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Merlot from the Mountain

Eric Guerra Wines is devoted to high-caliber merlot made from high-elevation grapes

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We've heard it all before. Dreamer falls in love with a grape, enlists the aid of a sensitive, skilled winemaker and they combine to make a small amount of meticulously sourced, finely tuned wine. They take their precious bottlings to only the best restaurants where the wine buyers say, wow, what a great, food-friendly wine, send me a case! Word spreads and bottles are coveted.

Ah, much ado about the latest pinot noir, you say? Cabernet sauvignon? No, this tender story is about merlot.

Eric Guerra Wines is a boutique Sonoma County producer devoted, in the face of conventional wisdom, to making high-end merlot. Founder Eric Guerra and winemaker Leslie Sisneros are both veterans of Kendall-Jackson, where they bonded over the brute artistry of Bruce Springsteen (Guerra grew up in New Jersey) and the majestically soft, velvety merlots of California and Bordeaux.

"I love a cab as much as anybody else, or a pinot noir," said Guerra. "But the finest wines I've ever had were mostly merlot, because of that elegance, the softness merlot provides."

Four years ago Guerra convinced Sisneros, who was by then making Russian River Valley pinot noir for Arista Winery (still her day job), to join him in this heartfelt venture.



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / PD

Tim Ward, left, vineyard manager at Skypine Vineyards, supplies Merlot grapes to Eric Guerra, founder of Eric Guerra Wines, and Leslie Sisneros, winemaker at Eric Guerra Wines. Skypine Vineyards is located on Pine Mountain, overlooking Cloverdale, where according to Sisneros, the adverse conditions produce flavorful fruit.

"Eric's very convincing," she recalled. "He said 'I want to go with a merlot-based blend,' and he put his arguments through, that the best blends with worldwide recognition are merlot-based. I said, 'We'll try it and see.' "

The 2005 Alexander Valley Ispiri, a blend of 81 percent merlot and 19 percent cabernet sauvignon, was released earlier this year and has already found itself on the list at such culinary palaces as Cyrus in Healdsburg, Mirepoix in Windsor and Gary Danko in San Francisco.

"There are still people out there who say, 'Merlot? No, I've got my cab and my pinot and that's cool,'" Guerra said, "but the people who are real wine geeks who own the restaurants and the sommeliers, they get it."

Guerra and Sisneros source the majority of their fruit from Pine Mountain, a high-elevation sub-region of the Alexander Valley east and upward from Cloverdale. A part of the Mayacmas Mountains, Pine Mountain tops out at 3,000 feet. A push to have it be recognized as its own appellation would include the swales and slopes above 1,500 feet.

"Winemakers want intense flavors, concentration, color and all the stuff that happens on the mountain," explained winegrower Tim Ward of Skypine Vineyards, where Eric Guerra sources merlot.

"The reason mountain grapes and red grapes are so pertinent on Pine Mountain is the soils," he continued, "they're absolutely lousy, and that's why they plant Bordeaux grapes here -- they do very well in tortured conditions. That's what winemakers want, tortured grapes."

Ward originally planted merlot up at Skypine, a former kiwi orchard, in 1995, adding cabernet sauvignon in 2000, the rest of the traditional Bordeaux varieties -- cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot -- in 2005. He has 15 acres planted in all and the woes of the typical mountain grower: higher farming costs and lower yields.

Those realities add to the pressure growers like Ward feel when a varietal like merlot goes on the wane; he can make a lot more money by planting and selling cabernet sauvignon. That fact led him recently to graft over a patch of his merlot to cabernet. But he's not ready to give up entirely on merlot.

"I'm a big backer of merlot and always have been," he said. "The wine market's a cycle."

A cycle without as much variation as we might think. Cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay have long been and remain still the top-selling varieties in this country. According to Wine Business, citing recent Nielsen Company data, despite public perception, merlot has not suffered any drop in market share, maintaining an enviable 12 percent of the wine sales market nationally (chardonnay has 21

percent, cab 15).

"Merlot is not lost," he adds, "this is just a new and different take on merlot, about where it's doing well."

Early on, much of Ward's merlot went to Clos du Bois for its prestigious Bordeaux blend, Marlstone, one of the role models for Eric Guerra Wines.

"With the cab up here, the tannins are incredible," Sisneros noted. "The merlot's a soft, velvety grape so they work together."

She adds that part of the reason merlot has taken a hit in the wine cognoscente's consciousness in recent years -- beyond the fallout from a certain Oscar-nominated film -- is its tendency to be a little too soft and even bland. As a vigorous variety capable of producing an abundance of fruit, she said, it's been overplanted and undermanaged, making for some mediocre wines.

"It's all about good exposure and the right hang time, about managing the vines," Sisneros said. "It's tricky."

In concluding that Skypine was the right source for their merlot, Sisneros and Guerra tasted several vintages of Marlstone and other merlot-based wines crafted from Pine Mountain grapes. What they found were wines of depth and complexity, exactly what they were looking for.

Other inspirations are the vineyard-designated merlots from Duckhorn, Beringer and Pahlmeyer in the Napa Valley, and those made in Sonoma by Verite, Lambert Bridge and Stryker Sonoma.

Still, Guerra, who has been out there on the front lines trying to sell his boutique merlot, says that sometimes the easiest part is the making of the wine.

"You've got to believe in your dream," Guerra said. "We've got a really great filet mignon of a mountain here, one little spot I believe is completely untapped and there aren't many left."

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