

At 14 She Knew She Wanted To Be A Winemaker, Now You Have To Taste Her Wines



It could have been a parents' worst nightmare when 14-year-old Bibiana Gonzalez Rave announced that she wanted to make wine when she grew up. Never mind that her parents drank wine only on special occasions and that her native Colombia wasn't known for wine. She was caught up in a fantasy world outside of Medellin, then one of the most violent cities in the world.



Image: Jeff Pisoni

But this wasn't just a child's fantasy born out of comic books and movies; it was the seeds of a meteoric career that would take Rave to France, South Africa and finally to Sonoma County where today she makes award-winning wines under the Cattleya label. In 2015 the *San Francisco Chronicle* named her **"Winemaker of the Year."**

After a few false starts - classes in chemical engineering and then business - she decided her most direct route to making wine was to go to France, the epicenter of wine. She dropped out of traditional schools and with her parents apprehensive blessing went to France in 2000 where she earned diplomas in viticulture and oenology in Cognac and Bordeaux. She worked harvests at Haut Brion and later in Burgundy, Rhone Valley and even Alsace. But wanderlust lured her to new wine-growing regions.

“I was dating a French guy in Cognac. We were going to get married and work on his family farm. In France, you stay in one place and maybe move up there. But I wanted to go out and see how grapes respond to different terroirs,” she said.

She traveled to South Africa and then to California, where she had planned to spend a few harvests before returning permanently to Cognac. But she fell in love with Sonoma County and decided not to leave. She stayed in California, found a new love, married and started a family.

That she chose California over France seems odd, but not when she explains it.

“The difference is so great here. I found so many possibilities, a desire to produce absolutely the best you can. Resources are unlimited. It’s very seducing.”

But she didn’t lose the values of French winemaking. She just embraced the greater freedom California gave her in choosing grape varieties and vineyards.

“They teach you in Bordeaux that the first goal is to make wine dry, dry, dry. You never see a sweet wine there. And, acidity is important. I’m not afraid of it even though it makes my wines more austere. And, I love tannins. I go for it,” she said. “I think like a French winemaker, but I love California.”

Initially, she traveled 1,000 miles a week as consultant to such famous wineries as Au Bon Climat, Qupé, Peay before becoming a full-time winemaker at Sonoma’s Lynmar Estate. But she never lost her childhood desire to make wine under her own label.



Image: Chris Andre

In 2011 she left Lynmar and married Jeff Pisoni, whose family is a wine-making, grape-growing legend. It would have been natural to blend into the Pisoni empire, but instead she stuck to her dream. She secured long-term contracts with 20 vineyards to launch Cattleya, named for Colombia’s national flower, in late 2011.

Long days and nights in the vineyards and at the winery kept the newlyweds apart as they each pursued their careers, so in 2012 Bibiana and Jeff co-created Shared Notes, an exclusive and hedonistic sauvignon blanc.

It sounds like everything is working out well for Rave, but she said she has one accomplishment yet to earn: owning her own vineyards.

Here are some of her excellent wines we tasted:



*Cattleya Cuvee Number
Five Sonoma Coast
Chardonnay 2018*

Alma de Cattleya Sonoma County Sauvignon Blanc 2019 (\$22). Rave works with four coastal vineyards to make this aromatic and crisp sauvignon blanc. The addition of musqué clones gives this wine texture and grapefruit flavors. Simple, dry and refreshing.

- **Alma de Cattleya Sonoma County Chardonnay 2018** (\$24). This wine overdelivers for the price. Get it before she raises it. Using only neutral French oak barrels keeps down the cost but less oak also means less of those strong, secondary oak flavors. That makes the wine austere and pure – the way we like our chardonnay. Green apple and pear notes and good texture.

- **Cattleya Cuvee Number Five Sonoma Coast Chardonnay 2018** (\$55). More complex, this chardonnay has a velvet finish with obvious mineral notes. Very outgoing in style, it balances acidity and fruit. White peach and just a kiss of oak.

- **Cattleya Cuvee Number One Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 2018** (\$55). Rave's first Cattleya pinot noir from the cool Green Valley is a beautiful wine with a deceiving light color that surprises you with elegance, soft tannin and bright red berry



Shared Notes Les Lecons des Maitres 2018

flavors. Rave uses long, cold maceration to achieve a result she likens to Burgundy's Chambolle-Musigny.

- **Shared Notes Les Lecons des Maitres 2018** (\$65). Heavens, this is a delicious sauvignon blanc that begs for a second glass. Of course, very little of it will be made, so we're not likely to taste it again. But it should serve as a model for other sauvignon blanc producers because it blends a healthy dose of semillon – just like producers do in Graves. Unfortunately, there is so little semillon grown in California that blends are rare. The semillon is very pronounced in the rich texture and apricot, nectarine flavors. The 76 percent sauvignon blanc draws in the grapefruit and pear flavors.

Wine picks



Duckhorn Vineyards
Napa Valley Merlot
2017

Hess Select Pinot Noir Central Coast 2018 (\$19). This is a very pleasant, well-priced pinot noir that is worth seeking out. Aged only in neutral French oak, it has a pure raspberry fruit expression with a bit of spice thrown in.

- **Kendall-Jackson Jackson Estate Anderson Valley Pinot Noir 2017** (\$30). This is a bold styled pinot noir that can stand up to pretty much all meat dishes. Big cherry elements in a soft tannin structure, this wine is a delight to drink.
- **Duckhorn Vineyards Napa Valley Merlot 2017** (\$56). Blended with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, petit verdot and malbec, this beautiful wine is plush on the palate with floral, raspberry aromas and blueberry and plum flavors with hints of licorice. Very broad flavors and ripeness.

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr, MoreAboutWine, posted on SouthFloridaReporter.com, Aug. 10, 2020

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing a weekly wine column for more than 30 years. Additional Wine reviews on MoreAboutWine

All photos are randomly selected and do not indicate any preferred wine. Listed prices are subject to change

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