



WOLF FAMILY VINEYARDS: CURRENT RELEASES

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“Napa is increasingly the province of large established wineries with pedigrees that are as long as either their mailing lists or the lines at their tasting rooms on summer weekends. This, of course, is not exactly a fantastic thing, especially when it is accompanied by rising prices for wines bearing the appellation designation.

Luckily, as in many other places around the country, Napa is also seeing a resurgence of small, family-run vineyards. The rise of such vineyards alongside the consolidation and increasing corporatization of the wine industry may at first be counterintuitive. How is it that both can be happening at once?

Well, there has been a relatively stable growth in the real estate market in Napa. In the last 10 years, many people have realized their dreams of owning a nice home in Napa, and many of those nice homes came with some grapevines, most likely already under contract with some winery. Many owners were (and are) no doubt happy to honor the existing contracts, and take the (very good) money for their newfound fruit.

However, couple the increasing premiums paid for great Napa wines, and the love of wine that brings many such homeowners to the Napa valley in the first place, it's only a matter of time before these new valley residents succumb to the seductive fantasy of making their own wines.

It just so happens that this is exactly the path that led Doug Wolf and his wife Jane to become not only the happy owners of the old Inglenook estate, but very rapidly, the proprietors of Wolf Family Vineyards. You might say, the call of good dirt is very difficult to resist.

Wolf Family Vineyards consists of 29 acres of prime foothill land on the west side of Napa Valley above St. Helena. Planted in 1996 to primarily Cabernet and Cabernet Franc, these sloping vineyards sit on a mix of alluvial gravel and and richer clay loam soil and are tightly packed with vines (4 foot by 6 foot spacing) which leads to naturally low yields and small berried fruit.

Winemaking at the estate is done by the extremely accomplished Karen Culler, who has been making wine in Napa for more than 20 years. Culler may have been destined to become a winemaker, having spent time as a child helping her grandfather destem grapes for homemade wine back in Ohio where she grew up. A botany degree from Ohio State led to a masters degree in Viticulture and Enology from U.C. Davis

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(interrupted only by a minor, disappointing detour into Marine Biology in between), and after graduating in 1984, Culler began work as an intern with Robert Mondavi winery. The rest, they say, is history. In addition to her duties at Wolf Family Vineyards, Culler makes wine under her own label, Culler Wines, as well as other consulting clients such as Renteria and Ladera Vineyards.

Wolf Family Vineyards produces primarily two Cabernet based blends, as well as a Sauvignon Blanc, which was not made available to me for these reviews. For the reds, all the grapes are picked by hand and cold soaked for 5 days before being fermented with native yeasts when possible (in this vintage the Cab Franc was fermented with commercial yeasts). After pressing, the juice was aged for between 16 and 19 months a mix of new and old (1-2 years) French oak barrels.

Full disclosure: I received these wines as press samples.”

TASTING NOTES:

2003 Wolf Family Vineyards Cabernet, Napa

“Dark ruby in color, this wine has a succulent nose of cherries and chocolate aromas. In the mouth it offers a well balanced structure, with excellent acidity that supports a medley of flavors dominated by chocolate and cherries. These are wrapped in a delicate shawl of incense and spice flavors that fade to herbal notes in the long finish. The tannins are nicely integrated and soft, making for a lovely mouthfeel and overall drinking experience. Opulent without pretense and fully delicious.” *218 cases made. 9/9.5. \$65. Where to Buy?*

2003 Wolf Family Vineyards Meritage, Napa

“Inky garnet in the glass, this 56% Cabernet Sauvignon 44% Cabernet Franc wine has a bold nose of cherry, tobacco, and freshly ground coffee aromas. In the mouth it offers beautifully balanced and textured tobacco and black cherry flavors that are elevated by notes of violets and blackberry that linger in to a long, satisfying finish. Excellent.” *367 cases made. 9/9.5. \$49. Where to Buy?*

NOTE: While these technically are current releases, they have been on the market for nearly a year. The 2004 wines are just about to be released, and can already be purchased online.