



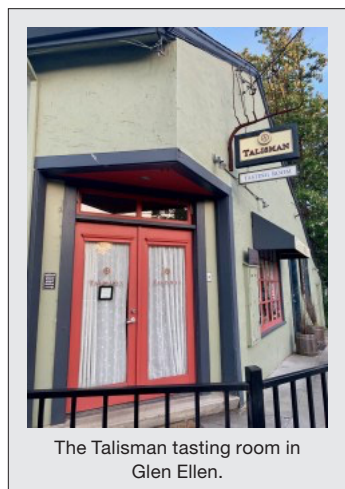
Talisman: Wines of Exceptional Character

We've had more than our share of truly wonderful wine-maker interviews and we've come to learn that great wine begins with great people. Recently we sat down in the middle of a vineyard (literally) over an entire afternoon with two of the very best: Scott & Marta Rich of Talisman Wine.



Marta & Scott Rich

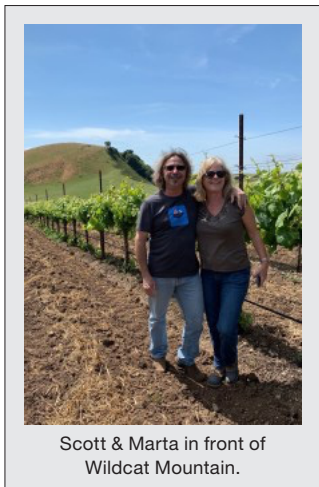
Talisman is a small production winery in Sonoma that takes the term artisanal to a whole new level. When we say small, we mean really small, with production totaling around 1500 cases annually. They produce only Pinot Noir from several different vineyards that have been thoughtfully selected because they express something qualitatively unique. Our first experience trying their wines at their tasting room in Glen Ellen in 2014, was a revelation. The lineup included 6 different Talisman Pinots



The Talisman tasting room in Glen Ellen.

from 6 different vineyards. Despite their distinct variation in taste profile, they each possessed an ethereal trait that immediately made us sit up and take notice. These are wines of incredible depth and character across the board and every visit to Sonoma since then, our first appointment is always with Talisman to taste the latest releases.

The winery is owned and operated by the husband and wife team of Scott and Marta Rich. Scott is the wine-maker and before starting Talisman he attended graduate school in the Enology Program at UC Davis and also worked as a research Enologist at R.H. Phillips and at Robert Mondavi Winery. He has been winemaker at Mont St. John and with Tony Soter at Etude where he made a number of highly praised wines. In addition to making the wines at Talisman, Scott makes the wine at the ultra-boutique Moraga Wines in Bel Air, California.



Scott & Marta in front of Wildcat Mountain.

The very steep Moraga Vineyard faces the Getty Museum and Scott produces tiny amounts of award-winning Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc from there. Marta has a degree in psychology and spent 18 years at Robert Mondavi working her way up the ladder there and eventually leading the Northern California sales team.

We met Scott and Marta at Wildcat Mountain Vineyard, one of 10 vineyards where they get the fruit to produce their wines. It is the highest vineyard in the Los Carneros appellation with views of the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance, surrounded by trellised vines, and green rolling hills, including one with an olive grove on top.



The spectacular view at Wildcat Mountain Vineyard.

From the moment we met them we knew we were in for a special day. Joy and fun oozes out of their pores and both are quick to find the humour in everything. Marta was kind enough to warn us ahead of time that there were no bathrooms at Wildcat Mountain and we all broke into a celebration of laughs at the sight of two recently added porta potties! From the back of their pickup truck, out came a table and 4 chairs, a tablecloth, flowers picked from their garden, a selection of cheeses, and a box filled with Talisman wines from different vintages yet to be revealed. The set table amongst the vineyards simply could not have provided a more perfect setting.



Wildcat Mountain Vineyard A spectacular place for an interview.



Wildcat Mountain Vineyard

Wildcat Vineyard was established by Nancy and Tony Lilly with their partner Steve MacRostie in 1998. Scott had known Steve since he first started making wine in Carneros in the early '90s. It is planted a little less than half to Pinot

Noir with the other half planted mostly to Chardonnay, and a little Syrah. When they planted, Steve wanted one other winemaker to make some Pinot Noir to help them with their marketing. Scott went to take a look and thought it was a pretty interesting piece of property.

“I was looking for uniformity from end to end, and from side to side. I was also looking for well-drained soils that weren't in swails. There are some swails in this vineyard which are much more vigorous—the canopy gets bigger, the fruit gets more shaded and the quality isn't as good so it's more difficult to make good picking decisions when you've got a lot of variation from one



Scott showing us Pinot Noir grapes early in the season.

end to the other. But they were willing to do extraordinary things for us. Usually when you go into a vineyard and are assigned rows, you get the entire row because it's a pain to just pick part of it and then leave the rest of it alone. They were willing to pick only part of a row for us which is very unusual. Today there are a number of people making wine from this vineyard including Flowers Winery and Schramsberg.”

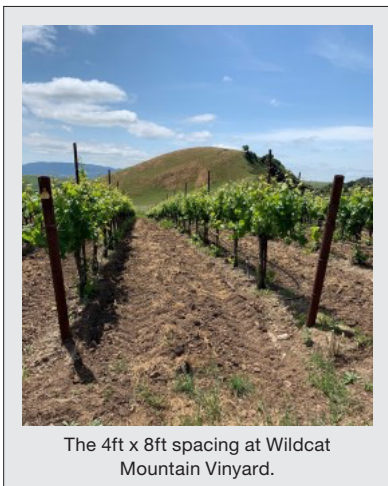
they had brought. To our wonderful surprise, Marta pulled out a bottle of their very first vintage, the 1993 Carneros Pinot Noir. At 26 years old, it is holding up beautifully and is remarkably fresh proving just how well their wines age. That year Scott had just gotten out of grad school and took a job as a winemaker at Mont St. John. His first two jobs in the wine industry were doing research so he not only learned the entire winemaking process, he worked with 340 different lots of wine during his first 2 years in the business.



Scott Rich

“The guy who owned the winery didn't think he could pay me what I was worth, so he gave me 3 tons of grapes which came out of the Madonna Vineyard (which has since been renamed). We made

203 cases from 3-ton plastic fermenters and a small basket press.” He is quick to add with a smile that everything was done by gravity, “we didn't technically have a gravity flow winery but we did have an anti-gravity device called a forklift!”. Scott took that job out of grad school for 2 main reasons. First, winemaker Larry Brooks, told him that he thought the best wine he had ever made was the 1982 Madonna Vineyard Pinot Noir for Acacia. Second, Scott found out they had hired Merry Edwards as a consultant. “I thought not only do I have this great vineyard to work with, but I've got an instant mentor, so that's how I ended up there.”



The 4ft x 8ft spacing at Wildcat Mountain Vineyard.

Scott then points out the smaller spacing at Wildcat between the vines which are 4ft x 8ft, versus the traditional configuration he jokingly refers to as “John Deere” spacing because it's wide enough to get one of their tractors through. “Changes in spacing have created interesting ways of thinking. It doesn't make sense to use tons per acre anymore because it used to be that there was this huge space that wasn't utilized and

there weren't roots or anything so that space could have been used. We now think in terms of pounds per vine or pounds of fruit per lineal foot of canopy. Our Holy Grail is to get no more than a pound of fruit per lineal foot and in this case we get about 4lbs per vine and that works out pretty well.”

We walked back over to the table and sat down to taste the first wine



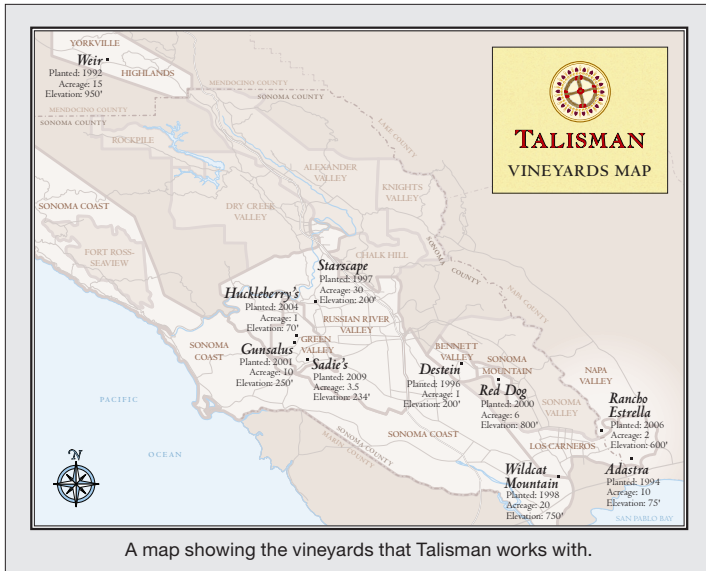
The incredible lineup of Talisman Wines we tasted.

As we dove into more of their philosophy behind Talisman Wine, Marta brought out the second bottle for us to taste: the 1999 Carneros Pinot Noir. For Marta, 1999 is her favourite vintage for any wine, from any country, anywhere. “I always find them to be full of character and brightness, with good acid, good aromatics and a great structure.” The 1999 Talisman certainly meets all that criteria and is markedly different from the 1993 despite being from the same vineyard. For Scott, maintaining the integrity of the vineyard in the wine is his first priority. “I don't want anyone to ever taste my wines and say, ‘oh yeah, these wines were made by Scott Rich.’ What I want them to do is say ‘yeah, this is Wildcat Mountain, or this is Red Dog Vineyard, or this is Weir Vineyard’. When you're too heavy-handed in the winery, all those unique differences that make wine so interesting get lost.”



The 2003 Talisman Wildcat Mountain Vineyard Pinot Noir

Why only make Pinot Noir? Because it is the wine Scott likes to drink the most and he gets bored easily. “I need to be challenged. If I'm not challenged I don't do my best, so I need a grape that pushes me. Pinot Noir requires 3 things: diligence, patience and going against the basic human instinct to meddle. The best Pinot Noirs are made by doing as



A map showing the vineyards that Talisman works with.

little as possible. I even extend that to what we've been doing the past 4 to 5 years. We're making more 100% whole-cluster wines which means we're doing even less in the winery than we were doing before. These wines are harder to drink young and need a few more years but they're much richer, they're much more interesting, and much more complex." As a result, Talisman releases their wines 3 to 4 years later than most other wineries. Scott's new challenge looks like it might be Nebbiolo as Bill Weir of Weir Vineyard is now growing that variety. "I actually think Nebbiolo is a lot harder to grow and a lot harder to make than Pinot Noir, and it's another grape that really transmits the vineyard well."

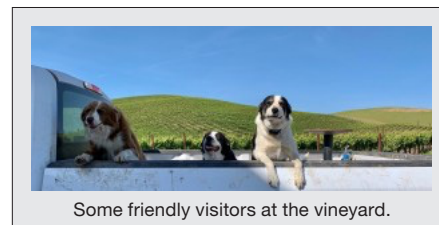


Scott has had a long and successful career as a winemaker and it's not really surprising when you meet him in person. He's clearly very intelligent, possessing a passion and curiosity that is infectious with every thoughtful answer to our battery of questions. If you ask him the secret to his success, he's a firm believer that being creative in applying what he's learned is key. A few years out of grad school he was invited back to UC Davis to give a lecture at a graduate seminar and wanted to demonstrate this point. "If you're in the program ostensibly you're quite smart and everyone learns the same content. What they don't teach is to think about things that are too far out of the norm. I took some Chardonnay and put about 20% very dark Cabernet into it. I asked everyone

in the class to sample it and tell me what variety it was. If you smelled it and ignored all the visual cues, on the nose it was unquestionably chardonnay. But because your visual sense overrides your other senses so much, I wanted them to think more creatively. By any measure of any of your senses other than sight, it was unquestionably a white wine and couldn't possibly have been a red wine. But only one person in a room full of wine people got it right."



The well-draining volcanic soil at Wildcat Mountain Vineyard.

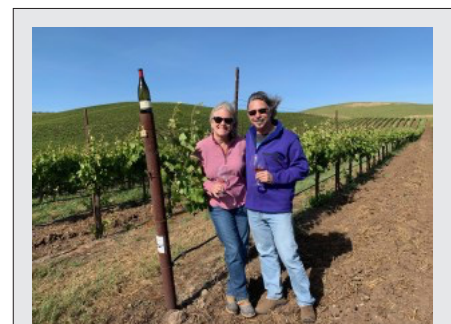


Some friendly visitors at the vineyard.

Scott is also very pragmatic and down-to-earth and approaches winemaking in similar fashion. He has recently noticed a development in the wine industry that

he finds particularly limiting, and largely a result of marketing: putting yourself at the mercy of a label. He cites Biodynamic and Organic farming as examples, "I look at Biodynamics and I think if you want to be in that little Biodynamic box that's great but it's going to prevent you from doing things and using ideas that might be really good from some other philosophy. But because you've put yourself in this box you don't have the freedom to do something that might be better. So I don't like it because these labels can sometimes really constrain people. Are you willing to lose your entire crop in order to stay organic? That doesn't seem to sustainable to me. There's also this mindset if you're not Organic you must be using chemicals. We have vineyards that are Organic but they're not certified because the certification process is extensive and cumbersome. All of our vineyards are sustainable and all of our growers are using best practices."

We followed the 1993 and 1999 Cameros Pinots with the 2009 Wildcat Mountain Vineyard Pinot Noir. For us, there is simply no greater pleasure in wine than spending time with a winemaker in the vineyard drinking their wine from the very place it



Two of the very best people you'll meet.

originated. Over the four and half hours we spent with Scott and Marta, we sipped, we laughed, and we learned. Perhaps the most interesting thing we discussed in our conversation is how wines are very much like people. Talisman Wines possess remarkable depth, structure, texture and soul. Scott and Marta proved to be every bit as exceptional as their wines and we would be the envy of any collector to have a cellar filled with both of them.

1993 Talisman Carneros Pinot Noir

Excellent+



The 1993 Talisman Pinot Noir

This was Scott's second vintage of Pinot Noir. He is obviously one very quick learner! This is a remarkably fresh wine for age 26. We have tasted wines from Burgundy older than this but never a New World Pinot. We never would have guessed that a California Pinot would have any life at all at this age. But this wine showed vivacity and energy in its medium body. Flavours of strawberry and cherry get support

from some lovely mature flavours of earth, stewed rhubarb, and notes of black pepper on the finish that give the wine added definition. The mouthfeel is soft and sensuous, but there remains enough structure to keep it precise and defined. We have drunk plenty of Talisman wines before their 10th birthday, knowing they could go much longer. We had no idea they had the goods to go this long! Grapes sourced from the Madonna Vineyard in Carneros.

1999 Talisman Pinot Noir

Excellent+

An interesting contrast to the 1993, it had many elements in common with its older sibling. The cherry and strawberry/rhubarb fruit profile was also in evidence but here the emphasis was on the cherry flavours where the strawberry/rhubarb was more out front in the 1993. With a bit of swirling we picked up baking spices and hints of pepper. 1999 was generally a cooler vintage in most of California but this wine

showed generous, ripe fruit with no stemmy, green character. The body is medium+ and the tannins have fully integrated with the fruit that gives this wine great balance and a sense of lightness. Wonderfully complex, each sip was a revelation of something new.

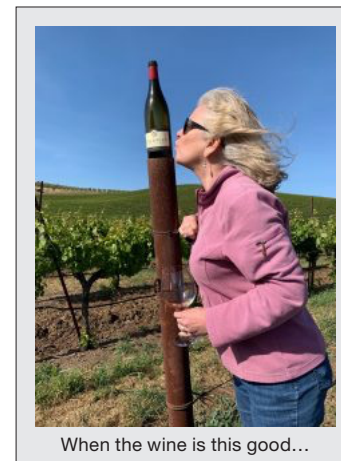
2003 Talisman Pinot Noir Wildcat Vineyard

Excellent/Extraordinary

We finished with this magical afternoon of tasting with a 16 year old wine made from grapes of the very vineyard we were sitting in. The relative youngster in the group, it had its work cut out for it in trying to meet the high bar set by the two masterpieces that preceded it. This wine took us on a different journey, stylistically. Here the focus was more on dark fruits. The strawberry/rhubarb and tertiary notes of the first two wines were replaced by black cherry, plum

and brown spices. The body is medium to full, voluptuous, and almost decadent. The most powerful of the three, yet somehow managing to show elegance at the same time. Could it show life in another 10 years, like the first wine? Without a doubt! This appeared to be just entering its prime with only hints of maturing. Pinot Noir just does not get much better than this.

Talisman Wine is located in the town of Glen Ellen, about 15 minutes North of the Sonoma Plaza just off the Sonoma Highway (12). Tastings are by appointment only (707-721-1628).



When the wine is this good...