

Spring-Summer 2002

THE SECOND HALF OF THE STORY

JUST ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO, RIGHT AS we were beginning our blending trials for the 1998 reds, The Wine Spectator came out with an article ripping the entire 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon vintage from Northern California and from Napa in particular. They said that due to adverse weather, the crop just didn't get ripe and therefore, the wines were thin, green, hard, overpriced, and to be universally avoided.

Unfortunately for a lot of producers, almost everything that the Wine Spectator was saying was true. The 1998 Cabernets that were released one and two years ago were generally thin, green, hard, overpriced, and to be generally avoided! But what The Wine Spectator failed to mention was that two years later, there would be a second half of the story to tell.

We have been farming on Spring Mountain for 25 years, which in the big picture I do not think is a very long time, but it is long enough to have learned (sometimes the hard way) what to do when Mother Nature throws you the old "Uncle Charley" (that's baseball for curve-ball).

There were two very important decisions that had to be made during the 1998 growing season and not everybody got them right. The first was how much, or if any, crop should be green harvested (dropped on the ground before harvest to help insure what was left on the vine would ripen). We normally make between 10-11,000 cases a year-in 1998 we made just under 6,000 cases. We dropped a lot of fruit on the ground. We passed the first test.

The second crucial decision came in September. We finally had two weeks of great weather, but heavy rains were on the forecast. The sugars were close, but the seeds were not ripe and the acids were not there yet: to pick or not to pick? We chose not to. We weathered the rains and the mold and finally in mid-November, the fruit got truly ripe! We risked losing all of our fruit but the payoff was worth it.

We did something that not everyone was able to do in 1998: we made the right call on both of the tough decisions and ended up making an extraordinarily beautiful 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon that has some qualities that are even more appealing than the '97! (Parker scored the '98 higher). The '98 opens up in the nose quicker and has more lively, ripe aromatics than the '97, and has tannins that have a more round, voluptuous mouth-feel at release than the '97, making the wine more approachable now. The wine was also more delicate in barrel than the '97 was, so we were even more discerning with our use of newer oak barrels, choosing to use less new oak on the '98 than the '97. The final result being a beautiful wine that I am not only proud to put our family name on, but has

won us more awards than any of the cabernets from the last twelve vintages! So here is to the second half of the 1998 Cabernet story!

--Michael Keenan