

Winemaker Profile: Celia Welch

MaryAnn Worobiec Issue: May 31, 2009

Even as a child, Celia Welch realized that she was passionate about the way things smell and taste. She recalls a childhood birthday party where she suggested that instead of playing pin the tail on the donkey, a better game would be for guests to try to guess the spices in her mother's cabinet by scent and flavor.

Today, she gets to challenge her palate every day as one of Napa Valley's most admired winemakers. A Cabernet specialist, Welch (formerly Masyczek) makes wine for eight wineries, including some of Napa's most sought-after, such as D.R. Stephens and Scarecrow. Her own label is called Corra.

The youngest of four children, Welch grew up in a small town in Oregon. Her father, an internist, was a wine lover and home winemaker who planted a half-acre of assorted vines in their yard for experimentation—everything from French Colombard to Charbono.

Welch pursued winemaking, earning a degree in fermentation science from the University of California, Davis, in 1982. "I came out of Davis with a strong set of technical skills and not a lot of practical idea of how wine is made," she recalls. She saw many women hired for lab jobs, but not for cellar positions.

She traveled to Burgundy and did stints in New Zealand and Australia before landing in Napa, settling in and making her mark at Staglin. Since 1995, she has been an independent winemaker, one who has managed to keep a low public profile while her wines gained in stature and her reputation grew.

Describing her winemaking goals, Welch refers to structure and texture more than flavors. "I want density, but not to be overbearing," she says. "I don't want to be the equivalent of the loudest voice in the bar. I want quality and complexity expressed, but quietly."

Scarecrow stands out as one of her biggest achievements. Founded by photographer Bret Lopez and stylist Mimi DeBlasio, who resurrected Rutherford's famed J.J. Cohn Ranch in 2002, the winery's debut Scarecrow Cabernet 2003 sold out briskly. And the 2004 vintage (96 points) sold out in 16 hours.

Welch, 48, a single mother of two teenagers, bases her operations at the custom crush facility Laird, where she makes six clients' wines. In this busy facility, she admires everyone involved in making the wine with her. "None of us are doing this 100 percent by ourselves," she says. She sees winemaking as collaboration and tries hard not to let her ego get in the way.

"Most of the wines [I make] are estate grown, and each bears its own personality and stamp of soil. My own influence on the product is invisible," she says. "I don't want someone to taste a wine and say, 'Oh, Celia made this.'" But when asked to what degree a wine is made in the vineyard, she says, "Well, if you give five different winemakers the same fruit, you'll get very different wines." She and her finely tuned palate are obviously doing something right. —*MaryAnn Worobiec*

RECENT WINES

CORRA Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2005 (93/\$125, 200 cases)

J. DAVIES Cabernet Sauvignon Diamond Mountain District 2005 (91/\$75, 1,826 cases)

KELLY FLEMING Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2004 (90/\$85, 500 cases)

LINDSTROM Cabernet Sauvignon Stags Leap District 2005 (93/\$95, 326 cases)

HOLLYWOOD & VINE Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2480 2005 (92/\$83, 1,380 cases)

KEEVER Cabernet Sauvignon Yountville 2004 (93/\$68, 230 cases)

SCARECROW Cabernet Sauvignon Rutherford 2005 (96/\$150, 850 cases)