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MAGAZINE

SALUTE

Lock, Stock & Barrel

BY KATIE KELLY BELL

FOR PIERRE SEILLAN, WINEMAKER FOR VÉRITÉ WINES, THE BEST winemaking starts in the forest. Pierre Seillan makes wine for three world-class properties (Vérité in Sonoma, Chateau Lassègue in Saint-Emilion and Tenuta di Arceno in Tuscany) and he is likely the only winemaker who spends time in the forest as part of his winemaking process. The humble, soft-spoken Seillan likes the forest anyway, but he's on a mission during his visits — hand-selecting the trees that will go to make his oak barrels. One might consider this to be micro-managing on a serious scale, but to Seillan it's a vital part of the process. Standing underneath a 200-year-old oak in France's Darney Forest, Seillan sighs and looks up, "What is true for the vine, is true for the tree. Terroir matters for all things."

Some might consider him obsessive, but the truth is always in the glass. Indeed, Vérité received an unprecedented seven 100-point scores from Robert Parker for its three blends, Le Désir, La Joie, and La Muse, the first Sonoma winery to achieve such a distinction.

Sonoma isn't commonly perceived as the land of 100-point wines, but Seillan, who was invited to the region by the late Jess Jackson, chose his sites in Sonoma over Napa for the range of terroirs. He adds, "I was attracted to the diversity of soils, climates, and other components of terroir in Sonoma. In fact, I am still discovering new factors even today. I don't necessarily believe that Sonoma is better than Napa, it is just that Sonoma's diversity in climate and soil is ideally suited to my micro-cru philosophy for crafting wines." Micro-cru is Seillan's calling card; it is a philosophy of winemaking based on myriad layers of flavor from multiple sources to achieve blended balance, including specific oak flavors from specific trees. In truth, Seillan doesn't think of himself as a winemaker, but a servant of the soil.

Seillan follows the cues from his vintage before he orders his oak barrels. "Once I taste each lot, then I know exactly which oak to choose for them." The whole process is almost a bit like placing a child in the right school environment, some need more discipline, and others need more freedom. "I want personality and synergy in each component so when the blend is finished you can't call out one main thing."

Seillan doesn't stop at merely selecting the oak tree. He also prescribes a specific aging regimen for the oak staves and a specific toasting process for each barrel. Working with multiple oak types harvested from 14 different forests gives Seillan a palette of flavor expression with which to build each wine.

For his Vérité blends he uses Bordeaux grape varieties harvested from four different Sonoma appellations; it seems he has as much a passion for trees as

he does for dirt. The Alexander Valley's elevation and uncompromising volcanic soils are marvelous for forcing vine struggle and developing complexity. The Bennett Valley's proximity to the Pacific Ocean, diurnal temperature shifts and Basalt-schist clay soils are ideally suited to Merlot, while Knight's Valley's gravelly volcanic soils are suited to Cabernet Sauvignon. And, finally, the chalky soils of Chalk Hill add a pitch perfect thread of minerality to each wine.



From a purely academic perspective, Seillan juggles dozens of elements in his winemaking — oak terroir, oak toast, barrel production, varying terroirs, micro-climates and separate fermentations. The result is complex and interesting wines that express silky tannins, sweet spice and ripe red fruits. La Muse (primarily from Merlot), is supple and earthy; Le Désir, (primarily Cabernet Franc with some Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot), is opulent and plush; Le Joie, (primarily Cabernet Sauvignon with additional Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec), is textured and powerful.

Seillan is rarely still; there is always a vine to inspect, a forest to visit or a barrel sample to taste. He doesn't often suffer the consequences of wretched vintage weather because of his attentive winemaking. If asked, he'll agree that Bordeaux's 2005 was a spectacular vintage, but it was that way for everyone. Seillan is most fond of the vintages that were often the most challenging, such as 2007 in Saint-Émilion or 2011 in Sonoma. "During a difficult vintage, I encounter few surprises at harvest because I pay attention," says Seillan. Of course his decades of "old world" winemaking experience certainly come into play when managing the vintage of a challenging year. For his Chateau Lassègue — Seillan is proud of 2005, but he believes that 2009 has the potential to surpass the 2005. At Vérité, some of his favorites include La Muse 2002, La Joie 2005, and Le Désir 2008.

Overall, he doesn't spend too much time pondering past vintages; he's too busy sniffing trees and wandering the vineyards...always, always seeking flavor. ♣



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