

Ladies' Luncheon with Celia Welch

by Karen Ulrich on May 10, 2012



Celia Welch of Corra Wines



This week, we've been blessed with the good fortune of having Celia Welch in town! And even better, to celebrate women in the industry, we were able to share the wealth with a selection of female sommeliers and buyers from a handful of select accounts. With Peter at the kitchen's helm, we sat with Celia at Studio TEW to a roundtable luncheon of Sliced Duck Breast and Melted Vegetables, the perfect accompaniment to pair with her wines. And while Celia Welch is certainly a household name when it comes to California's cult Cabernet Sauvignons, it was an enlightening experience to hear her humbly discuss her rise to present fame.

It all began with her father, a home winemaker with a half of an acre of non-commercial vineyards, who Celia began "assisting" at the age of four. Since then, she said, "I've made wine from every nook and cranny of Napa over the course of my career." And what a career it has been. In high school, Celia was interested in writing and music, and like most others at the time, she thought that winemaking was reserved for "little old Italian men." And though she'd developed a great appreciation of aromas and flavors from her parents who savored much of the same, she'd never heard of any female winemakers, "it just didn't seem possible," she said.

When she arrived at UC Davis to study enology, she was surprised to find that a quarter of her classmates were women. The Department of Viticulture, which was separate at the time, however, was populated by all men. And while she has stayed good friends with the women with whom she'd studied, she noted that a few quickly figured out that "the physical part of winemaking was not something that they wanted to do." Describing her studies as a "fun blend of science and art," she did admit that "it's hard to think of chemistry and micro-biology as being creative."

Earning a B.S. degree in Fermentation Science in 1982, she then started to travel, first with her fiancée to New Zealand, and then to Australia's Barossa Valley to work. In 1984, she returned to Napa to assist in a few small wineries in Mt. Veeder and Carneros; and then she joined Silverado Vineyards as their

Wine Science Director in 1991, the year she became pregnant with her first child. Not knowing any other female winemakers who were moms, she wasn't sure that she could now manage an 80 hour work week during harvest, and so, she gave up her full-time position that same year.

As luck would have it, in 1992, Celia received a call from Shari Staglin of Staglin Family Vineyard in Rutherford, Napa Valley. Looking for a part-time winemaker, Staglin had four barrels of Chardonnay to work with, and six to eight barrels of Cabernet Sauvignon, "a manageable project" as Celia described it "with a kid." Staying on with Staglin for ten years, she took on a few other clients, carefully managing her consulting until the children were in school.

Fast forward a few years, Celia now consults on a total of eight Napa Valley projects, including Scarecrow, Monsieur Etain, Keever Vineyards, Kelly Fleming, Lindstrom Wines, Barbour Vineyards, and Corra, Celia's own. And because the brands are small, the work is manageable. For example, Corra has only one wine, made from four lots; and the three facilities from which she works are relatively close, so she doesn't have to travel much. Harvesting from Calistoga in the north to South Napa, the workload is spread out. "I take full responsibility for each project," said Celia, explaining how she works closely with each vineyard manager, overseeing the irrigation, leaf thinning and harvesting of each block. "There isn't a procedure that I haven't directed [for each vintage]. I don't delegate any winemaking decisions," she added. "Each year is so unique, I can't just call in directions."

In the winery, Celia works with a combination of natural and commercial yeasts, making the call when the grapes are harvested. If the fruit has been pecked by birds, she explained, there's a greater potential for bacteria, so she could either blast the wine with sulfites or use commercial yeast; and so she chooses the latter. Bloom, she said, is actually killed off when the wine hits 3% abv. With natural inoculations, it's the yeast that's already present in the winery that completes the fermentation. At times, she prefers selected yeasts because they leave no trace of residual sugar. When the actual fermentation is completed, nothing can then spoil the wine, because the nutrients have been depleted. With this, Celia can use less sulfites and not filter the wines, because at this point they're complete, stable and consistent.

"I want my role in all of this to be invisible," she said, speaking of her winemaking process. "If there is a thumbprint, it's in the texture." And on this note we'll have more next week!