

FEATURE ARTICLE

Oakville ~ Napa Valley (AVA)

**Napa Valley's future in the Cabs
of tiny Tierra Roja**

by Alan Goldfarb

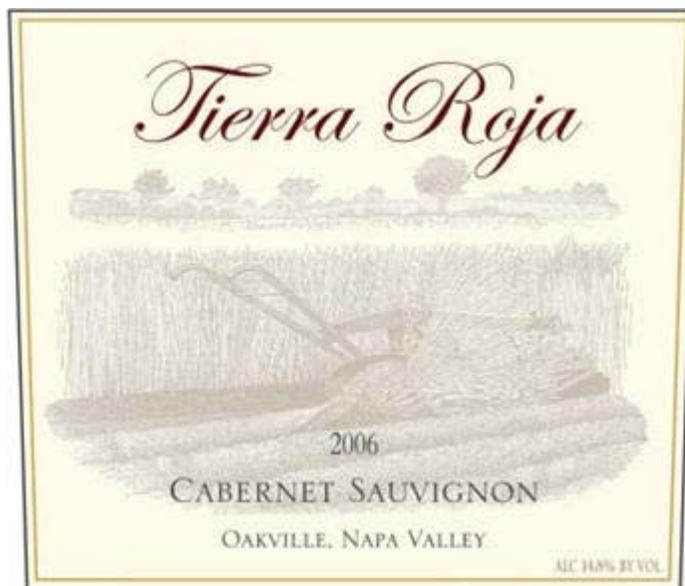
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To borrow the declaration that rock critic Jon Landau wrote in the 70s, “I have seen rock and roll future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen”, I have looked at the Napa Valley and its future is the Cabernet Sauvignon from the tiny Tierra Roja vineyard (just off the Silverado Trail at the eastern head of the Oakville Crossroad).

The wine is not corporate. The wine is a definitive expression of the site from where it originates. The wine is in spot-on balance with its fruit, tannins and acidity. And the wine is extraordinarily pleasurable, especially in concert with food.

In other words, the 2005 and the 2006 [Cabernet Sauvignons](#) I tasted, which represent the second and third efforts from this producer, resemble those which once were made from America's most prominent region; and they are examples of the way modern techniques should be practiced to best allow the palpability of the wine to come to the fore.

But before you accuse me of hyperbole, let me state that the [Tierra Roja](#) Cabernet is expensive at a wallet-wrenching \$115, and in this economy, that's no trifle. Second, a perfunctory scrutiny of the data sheet will disclose a



...and a tiny vineyard shall lead them.

litany of high numbers that would make one blanch - alcohol levels which are bordering on 15 percent and pH's which are creeping into a range that you might surmise will make it taste more like Dr. Pepper than wine.



Winemaker David DeSante

In fact, the Cabs from the 4½-acre, terraced, red soil vineyard do not seem as though they are at the Napa Valley average of 14.8 percent. I guessed they were more in the 14.1, 14.2 range because the alcohol esters don't grip the throat. Not even close. The pH is an extremely high 3.9, which is unconscionable if you don't want your Cab to flatline and lay like a lox.

But somehow, little-known-as-yet winemaker David DeSante employs an open-top fermentation process that he insists allows the fruit to remain as bright as a freshly picked Bing cherry, the astronomical pH be damned.

According to the winery's owner, Linda Neal, the winemaker doesn't utilize often-used techniques such as "watering back" (to lower alcohol), de-alcoholization (to lower alcohol), or micro-oxygenation (to alter texture or aroma). So, how does DeSante explain the high pH that does not mercifully flatten out the wine, or the high alcohol that is subdued? DeSante acknowledges, "It's a question I can't begin to answer."

But he goes on, "I prize freshness. I really want to taste the fruit. I'm harvesting around 25.5° Brix (a measure of sugar) and 3.5 (pH), and ferment in open-topped fermenters. (That way) you lose some of the oxygen, lose about half a percent of alcohol, and are left with the substance of the wine itself. After ML (malolactic fermentation), the pH rises to 3.9. (But) we preserve the freshness."

Much of the reason why numbers alone can't begin to explain the worthiness of the Tierra Roja Cabs is the efficacy of the vineyard. Without overstating it, DeSante calls it "a *grand cru* site". Upon elaboration of what seems like bombast, DeSante is clear that "wines are not made by the numbers. I love my Davis education, but when you get to a certain point in your career, you don't need a recipe. I make homemade pasta and I know it's done when it has a texture of your earlobe. Those are things you can't quantify. When you get to a special vineyard, it's: wow! I can't do that anywhere else. I don't have that kind of subtle variation (in vineyards which he works for others) that I have here. What an opportunity ..."

SO WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE TIERRA ROJA VINEYARD THAT IS SO, WELL, "WOW"?

The provenance of its founder, and perhaps more importantly, the ground from which its grapes emanate is owned by grower-cum-vintner Linda Neal. For 20 years, Neal worked alongside her now-divorced husband in their vineyard management company.

It's apparent that this likeable, down-to-earth woman knows soil. She has it in spades in the form of the rust-red

volcanic soil that informs her vineyard (ergo, its name); as it does in the high-toned neighborhood of Oakville that is home to such stalwarts as Screaming Eagle, Bond, Dalla Valle, Bacchus, and Rudd. Those bona fides, coupled with Tierra Roja's short supply – only about 250 cases are produced each year – account for the high price tag. That, along with the opinion that this vineyard seems to be turning out some of the best wine we've tasted from Napa Valley in a long while.

So, why in heck did Neal - who characterizes herself as a "jeans and boots person," who now must put on high-heels although "I don't feel like putting big-girl shoes on" - cross over to the wine side? Was it just for vanity's sake, the malaise that has gotten a hold of a preponderance of her grape-grower brethren and sistren, who sashayed to the other side?



Tierra Roja's owner, Linda Neal, puts her heart and soul into her vineyard.

"Masochism and insanity," she answers forthwith, without much irony. "I avoided it for so many years because I know it's another business ... Wine is a way to share the vineyard, but I can't deny it, I want to share a piece of me and if that's vanity, that's vanity. I like to think of it as love more than vanity. But I was compelled to do it," continues Neal, who used to manage the well-known Sauvignon Blanc vineyard Gamble Ranch and sold the fruit from her Oakville vineyard to Cakebread and still does to Dave Phinney's Orin Swift label. "When you live in the Napa Valley, wine is the currency. You're always taking someone else's wine (made from their vineyard or their managed grapes) around. I needed my own child."

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE VINEYARD

So, which end of the business does she prefer? "No doubt the vineyard," she says without hesitation. Now she says she has to start over, despite being on the other end of the business for more than two decades. Her parcel of land overlooks the valley, climbing to where it's contiguous with Dalla Valle's Maya vineyard. Of the vineyard, Neal says, "there's no more perfect place on the planet to make wine." The rocky soils make for a well-drained platform from which flows "some of the sweetest" (well) water and is the "sweet spot where it all comes together."

Winemaker DeSante corroborates her story apropos the vineyard that he calls *grand cru*. "It's all about that vineyard. You have to have a confluence of many factors – the right soil and exposure – and she has that perfect site."

The parcel results in small berries – the kind that winemakers always think are right for making great wine – "with good color, structure, and opulence that preserves the fruit. The fruit intensity and mid-palate structure without heavy tannin on finish - that's a really hard thing to come by."

While tasting the wines, I note a dusky or dusty taste in the mid-palate that's both appealing and adds nuance and complexity that seems to come from the dry, red earth.

Neal and DeSante point out the vineyard's lack of uniformity, just the opposite from the neat, exacting rows that one sees on the valley floor; and for which many viticulturists strive. It's that lack of sameness that Neal and DeSante insist is a major reason why Tierra's Roja's wines take on such complexity; despite it being 100 percent Cabernet and 100 percent from one vineyard. Which I believe makes Neal's wine one of the few true expressions of terroir being made in California today. However, as they explain, the wine in a sense *is* a "blend", only the assemblage comes from harvesting grapes systematically and separately from several different elevations in the vineyard. The middle two-thirds down the hillside gives the fruit its brightness and freshness.

It's an "amazing *je ne sais quoi*," is the way DeSante describes the qualities that the vineyard gives the Tierra Roja.

As for the lack of uniformity (or lack of conformity, the term that Linda Neal uses to also describe herself), DeSante says, "It makes it a very interesting party to go to and this party is full of different people and they all bring different attributes to the table."

What kind of party was Linda Neal seeking when she made that not-so-serendipitous decision to go over to the wine side? She tells me that she had been impressed with the wines made at Raymond and Beaulieu in the '80s – Bordeaux-style wines that always seemed in balance – and those were her models.

DeSante too remembers those wines. "I remember winemakers telling me you need to understand the classics to know where we've been." Where the Napa Valley, as well as the rest of California, has been the last 20 years is in what David DeSante calls "two shocking episodes". He explains thusly: "We had to reconcile the shocking episodes of phylloxera, and critics; and now we are having to check in with the history of our valley. I think we're returning to our roots but in a revised, modern way."

Furthermore, while not referring specifically to the wines of Tierra Roja, he says, "... This is who we are. We're discovering ourselves again. Our vineyards are coming of age again; and we're not trying to chase the reviewers. I believed in the classics. But I'm not under the illusion that we can go back and take their best traits and bring them forward with who we are today. They (some of the wines of today) show Napa, they show our history and they'll endure. But it's only in vineyards (such as Tierra Roja) that we can produce those wines."



Photos by Alan Goldfarb