Just Our Little Secret

by Don Gillette

Believe it or not, life at Napa Valley Winery Exchange is not uninterrupted hardship. We have our joys. Aside from devouring store inventory and debating our favorites with the customers, our most pleasurable task is the hunt for and subsequent promotion of exciting new wineries. Two years ago, in pursuit of that task, I called winemaker Bob Egelhoff.

Bob is the winemaker at the much admired David Arthur Vineyards and worked previously at the fine Robert Craig Winery in the same capacity. I had heard rumors of a new Cabernet project, and at my request he came in to tell us about it. He arrived with a bottle of that wine in one hand and a sheaf of paper in the other. My eyes were immediately attracted to the paper. I knew he was also in the city to visit his printer and I could plainly see the 'galley proof' of a new wine label on the top of the stack. The label was for a 1998 Chardonnay from Richard Partridge Winery.

Our interest in that Chardonnay brought Bob back for another visit. The wine proved to be delicious and we debuted it soon after, selling a good percentage of the 89 cases that were produced. When we later got an early look at the Cabernet from Partridge we were downright ecstatic. It was terrific, and it was our little secret, or so we thought.

Convinced that we had stolen a march on the rest of the wine world, we began phoning our best Cabernet customers to share the news. That week, the new Wines and Spirits Magazine came out with the Partridge Cab on the cover. To further frustrate our "quiet" marketing scheme, the Wine Spectator Website followed, making it a "Hot Pick" and giving it 94 points, their highest rating yet for a 98 Cab. The news was out.

Although an electrical engineer by profession, Richard Partridge grew up on a family farm and was no stranger to agriculture and its demands. An avid wine drinker and financially successful in his own business, he allowed himself to dream of a foray into the wine trade. A chance meeting with Bob Egelhoff and the discovery of shared goals made Richard Partridge Winery possible.

It is a good match, both are affable and having fun. Their unpretentious conversation is appealingly fresh, free of the self important posturing sometimes encountered in the rarified world of "Cult" Cabernet. Each makes important contributions to the endeavor. Richard brings business acumen, marketing skills and a willingness to foot the bill for the very best fruit. Bob polishes the wines like a diamond, and his vineyard skills and grower contacts have helped obtain the "Grand Cru" quality grapes they both covet. In the final analysis, Bob's fruit selection may prove as important a contribution to the finished product as any his winemaking ability produces.

IT ONLY GETS BETTER

The customers responded as enthusiastically to the Partridge wines as we did, so selling them proved as easy as it was pleasurable and when opportunities arose to barrel taste the 1999 and later the 2000 Vintage we were there. How good are they? The 2000 Cabernet is clearly a star of the vintage, one of the top five amongst 60 or so that I have tasted. The 1999 Cabernet, in an even stronger field, was tasted twice in barrel and more recently in bottle and like the younger wine, it is absolutely wonderful. My tasting notes on the 1999 Cabernet and its companion, the delicious 2000 Chardonnay follow. As you can see, the secret may be out, but I still get to drink the wine.

2000 Richard Partridge Chardonnay Napa Valley

David Arthur & Oak Knoll Vineyards
Bright, slightly citric, richly oaked but
essentially fruit driven nose of spiced
apple, lemon, kiwi and flint scents, with
a peach/pear core that grows expansive
with airing. Lovely and supple on the
palate, it is a flavorful wine of surprising balance and grace, dominated by
pear and peach, with lemon, mineral
and vanilla notes pushed toward the

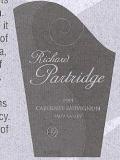


rear. The finish is nicely focused and extremely long, seeming sweetly fruity until the dry mineral notes cut in to bring their bracing effect to a cascade of pear, peach, apple and mock orange. Altogether Californian in fruit character, it is nevertheless balanced like fine Chablis and it will be most appealing when paired by those dishes, particularly seafoods, that can show off its exquisite balance. 220 cases produced.

1999 Richard Partridge Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Sacrashe & Steltzner Vineyards

Deep, purple edged color. Gorgeous, classy, fruit dominated nose of juicy purple plum, pomegranate, red current and blueberry,

with vanilla and hints of candied violets and rich mountain earth adding depth. Perfectly ripe and appealingly supple, it opens with elegantly phrased flavors of sweet plum, blueberry, currant, vanilla, toast and earth. Mouth coating, full of 'grip', and very long, it submerges its tannins in a bath of sleek plum and berry, leaving contrasting impressions of stately polish and youthful buoyancy. Overnight airing reveals more layers of complexity, great charm and even greater persistence, as darkly earthy



'mountain' scents emerge and the fruit clarity ratchets up a notch with scents of cherry, currant, blueberry and anise. The extra airing time proves equally beneficial to the flavors, which become ever more high toned, as sweet red plum and cinnamon join the parade of current, berry, etc. This already delicious wine wants another 5 to 8 years to reach full maturity, but the patient will end up with a Cabernet that delivers memorable Napa Valley flavors and the stylish feel of a fine Margaux. Blended with 4% Merlot From the McKenny vineyard in Stags Leap. 580 cases produced.

The winery's official release date for these wines is September 15th, but they are available at the Napa Valley Winery Exchange now. The Chardonnay is priced at \$36.00 and the Cabernet Sauviagon at \$75.00. There is a one case limit on each wine