Partners brands will be transitioning this year to Saint-Gobain Eco Series bottles made from recycled glass (which also happen to be lighter, saving on shipping costs) as well as labels made from recycled paper.

Flagship wine: "The Green Truck Petite Sirah, Mendocino County [SRP \$12] is doing really well," says Katy. "This is a varietal that a lot of people are clearly in love with, but others are unfamiliar with. When you pour it in the glass, you say "Wow! Look at that color!" —David Gadd

Jennifer Higgins
Head Winemaker, Lancaster Estate
Alexander Valley

As winemaker Jennifer Higgins marks her eleventh vintage at Lancaster Estate, she considers the 2004 Estate Cabernet to be a very special wine. "I have a fond spot for the '04 because it was my first grape-to-glass vintage as head winemaker." Prior to '04 Jennifer had been assistant winemaker and studied under the likes of Jill Davis and David Ramey, both of whom are masters in their own right. "2004 was a banner year for anyone's first vintage as winemaker, and the wine confirmed my belief in the quality of wines that can be made off this estate."

Jennifer is not alone in the belief that a winemaker's personality goes into every bottle, and she finds making estate-grown wines particularly rewarding.

"It's wonderful to make very unique wines that no one else can make, and we do it by focusing on a snapshot of the vintage and by intimately knowing the personality of the place." At Lancaster, that means hillside vineyards which express spicy deep plum and black cherry fruit, and powerful tannins.

Lancaster grows the five classic Bordeaux varieties and blends can vary from year to year; Jennifer's '05 exhibits a classic Cabernet Sauvignon expression with the estate's signature clove and nutmeg complexity while '06 showcases some "very sexy" Malbec fruit. With current production at about 4,000 cases, Jennifer approaches each vintage as a new experience and an opportunity to improve upon the last.

Flagship wine: "We released the Lancaster Estate '06 in September," says Jennifer, "and there is a consistent thread of Lancaster character that runs through every vintage, from '95 to '09." —D.P.W.