



WOMEN OF WINE

BY K. REKA BADGER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEN RODRIGUEZ

AIMING TO END HER LIFE, a distraught Persian woman of fable guzzled the dregs of spoiled grapes. Instead of expiring, however, her mood lifted, happiness returned and fermented grape juice found lasting favor with kings and commoners alike.

Despite their status as the legendary discoverers of wine, women historically have served secondary roles in its production. They have worked in tasting rooms and marketing departments, but rarely stained their hands doing the fun stuff in cellars or on crush pads.

The Wine Institute reports that in 1890 women made up about 10% of California's lead winemakers, a figure that remains roughly the same more than a century later. But just as women have cracked the glass ceiling in a host of traditionally male-dominated pursuits, so too has the distaff half begun to swell the ranks of California's viticulturists.

In Santa Barbara County, women have made wine at least since 1972, when Mary Vigoroso began vinifying fruit from her own vineyard. Nine years later, Brooks and Kate Firestone, founders of Firestone Vineyard, made headlines by promoting Alison Green-Doran from cellar master to winemaker, a position she held for nearly 20 years.

As Green-Doran assumed her new duties, Lane Tanner took over as enologist at Firestone, an unprecedented move that put two women in charge of a major regional winery.

Tanner remembers some of the early difficulties she faced, including cleaning barrels by rocking them with chains inside and, later, wrestling hundred-pound barrels onto cumbersome washers.

"You do two or three barrels and your back's done for the day," she says. "Now we use barrel wands that go right into the barrel on the rack, so it's gotten physically easier. That's been a real help to women in this business."

In 1989, Tanner started Lane Tanner Winery, crafting what she called "feminine" Pinot Noir. Rife with lush sensuality, the wines earned colorful nicknames, such as "working girl wine" and "the haunting other woman."

Kathy Joseph, also a renowned Pinot Noir producer, earned a B.S. in bacteriology before surrendering to the lure of farming, an integral part of winemaking. She started Fiddlehead Cellars in 1989 and later planted Fiddlestix Estate, nearly eight acres of Pinot Noir in the celebrated Santa Rita Hills.

Along the way, Joseph hired a number of women making their way up the viticultural ladder, including Karen Steinwachs, who became winemaker at Buttonwood Farm Winery in 2007.

Steinwachs exchanged a 20-year corporate career for the messy glories of winemaking when she volunteered to work harvest in 2001 and never looked back. She admits that women can't muscle equipment the way men can, so they have to work smarter.

"I use a pallet jack and put wheels on things that are heavy," she says. "I use a lot more physics than brute force."

Steinwachs sees herself as more of a shepherd of juice than a maker of wine and employs some novel techniques in the cellar.

"I don't think we're as forceful as many of the guys in making wine," Steinwachs explains. "We're more personal

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Winemakers clockwise from top left: Kathy Joseph, Fiddlehead Cellars; Karen Steinwachs, Buttonwood Farm Winery; Lane Tanner, Lane Tanner Winery; Meghan Reeves, Reeves Ranch Vineyard; Morgan Clendenen, Cold Heaven Cellars and Lorna Kreutz-Duggan, Foley Estates Vineyard





Clockwise from left: The iconic barn at Fiddlestix Estates hosts a variety of wine-related celebrations throughout the year. Bottles from Foley Estates Vineyard, Buttonwood Farm Winery, Cold Heaven Cellars and Reeves Ranch Vineyard reflect the unique personalities of each wine and winemaker.



with it. The wines are like my children; I worry about them all the time.

“They constantly evolve,” she smiles, “so I play music for them. During harvest, they get rock and roll, and when it’s just me, I like to play opera.”

As with women (and men) in the business, Steinwachs savors the long crazy hours of harvest, the purple-tinted hands and the pride that comes with crafting a pleasurable product that brings people together.

“I actually like getting dirty,” she grins, “having my hands up to my elbows in stuff. This is a passion project industry, and if you don’t love every aspect of making wine, then it’s not the place to be.”

Steinwachs notes that, in Santa Barbara County, female winemakers actively support each other, offering technical aid and recommending each other’s wines. During the fall of 2010, she remembers, Morgan Clendenen, whose label is Cold Heaven, hosted regular pub nights where local women could commiserate about the rigors of harvest.

For aspiring viticulturists, mentors play a powerful role, and veteran winemaker Rick Longoria has helped several area women reach their goals. They include Clarissa Nagy, now winemaker at Bonaccorsi Wine Company, and Lorna Kreutz-Duggan, Foley Estates Vineyard’s assistant winemaker and enologist, a laboratory position.



“Rick was a tremendous mentor, and I am forever indebted to him,” Kreutz-Duggan says. “He showed me the true artisan side of wine-making and highlighted the importance of fruit sources.”

Kreutz-Duggan defines winemaking as wearing many hats, from chemist and viticulturist to mechanic, plumber and sensory analyst. In the latter department, she has noticed some differences between the sexes, but is unwilling to draw conclusions about the controversial notion that women have more taste buds and, hence, better palates.



“I do feel that women and men have different sensitivities,” she says. “Regarding wine faults, women seem more sensitive to VA [volatile acidity] and men to Brett [Brettanomyces yeast]. Maybe it’s gender innate or maybe an intuitive thing.



“I’m a big fan of powerful aromatics,” she continues, “and sensory-wise, I tend to be more analytical, but my goal is to make balanced wines that people enjoy.”

Meghan Reeves launched her label, Reeves Ranch Vineyard, after finding it painful to part with the grapes she and her husband carefully tend each year. After taking community college courses and consulting with Kris Curran, who makes wine under her Curran label, Reeves began crafting Syrah in the garage.

“Growing the grapes, that’s what I love,” Reeves declares. “I like to have control over the fruit. The most exciting thing is to see it come full circle, drink what you made and be proud of what you drink!”

The female winemakers of Santa Barbara County acknowledge their novelty status in a male-dominated industry, yet strive to earn respect for their viticultural skills, regardless of gender. They rack wines and wrangle hoses with the best of them, while maintaining a personal, even nurturing relationship with their liquid charges.

Lane Tanner, who retired after more than 30 years in the grape game, sums up winemaking as a rare job that allowed her to work hard, get dirty, dress up for events and take weeks off at a time. She figures if she has a change of heart, she can easily return to it.

“It’s an amazing array of fun stuff,” she admits, “and it’s never the same from month to month. It covers everything you’d want to do.

And the truth is, I’ll always be a winemaker.”*

Special thanks to Kathy Joseph of Fiddlehead Cellars and Fiddlestix Estates for allowing us to shoot at their beautiful vineyard—at the height of harvest season!

