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Wine & Spirits

New Development in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley

By Wolfgang M. Weber — August 2006

“Winegrapes weren’t always the local cash crop. Until the late 1960s, prune trees covered Dry Creek’s valley floor, and ancient plots of zinfandel were largely ignored. Dry Creek Vineyard’s Kim Stare Wallace recalls that when her father, David Stare, ripped out a dilapidated orchard to plant vines and built a winery in 1972, “people thought my dad was nuts.”

Jump forward three decades and David Stare doesn’t look so crazy—there’s not a prune tree to be seen in the valley. As we sit down to taste Dry Creek Vineyard’s three different takes on sauvignon blanc, Wallace, who with her husband Don, recently took over operations at her father’s winery, says, “You know, I swore I’d never work here as a kid.”

Dry Creek Vineyard has been a proponent of sauvignon blanc since the early days, and the variety is a good example of Wallace’s renewed focus on the winery’s vineyards, which show the character and diversity of Dry Creek Valley. The ‘04 Taylor’s Vineyard, made from the musqué clone of sauvignon blanc, packs in rich flavors from the warm sunshine in Dry Creek, yet it shows lightness and lift, a refreshing sensation that both Wallace and winemaker Bill Knuttel attribute to the region’s cool nights and early morning fog.

Showcasing single-vineyard wines is one of the ways that Wallace believes Dry Creek Vineyard can distinguish itself in a marketplace that has become increasingly difficult for medium-size family wineries. “We’ve pulled away from doing a severe program,” she says of the new focus on specific vineyards.

To make the point, Knuttel offers two



Kim Stare Wallace and Bill Knuttel



zinfandels from 2003, his first vintage at Dry Creek Vineyard: one from 15 year-old vines at Somers Ranch and one from Beeson Ranch, where the zinfandel vines are more than a hundred years old. “As a winemaker,” he says, “it’s like saying ‘Here are the pieces that showcase what’s happening in each vineyard.’” Both are balanced at a relatively low alcohol level, the younger of the two showing plenty of spice and blackberry fruit, while the old-vine zin mixes fresh blueberry fruit with savory aromas of wild mint and hillside sage.

Reflecting on the recent changes at the winery, Wallace points out how rare it is for family-owned companies to survive a transition between generations. “We’re bound and determined,” she says firmly, “not to let what happened to the other medium-size family wineries happen here—to be squeezed out or gobbled up.”

Dry Creek Vineyard was the first new winery established in the valley following the repeal of Prohibition, and a wave of smaller wineries soon followed. In recent years some of them, like Preston of Dry Creek, has pursued organic viticulture. Others, like Quivira Vineyards, have taken organic viticulture a step further and moved toward the practice of biodynamics.”

