

Washington Wine Blog

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Interview with Alpha Omega Head Winemaker, Jean Hoefliger

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Great picture here of superstar winemaker, Jean Hoefliger, head winemaker at Alpha Omega, sampling some of his Cabernets (photo by Suzanne Becker Bronk)

Today we bring you a very special interview with Alpha Omega head winemaker Jean Hoefliger. Winemaking has been in Jean Hoefliger's blood. His career path didn't originally start with wine but he could not help become entrenched in the wine world. Jean Hoefliger was born and raised in Switzerland. His passion for wine brought him from Switzerland to Bordeaux, and South Africa, as he made wine at esteemed estates of Chateau Lynch-Bages, Chateau Carbonnieux, as well as Meerlust. Completing a winemaking and viticulture degree at the Swiss federal school of Changins, Jean then moved to California where he spent five years as winemaker for Newton Vineyard before joining Alpha Omega. Jean is able to source from some of the best vineyards in Napa valley including Beckstoffer's To Kalon and Missouri Hopper in Oakville, Dr. Crane and Las Piedras in St. Helena, Georges III in Rutherford, Stagecoach in Atlas Peak and Sunshine Valley in Oak Knoll District. Jean also works with eminent consulting winemaker, Michel Rolland, who consults for some of the most famed wineries of the world.

I was very impressed with a recent visit to Alpha Omega. Jean's recent lineup of wines were exceptional, showing great poise and terroir. One the highest rated Chardonnays that I have reviewed in the past year, the 2013 Alpha Omega 'Reserve' Chardonnay (WWB, 95) just won Best of Show at the International Chardonnay Symposium competition. Jean talked about his background in wine as well as his family experience that brought him into winemaking. I found him a delight to speak with and I think you will truly enjoy hearing from this exceptional winemaker. Learn more about him and his wines at aowinery.com Here is my interview with Jean Hoefliger, head winemaker at Alpha Omega Winery.

WWB: What were some of your first inspirations as a winemaker?

JH: It all started being born from an American mother and a Swiss father. All of the males went to Law school and I decided to go to law school. I realized that I learned to play cards and drink wine so I didn't want to waste more of my time there in school. Being in Switzerland I wanted to do some wealth management and I went into that side for about the same amount of time, two years. The same thing happened -- every time that I had a dime, I would visit a producing region or taste wines with friends. I got the recurring message. I went to my godfather that owns one of the oldest founding winery, started in 1536 in Switzerland. I wanted to learn from their winemaker as a cellar rat for a few months. He told me that was not a problem. The first day I walked in and he told me to go taste in the cellar. We tasted 62 different lots and I didn't know better than to swallow. I swallowed all of the samples and then told everyone that I this was the career for me. Since then I have learned how to spit when I try wine. I think what made me fall in love with wine is the balance between the scientific side and the artistic side that you can't control. You can't control the weather and the vintage and it is really an interaction between the soil the plant and the climate. In winemaking, there are only a few things that you can do with the grapes and the rest is an expression of an art.

WWB: What was your experience working in Bordeaux at the famed estates Chateau Lynch-Bages and Chateau Carbonnieux? Have those experiences prepared you well to make great Napa Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet?

JH: That is an interesting question and probably the first time I have heard this question. That relates to the 2011 vintage, the coldest vintage in Napa. We were in the level of the acidity that we have in Bordeaux. You have these kind of conditions in Bordeaux so in the colder climate it helps managing the acidity in the wine. I think Bordeaux brought balance to the equation. I try to travel a lot and explore different climates and as a winemaker you only have one shot a year if you only make one wine in one area. I am 43 today and I probably have another 30 vintages to go. By traveling I think that I am able to learn faster about different soils, conditions and different things. Bordeaux brought me the concept that in any given appellation, winery, and country, you have to work on what you lack. You don't focus on what you have but if you are already good you should focus on bringing average quality up.

In Napa balance is something that we don't have sometimes. We have a very consistent climate -- probably the most consistent climate that I have worked at. You have the consistency of climate because of the heat and profiles that are ripe makes the wines consistent. To get a great wine you have to work in making sure that you find the elegance and the acidity. I think in any given wine that backbone is acidity. Because of the hotter climate in Napa this is key. You want the elegant factor and the balance factor in making Napa wines. I was in Bordeaux for a few years and was assistant winemaker at Chateau Carbonnieux and was under the winemaker helping him. That was really interesting because that was one of the first experiences where I was left alone to make wine. That was outstanding from the professional side of things and you know that your decision will have a direct impact. This was 1998 and I had not completed all my studies and degrees, so my winemaking was based on previous experience in the cellar. The winemaker at the time trusted that I would come in with my previous knowledge to make good Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc. Of course he was keeping a close eye but that was really the first time to have the freedom of vintage. Sauvignon Blanc in Bordeaux is the polar opposite of Napa. Napa can lack acidity but Bordeaux has the acidity for great Sav Blanc.

You can acidify wines in Napa but you have plenty of acid in Bordeaux. I am not a big proponent of adding things to the wine. I think most of the time there are other ways to improve than adding to the wines. As a winemaker you have to allow yourself to have changing conditions. You have to adapt. I think in Bordeaux that you have some years where you have to chaptalize and you need to add sugar to reach these levels. You have to maximize the potential in the vintage. It is the winemaker's job to adapt to the vintage. 1998 in Bordeaux I had to work with the acidity and the ripeness issues and that might not be perfect so you have to adapt how you are going to treat the grapes. The polar opposite was 2013 in Napa you have to adapt to the warm vintage.

WWB: I had the chance to review your 2012 Alpha Omega 'Era' Cabernet (WWB, 96) which is one of the highest scoring Napa Cabernets that I have sampled in the past year. What makes that wine and the vintage so special?

JH: A lot of things make the wines so special. The 2012 was a ripe vintage but a bit cooler than 2013 so the backbone of acidity was there. The tannins were the skeleton of the wine. Era is the flagship of Alpha Omega and we take the best lots and the best blocks to blend for that wine. We have diverse soil in Napa and that helps make this wine so special, the diversity of the soil. My theory in 2006 starting out was using the diversity and using blocks that represent the true beauty of the region. By having all these components when you blend them it fits the gaps. I don't believe that everything is perfect. When you blend you don't focus on aromatics, solely on the structure of the wine. Aromatics evolve with age but you want to focus on the soul and structure of the wine. The other big difference with Era is when I went from Chateau Lynch-Bages in Bordeaux to Newton [Napa] in 2001 I learned that most wine is consumed right away. I love older wines but I have to make wines that are consumable earlier. How can I do that? I thought about the past in Bordeaux. Six months after harvest when the press has the wines and the wines are rated, we do malolactic in barrel and the wine tastes better earlier. It is a known fact that this can't be tasted a year later. This makes the wine more accessible earlier. I was interested to learn how I can push that principle further? So we had to expose the grapes earlier in the wine and I took a barrel and used a 59 gallon barrel as a mini tank. This integrates the wood but it also gives it some contact with air. That will connect the unripe tannins and will bind the rest meaning that it creates a chemical bridge between the aromas and the tannins and makes the structure of the wine more stable. This makes the wine more roundness and velvety texture but you have the agability. I started to do this in 2001 in Newton and last year I did 1000 barrels. I think wine is about sharing so now all of Napa is doing this. The 2012 'Era' Cabernet is 100 percent barrel fermented and you always have the dense mouthfeel and velvety texture because of the barrel fermentation.

WWB: At my recent tasting to Alpha Omega I had the chance to run through your impressive lineup of Chardonnays. Your 2013 'Reserve' Chardonnay (WWB, 95) is one of the highest rated California Chardonnays that I have sampled in the past year, up there with the 2013 Kongsgaard Chardonnay (WWB, 95). Can you talk about this special wine and how you were able to achieve the length, complexity and almost Chablis like minerality?

JH: What I am trying to create is two factors. You have the grapes from Chardonnay that are the cooler climates so you protect that acidity. You have nice ripeness so that you can improve this. Chardonnay has three things, acidity and freshness which makes you able to stir. This can be compensated with re-releasing polysaccharides in the wine that are in the yeast and you give it a bit more mouthfeel. In order wines to be balanced, you need the acidity. If you can stir you can regulate the impact of the wood and the yeast has the wood component for the balance of the wine. Once you have that you have to think of what you are missing. In Napa we are missing limestone. Burgundy has the amazing component to the acidity and minerality with the limestone. How can I compensate for the lack of limestone? I decided to kind of apply a compensation factor where I take the wine out of barrel, after they are barrel aging, and put it in stainless steel for three months, locked. This takes away from the oxygen, whereas when it is in the barrel there is oxygen. In stainless steel there is not the reductive aspect of the wine. By doing this you are reinjecting acidity and minerality to the wine. I think that is how I try to get the balance in the Chardonnay. I started doing this in 2010 and like everything in winemaking this change has to be slow. The more we did that it worked great and we continued to increase the percentage on that.

WWB: During my tasting at Alpha Omega I had the chance to barrel sample some of your 2014 Cabernets and was very impressed. What are you expecting from the 2014 vintage red wines?

JH: Everybody has raved about the '13s and because of the density and concentration of the vintage. If you look at 2014 that is closer to 2012 meaning that we had ripeness but we had a bit more acidity. I think that 2014 is actually a wine that is less Napaesque in the blockbuster sense but maybe a bit more balanced. I think the people that liked the 2012 vintage they will like 2014. It is hard to judge your own work. I was tasting with Michel Rolland and we make wine together now. He is the doubter here and we had the 2014s here and he thinks this is the best vintage ever. He said that for him it has the concentration but the backbone of acidity to support it. It is hard to judge my own work but it is hard to disagree with that. 2014 reminds me a little bit of 2002 even though 2002 might be closer to 2013. The closest vintage to me would be 2012 or before that would be 2008. 2008 was a bit more lush and velvety than 2014.