

For the love of wine

Scott and Marta Rich, Talisman Wine

by Debra Beresini

I recently interviewed Talisman Wine owners Scott and Marta Rich. Marta suggested I arrive early for a tasting experience. Upon arriving, Grayson Steel poured a glass of the Cuvée Number 7 Pinot Noir — it was a lovely experience. Talisman is all about pinot noir.

Grayson is a vital part of Talisman, serving as shipping manager and cellar rat during harvest. Recently, the Riches hired industry veteran Rob Lorenz as head of consumer sales and marketing.

Scott has a wide-ranging background as an environmental planner, wine researcher and, ultimately, winemaker. Marta, who has been enamored by wine most of her life, moved to the Wine Country from Minnesota to work in a winery. She had asked a friend which winery was the best. Her friend responded, “Mondavi, but you will never get a job there.” Marta moved to Napa Valley, found a cottage to rent, and was hired at Mondavi. She stayed at Mondavi for 18 years.



Scott and Marta Rich. Photo by Debra Beresini

Kenwood Press (KP): Scott, why did you choose winemaking, and what do you love about it?

Scott Rich (SR): At UC Davis, I was introduced to Mogen David 20/20, but fortunately, my experience got better from there. I intended to go to vet school, but I ended up with an environmental planning and management degree and did land planning for about 10 years in San Francisco. It was great at the time but not something I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Many of my close friends were in the wine industry, and they were having fun. I had a science background because of the desire to go to vet school, but there was also an artistic part of me that needed to be satisfied. I looked at winemaking, which seemed to satisfy both needs. I went to grad school and earned a degree in winemaking. My first jobs in the wine industry were as a research enologist for HR Phillips and then for Mondavi.

I wanted more control over my life, which I thought would happen when I worked for myself. In retrospect, building Talisman wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. We grew very slowly, and Marta and I had other full-time jobs to support the growth. One advantage was that the person I was working for at the time did not feel he could afford to pay me enough, so he gave me our first three tons of grapes. That is how we got started.

I love spending time in vineyards. When I started making wine, it was not common for winemakers to go to vineyards. Winemakers made picking decisions based solely on how sweet the grapes were. They did not look at the flavor, tannins, or seed ripeness. If you don't spend time in vineyards, you don't know what is happening to the vines. This year, due to the cooler weather, from the beginning of flowering until fruit set took some of our vineyards three to three-and-a-half weeks, rather than the typical week or 10 days.

During veraison, we will adjust the fruit load and remove more than 15% to 20% of the clusters to have uniform ripeness. I love harvest! I like the manic pace and energy that surrounds making wine. The harvest schedule is a little nuts, but I love the energy part; it is exciting.

KP: Marta, where did your passion for wine come from, and what is your favorite part of the wine business?

Marta Rich (MR): I don't remember life without wine. After my parents were married, they moved to France, got into wine, and loved it. When they moved back to Minneapolis, my dad started making wine from concentrate with his buddies. My mom would cut and paste different wine labels on the bottles of wines we enjoyed. It was a fun time.

For the love of wine (continued)

My favorite part is watching people's faces light up when they taste our wine. I was at a pinot noir event at a restaurant in Sebastopol several weeks ago. I was at my table pouring our pinot noir, and this guy looked at me and told me to pour the best. I told him they were all the best. He picked up the glass I poured and said, "Thanks." Then he took a sip and said, "Whoa." That is what I love.

KP: How many cases are you currently producing, and where do you source your grapes?

SR: We should be producing 4,200 cases, but Mother Nature has not cooperated for the past four years. Last year, we produced about 3,000 cases. We actually work with a dozen different vineyards stretching from the Napa side of Carneros across Sonoma County, [and] up to southern Mendocino County.

KP: What would you want your customers to know about your wine process?

MR: The wines are lovingly crafted. One of my favorite quotes from Scott is, "It is a lot of work to do as little as possible." We use a natural process, with native yeast. The native yeast is sometimes fermented with multiple strains, giving layers of flavor. After the fermentation goes dry, we seal the tanks for a week to 10 days for an extended maceration, which starts the binding of the tannin molecules and contributes to a smooth, silky texture. We also use five different cooperages as each brings out something different in the wine, such as aromatics, texture, or depth. We keep the wine in the barrel anywhere from 16 to 20 months.

SR: Another thing that is important to us is our carbon footprint. We stopped using capsules 12 years ago. Originally, capsules were made from lead to keep rats out of corks, but I no longer know many people with rats in their cellars!

Also, we use labels with clear acetate backing that can be recycled instead of opaque backing that has to go into a landfill.

We think about these things. We are doing what we can reasonably do to provide the best production process and materials for the environment. We want to leave the world in better shape than when we arrived.

Debra Beresini and her husband, Steve, own Black Dog Ranch/ Beresini Winery. They primarily produce chardonnay and pinot noir grapes on their property and make pinot noir under their brand. Their tasting room is in the 1885 wine tank on Arnold Drive in Glen Ellen.