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THE GRAPEVINE

Winemaker Terry Culton garners praise for Adelaida

By Laurie Daniel
The Tribune

Although Adelaida Cellars is no newcomer on the Paso Robles scene — it was established on the west side in 1981 — the winery never made much of a mark. But the past few years have seen some changes, and Adelaida's wines have never been better.

When I first encountered them, many of the Adelaida wines were encumbered by a heavy-handed use of oak. "The whole house was American oak, and the wines spent about two to three years in barrel," says Terry Culton, Adelaida's winemaker since 2003.

When Culton — who had spent the previous four years as assistant winemaker at pinot noir specialist Calera Wine Co. — arrived at Adelaida, he was given a free hand with the winemaking. "I haven't bought an American barrel since I got here," he says. Instead, he's using mostly French oak, along with a few Eastern European barrels for the Rhone-type wines. The wines are also spending less time in barrels because Culton is trying to retain more fruit flavors.

"I'm trying to make fun, balanced wines that you can have dinner with," he says. Then he laughs and adds, "I like to eat."

It helps that Culton has some wonderful vineyards to work with. One is the historic HMR Estate, first planted with pinot noir in 1963. Paso Robles isn't often thought of as pinot country, but at 1,700 feet and just 16 miles from the Pacific, HMR occupies a cool spot for Paso. More recently, the upper part of HMR — at an elevation of about 1,900 feet — was planted to Rhone grapes.

Nearby is the Viking Estate Vineyard, which the Van Steenwyk Family planted shortly after acquiring Adelaida in 1991. Viking, which is warmer than HMR, has proved to be particularly good for cabernet sauvignon, although I really like the syrah from that vineyard. Adelaida also has a long-term contract on Glenrose Vineyard, which is next to Viking. Ninety percent of Adelaida's grapes come from those three vineyards, Culton says.

Under Culton, Adelaida's wines have become top-notch, especially the cabernet and syrah. The regular bottling of 2002 cabernet sauvignon (\$28) is easy to drink, with bright flavors of black cherry, mocha and spice. The 2002 Estate Reserve cabernet (\$45) is more structured, but with similar flavors. At the top of the cabernet heap is the 2002 Viking Estate Reserve (\$75), a dense, juicy wine with black cherry and black currant flavors, a hint of anise and firm but approachable tannins.

Among the syrahs, the regular bottling of the 2003 (\$28) is still fairly tight, with smoky black raspberry flavors. Of the single-vineyard syrahs, I prefer the 2003 Viking Estate Reserve (\$55), a big wine with juicy, ripe black raspberry, nice spice and a hint of smokiness. (If you see a 2002 Viking Estate Reserve Syrah on the shelf somewhere, grab it. It's absolutely delicious now.)

The 2003 Rhone Style Red (\$26) hails from Glenrose Vineyard and displays ripe strawberry and raspberry flavors, accented by oak. It's ready to drink. A 2003 zinfandel (\$20) is more elegant than many Paso zins, with bright berry fruit and hints of tobacco, white pepper and spice. And as for that historic pinot noir, I particularly like the 2003 HMR Estate Reserve (\$55), a structured yet supple wine with bright, concentrated cherry flavors.

There are some nice whites, too, especially those made from Rhone grapes. The 2004 viognier (\$30) is fat and creamy, with peachy fruit. Even better is the 2004 roussanne-grenache blanc (\$25), a lovely wine that's crisp, long and a little smoky, with flavors of peach and honey.

Laurie Daniel writes a weekly column on wine.

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