

It's Time for Wine

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By

Monty & Sarah Preiser

Wine Writers

DeLoach and Russian Hill The New and the Old Are Both Terrific



We don't know if other wine writers have the same recurring nightmare as do we. It has to do with being invited to stay at a winery's guest house for a few days, or enjoying the owners' hospitality for meals, or taking someone's time for a tour, and after all of that attending a tasting with the winemaker, manager, or owner where most, and sometimes all, of the wines are hellish. What happens when we have accepted all that hospitality, but didn't like the wines? It is not a pleasant situation, and can cause a writer to lose sleep.

Fortunately, it is easy, and a pleasure, to write about two recent visits - one to the older, yet splendidly resurgent, De Loach Vineyards, and one to a sort of new kid on the block, the highly innovative Russian Hill Estate Winery. Neither was really on our radar screen when we sidled up to their neighboring tables at the Aspen Food and Wine Classic and were greeted by two bright and charming ladies - Ginny Lambrix (Director of Winegrowing at De Loach) and Ellen Mack (co-owner of Russian Hill). Only after tasting the limited wines they were showcasing in Colorado did we know we wanted an extended visit at both of their wineries "back home" in California.

Perhaps "resurgent" does not really tell the whole story at De Loach, as what the new ownership and management has done in reality is to downsize production to emphasize only the best fruit, and "reinvent" the entire winemaking process. Every aspect of the business has been reconsidered and reinvigorated. From new barrel programs to the emphasis on certain varietals, from biodynamic farming practices to vineyard management, and from new fruit sources to a new winemaker, all is not only moving in the right direction, but it may have already arrived. De Loach, with Lambrix and winemaker Greg LaFollette at the helm, is unquestionably once again crafting world class wines that are often stunning.

Husband and wife Edward Gomez and Ellen Mack, two retired Medical Doctors, established Russian Hill in 1997, many years after De Loach had first gained a national reputation. The Docs spent two years intensively searching for the appropriate site, as they believed it was imperative

that the land be capable of producing outstanding estate vineyards, but also allow for construction of a winery. Only by having full control of both the vineyard and wine production did Mack and Gomez feel they could produce the wines of the quality they envisioned. Of course, a winemaker was needed, and nephew Patrick Melley was brought on board. Using Ed's love of study and innovation (such as his redesign of certain fermenting tanks and equipment to make vinification more uniform), and Patrick's deft touch, the young wines at Russian Hill are poised to make a splash on the big scene. Each is distinctively good, and some are outstanding.

-2005 Early Harvest Gewurztraminer (\$16): hints of jasmine and lychee nuts greet the nose, with white peaches and bright citrus tones lingering through a long, dry finish.

-2004 OFS Sauvignon Blanc (\$20): nicely representative of the varietal, it is not the winery's best effort, but it well accompanies shell fish and spicy dishes.

-2004 Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$16): locally grown Gravenstein apples prevail from the nose to a finish so crisp it almost crunches.

-2004 OFS Chardonnay (\$30): rich gold color successfully predicts the rich, full, creamy mouth, and a bright food friendly finish.

-2004 OFS Pinot Noir (\$35 - pre-release, so watch for this one and skip the 03): a mouthful of plush red & black plums with a long bright and spicy finish.

-2004 Durell Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40): an earthy nose of white truffles and round smoky plums give way to lots of lingering nuts and spices. A top of the line wine.

-2004 Maboroshi Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40): Maboroshi means "whimsical dream" in Japanese, and De Loach Maboroshi means delicious in winespeak. Smoke and forest floor on the nose yield to all sorts of berry flavors in the mouth. Chewy tannins mix with star anise at the finish, which doesn't end until you eat something.

-2005 Green Valley Pinot Noir (\$40+): this pre-release is Monty's favorite. Layers of dark yummy fruits shine through in this baby, plus touches of earth and bacon from nose to finish. What potential!

-2004 Riebli Valley Zinfandel (\$35): sold out at the winery, but if you can find it, try it - you have to trust us!

-2004 Saitone Ranch Zinfandel (\$30): a lighter, more elegant style than the Riebli, yet with lots of red fruits and a bright, spicy finish. As good in its own way.

-2004 Forgotten Vines Zinfandel (\$30): lush, dark, sweet, and elegant. Quite balanced with fresh acidity and spices- a real quaffer.