

SPOTLIGHT ON WOMEN WINEMAKERS AT FOSTERS WINEMAKERS TOUR

by Rich Mauro

I THOUGHT I HAD A GREAT IDEA.

Fosters Wine Estates (the conglomerate resulting from last year's merger of Beringer Blass and Southcorp) was sponsoring a Winemakers Tour and the tour was coming to Denver on May 11.

Now, my "great idea" didn't have anything to do with the fact that Fosters Wine Estates has one of the most impressive portfolios in the business (with 61 wineries and labels mostly in Australia and California but also in Italy, France and New Zealand, according to the company's website).

I had wanted to do a column on women winemakers for a while and I noticed that the company employed several women as Winemaker, not just as assistants, and three of them would be at the tasting. So, I decided this would be a great opportunity to write such a column and arranged a few minutes with Danielle Cyrot of St. Clement, Natasha Boffman of TAZ and Margo van Staaveren of Chateau St. Jean before the tasting.

To be honest, I wasn't sure exactly what approach to take about the topic, which made me all the more interested in hearing from the women. It seemed to me the context for such a discussion, though, had been set by the marketplace.

I had read that there has been significant growth in the number of women becoming winemakers, especially in the last decade. The same for women Master Sommeliers. I had seen the success of Leslie Sbrocco's book, "Wine for Women: A Guide to Buying, Pairing and Sharing Wine."

There have been numerous attempts by the wine industry in recent years to market certain wine specifically to women (something I despise, by the way). I have heard about myriad women-only wine tasting groups and winemaker dinners. I also had read that women now comprise a majority of wine consumers (Sbrocco even quotes the Wine Market Council as putting the figure at nearly 64 percent).

Well, as the saying goes, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I quickly found out that these women didn't think there should be a distinction between being a woman and being a winemaker. They clearly resisted a story with that angle.

Ms. Cyrot, who graduated from the University of California at Davis in 1998,



Danielle Cyrot of St. Clement

and Ms. Boffman, who graduated from Davis in 2000, did admit to occasionally getting paternalistic comments including gender references. But they thought the comments were more likely related to them being the boss, especially given their relatively young age.

Ms. van Staaveren, who has worked at Chateau St. Jean since 1979, added that she has been treated no different from the male winemakers.

Bottom line, they clearly think of them-

selves not as women winemakers but as winemakers who just happen to be women. And, as winemakers, they were much more interested in talking about their wineries and the new projects they are working on.

At St. Clement, for instance, Danielle Cyrot was excited about the new single vineyard series being developed. "It's a challenge because I have only worked with blends before," she said. Previously, some of the best of those vineyards have been combined to form Oroppas, the winery's flagship Meritage blend. But with supportive growers and a talented supporting cast, she said she was confident of success.

Although TAZ Vineyards clearly bears the imprint (beyond using his nickname on the label) of longtime Beringer vineyard manager Bob Steinhauer, Natasha Boffman is ready to make her mark, too. As she put it, "The best thing about the job is the opportunity to influence every stage of the process." She said she was looking forward to the opportunity to grow this still relatively new brand.

Chateau St. Jean, of course, is one of

the most storied wineries of the modern California wine industry. After gaining recognition with near legendary single vineyard Chardonnays and late harvest Rieslings and Gewürztraminers throughout the 1970's, the winery went on to excel with red wines. Margo van Staaveren was there through most of those accomplishments, working in a variety of capacities (including helping to develop the highly decorated Cinq Cépages Cabernet Sauvignon in the 1990s) until becoming winemaker in 2003.

Now she is taking on a big challenge in trying to develop the winery's Pinot Noir portfolio, including experimenting with sources and styles and adding a single vineyard wine to the existing Sonoma County and Durrell Vineyard bottlings.

Unfortunately, Laurie Hook, Winemaker for Beringer Vineyards, was not on the tour. It would have been nice to add her voice to this discussion. Laurie came to Beringer as an enologist in 1986, was made assistant winemaker to Winemaker Ed Sbragia in 1997, and finally promoted to Winemaker in 2000. She now works in partnership with Mr. Sbragia on all aspects of wine production at Beringer. I have met with Laurie on a couple of occasions and I think she would be OK with letting her wines speak for her, which they did quite well.

While men may still dominate the wine industry, particularly in terms of ownership and management, the accomplishments of these women make me glad that the opportunities for women in winemaking are increasing.



Margo van Staaveren of Chateau St. Jean



Natasha Boffman of TAZ Vineyards



Laurie Hook of Beringer