

LE PAN

TRENDING | MAGAZINE | ABOUT | SEARCH | SUBSCRIBE

WHITE LIGHTS WAY FOR NAPA'S ROSEMARY CAKEBREAD

By Andrew Dembina on April 25, 2016

"Red-wine person" Rosemary Cakebread of Gallica Wine is launching her first white wine.

"I'm a red-wine person," says Rosemary Cakebread. While she is referring to personal preference, this is also undoubtedly a reflection of her professional reputation. Cakebread, one of Napa Valley's most respected winemakers, and founder-producer of the Gallica label, has made her name with Cabernet Sauvignon. She is, however, debuting a white wine this summer – an Albariño.

Cakebread was in Hong Kong this month to conduct tastings that focused on the different expressions of Cabernet Sauvignon throughout Napa Valley.

During her 15 years as winemaker and then consultant winemaker at Spottswoode, the reputation of the St Helena winery's flagship Family Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon soared. Spottswoode Sauvignon Blanc and Field Book Syrah were also under her remit.

"My earliest wine experiences were always with Cabernet; and I love it – it's a personal favourite, from Napa and other winemaking regions," she says. "But I also like Grenache and Syrah, and one of the reasons I started Gallica was to be able to work with other varieties."

Cakebread's inaugural solo release, and most consistently highly rated wine is her Gallica Cabernet Sauvignon, whose first vintage was 2007. She uses grapes exclusively from her Oakville vineyard, including Cabernet Franc, in the French-oak-aged blend. "Oakville wines are definitely up and coming," she says. "Cabernet is king there, and the tannins are not as obvious as some people imagine they will be when they think of Napa wines." This point was well made at her tasting of 2012s, her Gallica forming a soft contrast to the emphatic tannins of some of the wines from the other sub-regions.

Looking across Napa Valley 2014 predictions, Cakebread says, "It's not shabby; it's a nice vintage. It was a drought year with a fairly small crop, so expectations are high. But as the 2013 was stellar, it's difficult to talk it up too much."

Gallica's founder is inspired most by Bordeaux wines.

Winemaker picks

“My favourite wines?” Cakebread repeats the question, almost visibly sifting through her memory banks for something revelatory. Either stumped, or simply in full admission of what she thinks an interviewer might have predicted, she sighs. “Bordeaux, of course – it’s iconic. I also have a great appreciation for Italian wines and some from Australia – I like drinking wines from different areas. As a winemaker, it’s informative to try what’s going on around the world. Château Margaux and Angélus are personal favourites, though.”

Cakebread also makes a small quantity of Petite Sirah, from old vines purchased in St Helena. The Grenache and Syrah are sourced from growers she knows at other vineyards. “These are all small amounts of wine that I make purely for the joy of it,” she says.

So where did the interest for the upcoming Albariño come from? “I wanted to make a white wine,” she says. “But not a Chardonnay or a Sauvignon Blanc – so many other people make those quite beautifully. I was looking at Chenin Blanc and Vermentino. Then, by chance I met Matthew Rorick [winemaker of Forlorn Hope] at a tasting, and I told him I was interested in white grapes. He said he had a vineyard in Calaveras, and I went and looked at it – it was [Albariño vines] on amazing limestone. I was intrigued, so I bottled a 2015 vintage.” All being well, Cakebread hopes to take more fruit for a second vintage.

Reflecting on great white wines of Napa, she says, “Sauvignon Blanc always does very well – its a natural companion to Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sémillon grows well too, which is sometimes added to the mix. Some wineries do Chardonnay amazingly well – for me, Stony Hill is one. They pick early and keep the wines very bright; they don’t see a lot of oak. And they make a Riesling that is beautiful.” She adds that both Stony Hill varieties have the ability to age very well.

“John Kongsgaard [of the eponymous wine label] is another example of someone who does Chardonnay very well. And so is Smith-Madrone [Vineyards], which also makes great Riesling.”

Cakebread notes that early-ripening grapes, such as Chenin Blanc, Rousson and Vermentino, all have the potential to be very successful in Napa vineyards. “Chappellet [Winery] does a beautiful Chenin Blanc. I’m not aware of anyone growing Vermentino in Napa Valley. Roussanne and Marsanne are grown at Stagecoach [Vineyard] – they just don’t get the same attention as Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc. There are certainly curious growers out there, and I would expect to see more varieties in the future, but the crop cycles take time.”

So how will her Albariño be different from the Spanish expressions? “It’s almost entirely in stainless steel; there’s a little bit of [ageing in] oak barrels but very little – but I’m looking forward to being able to answer that [when it’s released] very soon.”