

Best Merlot

Robert Keenan Winery

By Julie Fadda

“Merlot is my favorite wine,” says Michael Keenan, president of Spring Mountain’s Robert Keenan Winery. “It has a roundness and richness that’s really appealing to me. It also pairs with the widest range of foods.”

For years, people called Keenan’s Merlot the “Cabernet lover’s Merlot.” This is largely because it has deep, rich flavors and tannins—much like Cabernet Sauvignon—that are specific to the estate where it’s grown.

Purchased in 1974, the winery sits at 1,700 feet, on the site of the original 1904

Conradi Winery, which (thanks to prohibition) sat empty for 40 years before Michael’s father, Robert Keenan, purchased it in 1974. It first released Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon in 1977, then Merlot in 1978. Michael took the company over in 1998.

Today, the winery focuses on Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot (along with a small amount of Cabernet Franc, Zinfandel, Syrah and Mernet, a Merlot/Cabernet blend), producing about 12,000 cases annually.

There are 40 vineyard acres on the property, 12 of which are Merlot. The

winery offers three different kinds: Napa Valley Carneros, Napa Valley and the single-vineyard Mailbox.

“I’ve invented the portable vineyard designate,” says Keenan. “The [Mailbox] vineyard used to be by the mailboxes near the road. It was originally bottled for a single-vineyard Merlot I thought we’d only do once [in 1997], because we pulled the vineyard afterward [it was replaced with Cabernet]. But people kept asking for it. So, in 2005, we chose the lower bowl vineyard as the single-vineyard Merlot—and we put a mailbox down there.

“The 2006 Mailbox has a bit of Cabernet Franc. It has roundness, elegance and a long finish,” says Keenan.

The Napa Valley is the winery’s most popular and largest production Merlot. It has 70 percent estate fruit and 30 percent fruit that’s sourced from Carneros. “This is the most traditional one for us,” says Laura March, who manages the tasting room and hospitality side of the business. “It’s nice to add fruit-forward elements into a more Cabernet-like Merlot.” The result is a very rich, deep and complex Merlot.

“The 2006 [the winery’s 30th vintage] Napa Valley Merlot has depth of fruit, spice, earth, roundness, tannins...it has everything,” says Keenan.

The 2007 Napa Valley Carneros is sourced from Andy Beckstoffer’s Carneros vineyard. “We’ve always pulled fruit from the Carneros region to blend with the estate Merlot,” says March. “But now we do the Carneros by itself because it’s a whole different wine.



Michael and Jennifer Keenan

“It’s a more typical Merlot; medium-bodied with lots of red fruit. It’s just an easygoing, pleasant,



Keenan's mountaintop vineyards

crowd-pleasing wine,” she says.

The Keenan staff works closely with consulting winemaker Nils Venge to craft the estate’s wines. “Spring Mountain is the best appellation for Merlot. It loves the cooler temperatures, lots of sunshine, eastern exposure, clay and rocky soil combinations. There’s also a later harvest here, which allows for better hang time,” says Venge.

When they blend, they do it blind and take notes. Everything is picked and produced separately, by vineyard, and aged separately. “We do blind tastings because I’m always fighting against my preconceived notions,” notes Keenan, who says one of the most significant things he’s learned through blind testing is that he feels Cabernet Sauvignon takes away from Merlot, while Cabernet Franc works well with it. “The wine I enjoy making the most is a treasure hunt of blending,” he says.

Speaking of treasure hunts, when you visit, be sure to ask about the winery’s “secret” blend. I’ll leave that one up to you to discover.

