

THE WINE GUY

Female winemakers don't consider gender noteworthy

I thought it was a great idea. Fosters Wine Estates (yes, the beer company owns wineries) was sponsoring a winemakers tour, and the tour was coming to Denver.

My great idea didn't have anything to do with the fact the company 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 firm's Web site.

Instead, it fed into my long-time plan to write a column about female winemakers. I noticed the company employed several women as winemakers, not just assistants, and three of them would be at the tasting, so I arranged a few minutes to talk with Californians Danielle Cyrot of St. Clement Vineyards, Natasha Boffman of Taz Vineyards and Margo van Staaveren of Chateau St. Jean before the tasting.

I wasn't sure what approach to take about the topic, but it seemed the context for such a discussion had been set by the marketplace. I had read about the increase in female winemakers and master sommeliers, especially in the past de-



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cade. I had seen the success of Leslie Sbrocco's book, "Wine for Women: A Guide to Buying, Pairing, and Sharing Wine." And I had noticed recent attempts by the industry to market certain wines specifically to women. I'd also read that women now make up a majority of wine consumers.

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

Cyrot, who graduated from the University of California at Davis in 1998, and Boffman, who graduated from Davis in 2000, did admit to occasionally receiving paternalistic comments, including gender references. But they think the comments were more likely related to them being the boss, especially given their relatively young ages. Van Staaveren,

who has worked at Chateau St. Jean since 1979, said she's been treated the same as the male winemakers.

Bottom line: They clearly think of themselves not as female winemakers, but as winemakers who just happen to be women. And, as winemakers, they were much more interested in talking about their wineries and new projects.

At St. Clement, for instance, Cyrot was excited about a new single-vineyard series. "It's a challenge because I have only worked with blends before."

Although Taz Vineyards clearly bears the imprint of longtime Beringer vineyard manager Bob "Taz" Steinhauer, 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."

At Chateau St. Jean, one of the most prestigious wineries in California, van Staaveren is trying to develop a pinot noir portfolio.

Unfortunately, Laurie Hook, winemaker for Beringer Vineyards, was not on the tour. Hook joined Beringer in 1986 and became the winemaker in 2000. She now works in part-

nership with winemaker Ed Sbragia on all aspects of wine production at Beringer. It would have been nice to add her voice to this discussion but, having met her before, I think she would be OK with letting her wines speak for her, which they did quite well.

Some recommended wines from the tasting:

St. Clement Vineyards

- 2002 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$35)

- 2002 Oropas (Bordeaux blend, \$50)

Taz Vineyards

- 2004 Santa Barbara Chardonnay (\$20)

- 2004 Fiddlestix Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$32)

Chateau St. Jean

- 2003 Belle Terre Vineyard Chardonnay (\$22)

- 2003 Sonoma County Cabernet (\$27)

Beringer Vineyards

- 2004 Private Reserve Chardonnay (\$35)

- 2003 Nightingale (dessert wine, 375 milliliter, \$40)

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