

WOMEN *in* WINE

NAPA'S LEADING LADIES

By Doreen Schmid



MARY ROCCA, CO-OWNER OF
ROCCA FAMILY VINEYARDS

For as long as there have been grapes in wine, there have been women in the wine business. As the Napa Valley has evolved into a world-class wine region, women in wine have increased in number, and are now as easy to find as a top-notch Cabernet. Women are taking their places front row and center and relishing the challenges, opportunities, and rewards of their positions in the wine world.

One thing that's changed as women have evolved in the wine industry, observes Domaine Carneros president and winemaker Eileen Crane, is that, "There used to be two or three women running wineries and now, between Napa and Sonoma, there are probably 30 women heading wineries of substantial size. As a result, you're no longer as much of a curiosity! There's also more of a work network out there—groups of women executives and CEOs who get together—that didn't exist even 5 years ago."

CHANGING ROLES

"Personally, my role has evolved for 20 years as the company's evolved, but those things aren't different than for a man in my situation," says Crane. She notes a positive development in that more women are occupying manual winemaking roles in the cellar, not just the lab. "The next real threshold," she says, "is in sales. We still need to get more respect there. And then when you retire, you need more respect then, too!"

Heitz Cellars President Kathleen Heitz Myers emphasizes that staying on top is about adapting to change. "Our winery's been in business for 46 years: a lot's come and gone," she says.



KATHLEEN HEITZ MYERS, PRESIDENT OF HEITZ CELLARS



EILEEN CRANE, PRESIDENT AND WINEMAKER AT DOMAINE CARNEROS

“Great communication, the teamwork of a family business, constantly re-evaluating yourself and your goals, and mutual respect—the feeling that everybody brings something to the table—as president I try to integrate all those things, and that spirit is what I see reflected in our family and employees.”

Laurie Claudon-Clark’s background as a former psycho-therapist, Peace Corps worker, and ongoing supporter of a Nicaraguan community assistance project informs her work as co-owner of Claudon-Clark Vineyards. Philanthropy is part of the winery’s mission statement. “My involvement in our family business has to do with an earlier time when wine was part of family,” she says. “My role in nurturing the business focuses on meaningful connections and the way that wine brings people together and cements relationships. The science in vineyards and winemaking is certainly important, but it’s also basically agrarian. That’s what interests me: experiencing the seasons on our land, raising our children—almost literally—in the vineyards and now having grandchildren here.

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—EILEEN CRANE, PRESIDENT AND WINEMAKER, DOMAINE CARNEROS

“In my work with families I always stressed that your job is to provide them with nutrients and soil and let them be who they’re going to be. Now I help grow vines, and with terroir-driven wine you’re letting it be what it’s meant to be,” she notes.

FARMING FOUNDATIONS

While never Pride Mountain Vineyards’ official winemaker, there is no aspect of winemaking there that winery founder and co-owner Carolyn Pride hasn’t been involved with. “There’s a whole corporate side to a winery,” she says, “and I can quote it to you chapter and verse. I can tell you about anything factual, from soil types to barrels to production, but to me it’s much more fulfilling to tell the story of how it all happened.

“You either walk through, or walk by, doors that are open to you,” she says about the way she and her deceased husband Bob got into the wine business. They chose to walk through the door labeled “winemakers” in 1990, as they needed more capital than their grape growing supplied.

“It was a matter of economy,” she recalls. “We are from old



ROBIN LAIL, FOUNDER AND OWNER OF LAIL VINEYARDS

California farming families and what I do know is how to farm. Crops are specific—but farming is farming. It's far more difficult for someone raised in the city to happily embrace the country lifestyle. A good definition: we have no dull days. To be a farmer you have to be an optimist."

Although she was happy to recently turn over the reins to her two children, she is actively involved in the winery and the lives of its workers, including constructing caves, and a new tasting room and offices. "I've grown this ranch and the ranch has grown me," she adds.

INGENUITY & CREATIVITY

Viader Winery's owner-winemaker Delia Viader says that it takes "ingenuity" to be a successful woman in the wine business. "But ingenuity is common sense," she explains. "It's about women using their creativity and natural nurturing capacities just to 'get it done.' Even from college you have to prove yourself," asserts Viader, who holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy, has completed advanced business studies, and has four children.

"I see positive changes," notes Viader, "though it takes a lot of perseverance. I don't believe that women should be the same as men. I encourage the difference. We bring a lot to the table—certainly one thing is creativity."

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—CAROLYN PRIDE, FOUNDER AND CO-OWNER,
PRIDE MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS

The challenge, Viader adds, is for both men and women to remain globally competitive as the business and wine frontiers expand. "The world of wine," she notes, is now just that, "...the entire world. And those challenges aren't gender-centric. We started exporting in 1991 to all over Europe and Asia. You feel humble in many ways—competing with over 200 years of winemaking and people with 31 generations in the business."

A relative newcomer to the business, Mary Rocca embarked on her career in wine after a successful career in dentistry. Not many women practiced dentistry when Rocca, now co-owner of Rocca Family Vineyards, started out. She felt then, as she does now, that her own personal sense of pride required her to "always do my very best. I never wanted men to feel that my performance was in any way gender-related."

Rocca doesn't see much that's gender-centric in the wine business these days, but thinks that it's possibly the fact that women's palates are said to be more sensitive that makes women winemakers some of Napa Valley's best. She adds, "I'm thrilled to have one of those star winemakers, Celia Masyczek, on my team." The best winemaking is about bringing out what the wine is rather than make it be what it isn't, Rocca points out, adding that "women in general are brought up to learn how to work with situations in a non-dogmatic way. We compromise and look for solutions. That's helpful both in winemaking and in building relationships as a winery owner."

Robin Lail, founder-owner of Lail Vineyards, has two approaches to the issue of women in the wine business. "First," she says, "it's extremely important for me to do the very best I can do at whatever I do and I think it benefits women who come after me. And, two, on a daily basis I don't think about those kinds of differentiations. Working with my female peers in the business is very exciting and enriching on lots of levels. But business is just business. I am in favor of women being regarded as individuals capable at whatever they do."

Lail says that her biggest challenge is how to carry forward the legacy of the past: her great grand-uncle Gustave Niebaum founded Inglenook. "The story is an important part of California's wine business," she says. "It gives the business texture and depth and informs why we are making wine today. I'm so honored to do what I do, and with the involvement of our children we bring that history into the present tense."

Doreen Schmid is a wine, food, and travel writer who lives in Napa and New York.