

A Look At Two Legacy Wineries



When you think of winemaking pioneers in Oregon's Willamette Valley, a handful of names come to mind: David Lett, Dick Erath and Dick Ponzi, all of whom were growing grapes and making wine by the early 1980s. However, a name that escapes more memories is Cal Knudsen, a Weyerhaeuser executive who became Oregon's largest vineyard owner in 1975 when he expanded his 30-acre block in Dundee Hills to 60 acres.

Knudsen didn't make wine exclusively under his name, but he partnered with Dick Erath to form Knudsen-Erath Winery. When that partnership ended, he sold his grapes to Argyle for its well-respected sparkling wine program.

Knudsen died in 2009 and his four children — none involved in the wine business then — decided to continue the family legacy and launched Knudsen Vineyards in 2012, first with a pinot noir and then with a chardonnay. Because they had established lives and businesses well outside the wine world, the family turned to its long-time partner — Argyle — to help.



*Page Knudsen Cowles, managing
partner of Knudsen Vineyards*

We recently had dinner with Page Knudsen Cowles, managing partner of Knudsen Vineyards, who said it was important to the family to keep their father's legacy going for future generations. Knudsen continues to sell grapes to Argyle and buys back about 20 tons for its own wine. Argyle's winemaker Nate Klosterman is making the wine.

The Knudsens couldn't have made a better business decision. They can ease into the unfamiliar business of making wine with professionals at the helm. The two pinot noirs and one chardonnay we tasted were well made — good balance and pure expression of the Dundee Hills fruit character.

We really liked the 2016 chardonnay because it had just a kiss of oak and an austere but intense profile. The

estate pinot noir blends into the Willamette herd at \$55; the reserve showed more distinction at \$70 but the wines tasted like a product still being developed. Given the quality of the vineyards, we would like to see Knudsen make a single-vineyard pinot noir to show off its special vineyards.

Argyle makes a pinot noir under its own name but made entirely from Knudsen grapes. We wonder how and why winemaker Klosterman separates the Argyle and Knudsen pinot noirs if he's using the same grapes.

These wines are on the right track, but clearly the Knudsens have an uphill climb in a competitive market. The wines are distributed in only a handful of states and the burden has fallen to Page to hand-sell the wines city to city. She lives in Minnesota.

Page admits that distribution is a challenge in the early stages. Even though the family has been growing grapes for decades for renown producers like Erath and Argyle, retailers and restaurant owners don't recognize the Knudsen name.

She agrees that a tasting room will make her job much easier, especially if that can drive direct-to-consumer sales. Oregon has seen tremendous growth in this sector. More than 70 percent of Oregon wine producers make less than 5,000 cases a year and depend almost entirely on direct-to-consumer sales.

GIRASOLE VINEYARDS

 We last bumped into the Barra family in 2010 while tasting their Mendocino County Girasole wines with family patriarch Charlie Barra and his wife. Charlie founded the vineyard operation in 1955 first by selling grapes to winemaking giants Wente, Fetzer and Mondavi. In 1997 they began making their own wine and sold it under the Girasole label.

Girasole — which means sunflower in Italian — sports a double sunflower label on their organically labeled and produced wine.

Fast forward to last fall when we met with Charlie's daughter Shelley Maly, Girasole's national sales manager, to taste their current offerings. Our favorites from the tasting were the not so easy to find, but worth seeking out.



*Girasole Pinot Blanc
Mendocino 2017*

Girasole Pinot Blanc Mendocino 2017 (\$15). According to Shelley Maly, only about 425 acres of this varietal are currently grown (down from 2,000 acres 30 years ago) in California and Girasole grows 15 acres of them. All stainless-steel fermentation and no malolactic fermentation combine to create this very clean brightly fruited mélange of pear and peach elements.

- **Girasole Pinot Noir Mendocino 2016** (\$16). This is a well-priced crowd pleaser with an appealing cherry and plum nose and flavors with some spice notes in a soft round package.
- **Girasole Cabernet Sauvignon Mendocino 2016** (\$15). The hands-down winner of the flight, this cabernet sauvignon drank way above its modest price tag. Bright cherry and berry elements created a very pleasing and satisfying glass of wine, that made us yearn for a barbecued rib eye.

WINE PICKS

- **Paranga Red Kir Yianni Macedonia 2016** (\$18). Macedonia is located in Northern Greece where this blend of syrah and merlot meets the indigenous xinomavro. Plum and cherry elements with cinnamon and pepper notes dominate this very good medium bodied red wine.



Beronia Crianza 2015

Beronia Crianza 2015 (\$15). This Rioja blend of tempranillo, garnacha and mazuelo is a great value. Herbal aromas with cherry and blueberry notes with a hint of vanilla and chocolate from the American oak.

- **Flora Springs Merlot 2016** (\$35). Few wineries like Flora Springs have stuck with merlot because of waning sales. Thank heavens, it did. A perennial success, this merlot offers up generous floral aromas, ripe black cherry and blueberry flavors and oak-inspired hints of spice and chocolate.
- **Skouras Megas Oenos PGI Peloponnese 2013** (\$30). This is a big full-throttle, ripe-fruit, and oak-driven red wine. The blend is 80 percent aghiorghitiko (also known as St. George) and 20 percent cabernet sauvignon. Blackberries and cedar notes propel this wine into a mouth filling drinking experience. Pair with a prime barbecued steak to maximize pleasure.

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr, MoreAboutWine, posted on SouthFloridaReporter.com, Mar. 4, 2019

Additional Wine reviews on MoreAboutWine

All photos are randomly selected and do not indicate any preferred wine

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