

A Nichols Worth of Wine
Spring 2008

Hillary, Heidi and Mother's Day

Funny how a single random thought leads to another and before you know it the idea for a story is born.

I am not exactly sure when it happened. Maybe it was while watching a news clip of Hillary Clinton throwing back a shot of what appeared to be scotch or bourbon and wondering whether she ever drinks wine. It could have been while flipping through a calendar trying to figure out when Mother's Day falls this year. More than likely however, it was when I uncorked a bottle of Heidi Barrett Peterson's, 2004 *Revana* cabernet, that thoughts of wine and women came to mind.

Most days both of these subjects occupy some measure of my daily thought process, but recent research got me to thinking that women may finally be receiving their long overdue recognition for their contributions to the world of wine. Woman's role in wine, though, began with a rather inauspicious start. In early Roman times, a woman suspected of or caught drinking wine could be sentenced to death! Thankfully, by the early nineteenth century women were not only enjoying wine, some were taking an active role in its production and commerce.

Following the deaths of their spouses, Madame Clicquot, Nicole Barbe-Ponsardin, in 1805, and Jeanne Alexandrine-Pommery, in 1860, assumed control of and expanded the Champagne operations started by their husbands. Half way around the world in Australia, Mary Penfold, at her eponymous Penfolds winery, controlled one-third of all wine produced in that country. Centuries later, the legacy of these three very influential women of wine remains firmly intact.

Women working in the historically male dominated domaine of wine is growing significantly. From Jeanne Parker, a pioneer female winemaker in South Africa in the early 1900's to Susanna Balbo, in the macho culture of Argentina in 1981, women continue to certify their influence in the wine industry. None as strikingly though as Gaetano Jacono, who at the age of 23, shattered the glass ceiling by assuming full control of the family vineyards and winery in a male-centric Sicily, almost two decades ago.

Today in California, and around the globe, women are at the forefront of every aspect of wine. With very good reason according to speakers at a Women in Wine symposium last November at the Napa Valley food and wine Mecca, Copia. Apparently, millions of years of genetic conditioning has blessed women with significantly more receptors on the tongue than men, giving them a superior sense of taste and smell. Who knew and has anyone told Robert Parker?

Other gender specific wine traits to surface at this event is that while women hold only a slight edge in the overall population at 52%, they are responsible for 80% of the wine sales in America.

Another speaker (maybe a wine psychologist?) suggests that women are less influenced by ratings than their male counterparts when buying wine.

Recent reports from a number of wine information sources indicate that 20% of our country's 2000 wineries now employ female winemakers. This list is a veritable Who's Who of wine. Heidi Barrett-Peterson, the most in-demand consulting winemaker today, tops that list. Along with her winemaker duties at Napa's *Revana*, Heidi produced 100 point wines for *Screaming Eagle* and *Dalle Valle's Maya*. In this same wine galaxy is Mia Klein, who has worked with *Araujo* and *Spottswode*, and makes what many consider to be the best sauvignon blanc on the planet at *Serene* winery.

Ashley Heisey at *Long Meadow Ranch*, Merry Edwards, *Harlan's* Mary Hall-Maher, *Screaming Eagle's* Annie Favia, and Dawnine Dyer, who guided *Domaine Chandon* success in its formative years, just to name a few, are all in any superstar lineup of winemakers, male or female!

Outside the cellar, a number of women play an equally important role in wine. Michaela Rodena, CEO at *St. Supery*, Gina Gallo, three generations of Mondavi's - Carissa, Marcia and the "*First Lady of Napa*," Margrit Bever-Mondavi, transcend gender bias in defining the current and future landscape of wine in America and beyond.

Lest you think this movement is exclusive to America, consider Austria's Heidi Schrock, that country's "Winemaker of the Year" in 2003, or Germany's Sybille Kuntz, regarded as a leading authority on Mosel Riesling. Winemaking is not for sissy's or the feint of heart. It is grueling work often fraught with anxiety and disappointment at the hand of Mother Nature and the sometimes less-than-kind wine critics. All the more surprising to learn then, that an Italian princess, Principessa Coralia Pignatelli della Leonessa, doubles as an owner and winemaker, producing highly rated and respected Super Tuscans.

Recently, I met Lucy Wilson, the marketing half of the only "sister act" in Australian wine. Lucy's sister, Rebecca, is the winemaker and together they jointly co-manage Bremerton Wines in South Australia. Increasingly, great wines are coming out of Australia and the Bremerton girls more than hold their own with their quality shiraz and a host of other varietals destined to put Bremerton on the world wine map.

Locally, Naples has its own share of successful leading women of wine. Along with the legions of wine savvy females who dominate the sales and marketing force in our area, Erlene Ludwig of Sonoma's White Oak Vineyards, Sable Ridge wine maven Mary Ann Costello, and premier pinot producer *Domaine Serene's*, Grace Evanstad, all spend considerable time here each year supporting our community and all are deeply committed to producing fabulous wines.

Neapolitan Jane Delaney, owner of The Ravensvale Group, an importing company of handcrafted wines, has an amazing "best of" portfolio from Australia and Spain. At a recent trade tasting of more than 100 wines from Jane's book, I also learned that Jane, and her family, have

what Aussie winemakers refer to as “grape yards.” Jane is now producing her own Barossa Valley Shiraz named “*Butting Heads*” from the 2005 vintage. This first effort as *femme negotiant* earned Jane 92 Points from Robert Parker! On the retail side, Sukie Honeycutt, owns and manages one of Naples best wine shops, at *Tony’s Off Third*.

So, as Mother’s Day approaches, as Hillary presses on with her resilient race to re-occupy 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and Heidi Barrett-Peterson continues to dazzle us with wines that can only be regarded as artistic masterpieces, let’s take a moment and pay homage to our X-chromosome heroines and especially to every female wine warrior who makes it possible for all of us to reap the rewards of their vinous passion.

Did You Know...

In 1866, Josephine Tychson became California’s first women winemaker. Today, Ann Colgin, a Naples Winter Wine Festival fixture, owns and produces legendary cabernets from a few acres of vineyards of the original Josephine Tychson site, across from Freemark Abbey in Napa Valley.

Eat drink and be merry...

Bruce