



# The Wine Guys



By **TOM MARQUARDT AND PATRICK DARR**

It is hard to imagine what Randy and Audrey Sterling saw in a neglected house and rows of abandoned vines when they gave an inauspicious launch to Iron Horse. Perhaps it was part of the vision - living in France for several years, Randy had his heart set on making burgundian wines

when he moved to California.

The estate - planted with 110 acres of chardonnay and pinot noir in the fog-shrouded Green Valley - was not showing well when the couple visited on a rainy day in 1976.

"It was a mess," Randy recalls. Not only was the property bad, the 1876 house was propped up by beer cans. Compared to the vineyards, the fragile foundation was not a challenge to Audrey, an experienced hand at restoring historic homes.

Because of the early frosts that often occurred after bud break, agricultural experts had advised Randy to look elsewhere. But his experience in France told him a fog-cooled region was the place to grow chardonnay and pinot noir. He persisted - and won.

French wine experts thought the chardonnay Randy produced from the phylloxera-resistant root stock was akin to champagne. So, he changed his vision to making sparkling wine from chardonnay and pinot noir. Today, the wine of Iron Horse's vision is poured at diplomatic White House dinners and at countless weddings.

The winery is operated by daughter Joy and son Laurence. But the operation remains a family affair with many decisions made around the dinner table.

Tom caught up with the Sterlings around a shaded table in the well-manicured garden just outside the historic home near the winery. Over a lunch that incorporated produce from their gardens, conversation ranged from politics to the state of the wine-growing industry. It wasn't difficult to envision the private family discussions that grew the winery's success - and that of the children. Both Joy and Laurence have houses on the property. There are few operations that can call itself family owned and operated as accurately as this one.

The original vineyards that produced Barry's first wines from this cool area of the Russian River Valley are being replanted now, providing a new start for the children not unlike what their parents experienced in the valley's pioneer days.

Iron Horse makes still red and white wine as well as sparkling wine.

Iron Horse Blanc de Blanc (\$40). Barry says sparkling wines made from chardonnay grapes remains his favorite. Elegant in style, it has citrus notes and a dash of toast.

Iron Horse Brut Rose 2005 (\$50). Surprisingly the driest of the sparkling wines, this pinot noir-dominated bubbly has vibrant cherry and tangerine notes.

Iron Horse Unoaked Chardonnay 2007 (\$27). Crisp, minerally with apple and citrus notes. A great wine to serve with food.

Iron Horse Pinot Noir 2007 (\$45). We tasted a 2005 version of this and found it delightful. The 2007 is made from three clones of pinot noir and is redolent of cherries. Fresh, bright fruit and medium body.

**WINE PICKS**

Sbragia Cabernet Sauvignon Dry Creek Valley So-

noma County Andolsen Vineyard 2006 (\$35). Black cherry nose and flavors with a whiff of cedar, and alcohol, in a nice vanilla frame. Just a great glass of wine, at a decent price, that you can drink now or easily hold for 3-5 years.

Chateau St Michelle Chardonnay Canoe Ridge Estates Horse Heaven Hills 2007 (\$26). From the get go, this wine was delicious. Nice nose of pear, tropical fruit, and toast. Fantastic mouth coating fruit flavors of pear and citrus and a bit of mineral. Long lasting creamy finish - a terrific wine!

Seven Hills Merlot Walla Walla Valley Merlot 2006 (\$28). A very distinctive style of merlot with a cherry, berry, herbal nose with lovely berry, herb, and spice flavors. Very complex and appealing.

Seven Hills Pinot Gris Oregon 2007 (\$16). Nice fruity, peach nose with hints of hay. In the mouth pear, citrus, fruit flavors that makes a very nice quaffable drink.

Davis Bynum Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2007 (\$35). This wine is a real crowd pleaser and is not to be confused with French Burgundy. This is a big bold cherry, berry, spicy, full throttle expression of pinot noir, with 14.9 percent alcohol and was aged for 10 months in French oak.

Broquel Bonarda Mendoza Argentina 2006 (\$16). Bonarda is the most widely planted grape in Argentina, and was brought there by Italian immigrants. Some people think this grape is actually charbono a somewhat obscure Italian grape that used to be somewhat available in California, and is a favorite of Tom's. This is a no brainer of a classic quaffable, red wine, with beautiful, uncomplicated, cherry berry fruit flavors, with a nice understated hint of herbs. A very good wine at a great price, that is ready to drink now.

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