

Food & Wine

Weeknight
Dish: Seasonal
tips for skillet
suppers G4

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Erik Castro / Special to The Chronicle

Theresa Heredia, who trained as a chemist, surveys vines in the Pastorale vineyard at Joseph Phelps' Freestone Vineyards on the Sonoma coast.

WINEMAKERS TO WATCH 2012

Paying tribute to tradition



Letizia Pauletto and Enrico Bertoz, Arbe Garbe Wines



Michael McCay, McCay Cellars

More inside

For profiles and tasting notes on this year's Winemakers to Watch, see Pages G6-G7.



Chris Brockway, Broc Cellars



Gavin Chanin, Chanin Wines

Vintners highlight the best of California by trusting instincts, using a light touch

In many cases, our Winemakers to Watch for 2012 deserve attention for what they don't do. It comes down to a strong streak of traditionalism, a willingness to innovate by eschewing intrusive winemaking and, instead, working smarter.

That includes the use of old-fashioned wooden fermenters and whole Pinot Noir clusters on the Sonoma coast. It means making Chardonnay by barely touching the barrels, and fermenting with indigenous yeast to highlight Lodi's old-vine Zinfandel. It means minimizing additions in the cellar, and innovating the historical practice of blending white wines.

In doing so, our five choices highlight the best of what California offers.

— Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor



Winemaker to watch: Theresa Heredia

Theresa Heredia could have played it safe.

As a trained chemist, she found the science of winemaking relatively simple. Which meant that, as the winemaker for Freestone Vineyards, the Sonoma County coast project from Napa's Joseph Phelps Vineyards, she could easily have made by-the-numbers bottles.

She didn't. With her bosses' blessing, Heredia has spent a decade doing quietly radical cellar work, pushing what could have been just another deep-pocketed Pinot project toward the extraordinary.

"In general, California Pinot is pretty fruit-forward," she says. "We have to work hard to not make it too fruit-dominant."

Intense aromas

At a time when Pinot Noir and Chardonnay work hard to be mild-mannered, Heredia crafts the Freestone wines to explode with drama and tension. A wine like her 2009 Pastorale Vineyard Pinot Noir brims with intense aromas of pine mushroom and spice, yet it seems almost weightless to taste.

Some of this style can be explained by fastidious vineyard work, by picking at modest ripeness levels from Freestone's vineyards in chilly western Sonoma. But don't overlook her preference for fermenting Pinot using whole grape clusters - stems and all - in old-fashioned wooden fermenters, a technique sometimes criticized for adding unripe flavors. It might be too much to call her the queen of stems, but her decision has become crucial to the wine's identity.

"I was so scared at first," she says, "until I realized how much complexity the stems could bring."

A new career

Heredia grew up in Pittsburg and studied biochemistry at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. After a brief stint at Amgen, she pursued a doctorate at UC Davis. She was already interested in wine, splurging for bottles like the 1995 Clos de Vougeot from Denis Mortet, but only when her fellow teaching assistants from the enology program brought bottles to grading sessions did it dawn that wine might be a career.

In 2001, she got a harvest job at Saintsbury, and then discovered that Phelps needed a research chemist. But the winery also had a new project - growing Pinot Noir in a cold, tough corner near the Sonoma County coast.

Heredia also ventured to Burgundy for stints at Domaine de Montille and Comte Armand. There she not only saw the routine use of stems, but also the virtues of a hands-off approach.

"I learned that the less you touch the wines, the better they're going to be. You put that Chardonnay in a barrel, and if it takes a year to finish, it takes a year to finish."

Added yeast is a rarity (she avoided it entirely until 2010), and use of the preservative sulfur dioxide is kept to a minimum. She exposes her Chardonnay grapes to oxygen through a small, slotted press - another much-debated technique that can help prolong a wine's life.

But mostly Heredia resists the popular preference for daringly ripe flavors. "There's still a bit of green, but not a lot of green," she says. "The grapes are still turgid. They're nice and fresh."

Shrouded in fog

Of course, it helps to work with two sites, Pastorale and Quarter Moon, that struggle for every degree of ripeness. Planted in well-drained Goldridge soils, they're often shrouded in fog and farmed using a mix of biodynamic and conventional techniques. Most Pinot vineyards are filled with the usual roster of nursery clones, but Freestone's were planted largely to native selections like Calera.

Heredia's approach is fully backed by Phelps President Bill Phelps and director of winemaking Damian Parker - in part because of her chemistry background.

"There are a lot of people who talk out there," Parker says, "but they're not backing up their talk with any science."

Even in the cool 2011 vintage, Heredia stuck to her guns. Smart move. She pours me a sample from Pastorale, fermented with three-quarters of its stems. At barely 12 percent alcohol, it finds a balance of heady sage aromas and a dense texture. In the context of California Pinot, it is a radical, thought-provoking glassful, a sign that her style is exactly as she intends.

Age: 41

What she does: Brings traditional, if unexpected, techniques to a prime project on the Pinot frontier

Wine with dinner: Meursault from Thierry Matrot

Quote: "Not every place is perfect for growing Pinot and Chardonnay, but this is pretty darn close."

From the notebook

2009 Freestone Pastorale Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$75, 14.1% alcohol): Packed with foresty scents of pine mushroom, it offers vibrant huckleberry and watermelon, and delivers layers of spice and minerality. Densely built and yet seemingly weightless.