

FOUR HOLIDAY FEASTS WITH BAROLO | 95 COLLECTIBLE CABERNETS REVIEWED

Wine & Spirits

THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WINE

NAPA'S NEW NEW CABS

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Consultant Heidi Peterson Barrett between the bins at the Napa Wine Company



valley's most sought-after, and therefore least-available cabernets. Her client roster includes names like Screaming Eagle, Paradigm, Showket and Jones Family. One of her newest projects is her own, La Sirena, which has just released its second vintage of cabernet sauvignon, the 1997. All of her labels fetch high prices, selling out primarily on her reputation as a winemaker, but Barrett herself is low-key, unfazed by all the attention directed her way. With wine-stained jeans and unkempt hair, she seems the type most at home in the cellar or out in the vineyards, rather than in the flashy auction world where many of her wines change hands for staggering amounts.

Asked about the instant popularity of some of her wines, Barrett says, "Limited quantity is important. If you only make 500 cases or less, it is a bit more special because there isn't any of it, and people are always after things that they like and can't get. I think it also gathers a following when people can really pick a few winemakers who are able to be consistent with their quality. Then they go, 'Oh, that's from this person, it's going to be good.' They know you're never going to put your reputation out there on something that you didn't give your best shot."

Barrett, like Melka and Egelhoff, prefers

working with small, primarily estate projects, where the regionality of the wine can show through. "I like to really show off what a given piece of ground can do," she says, "and try to let it reach its potential, whatever that is. That's a lot of fun to me. I try to make it in a really balanced, elegant style. That's the part that I try to bring, but the fruit flavors, that's totally the vineyard. I just try to enhance them."

FOCUSING ON SITE

Barrett touches on one corollary effect of the popularity of "celebrity" consulting winemakers: an increased attention to site. The benchmark for the great Napa Valley cabs used to be the big, reserve blends, such as Beaulieu Vineyards Georges de Latour Private Reserve, Robert Mondavi Napa Valley Reserve, Beringer Private Reserve. Blended from a number of different vineyards throughout Napa Valley, these wines give a general picture of the valley's cabernet. The new wines from tiny estates have spurred their customers to see the valley as a patchwork of smaller growing areas. Those who follow David Arthur, a hillside estate above Rutherford, or Jones Family, which comes from hillsides up near Calistoga, understand that the Napa Valley can create a number of radically different

styles of cabernet. These are wines from specific places, from two and three-acre vineyards that a visitor can take in at a glance.

"Estate wines are what excite people," says Melka. "They feel much closer to the business than when they visit a huge winery. They see a vineyard and aesthetically it is beautiful in their minds, and it reflects the beauty of the wines."

Egelhoff agrees, adding, "I think it allows a consumer to realize that everything is happening right there, that grapes aren't being bought, blended in God knows what manner." Estates are also a more stable business model for the smaller wineries since vineyard sources change hands, or contracts run out. Egelhoff has built at least two of the brands for whom he makes wine around purchased fruit (2480 and Richard Partridge), and he knows that purchasing fruit every year is a risky business. "Sourcing fruit at this level is incredibly difficult. It's taken knowing people and having friends who will sell it to me and handshake deals where they could walk away from me. The price has gone up every year, and this year it jumped twenty-five percent in some vineyards. It's ridiculous. Your hands are tied, and all you can do is go to the owner of the brand and say you're gonna pay more