

SNOWDEN VINEYARDS

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

“Diana Snowden Seysses Brings a Burgundian Mindset to Napa”

Wine Spectator - October 15, 2018

The Napa native splits time between her family's Cabernet vineyards and Burgundy's Domaine Dujac

Driving up the Silverado Trail with Diana Snowden Seysses in her pick-up truck, I ask about the recent rainy weather in Napa, just as Cabernet picking was getting underway for most people.

"I'm already all in," she says, referring to her fruit. "I'm looking to pick living berries." She pauses, perhaps considering that that sentiment might irk those who prefer to let their fruit hang longer in pursuit of a different style of wine, before adding, "There is no right or wrong. That's just what I want. I liked what I saw [on the vines] and so I picked it."

Snowden Seysses' approach—earlier picking and a fresher profile—has been informed by her time in Burgundy. Married to Jeremy Seysses of Domaine Dujac, she spends most of her time in France, working on a range of Pinot Noirs that Burgundy aficionados drool over. In Napa, she also makes the wines at the nascent Ashes & Diamonds project, working with Steve Matthiasson.

Snowden's family has been growing grapes in Napa Valley since her grandparents bought 160 acres of land in the hills on the eastern side of the valley above St. Helena back in 1955. The family has come a long way in terms of grapegrowing. They initially sold everything off, including some for Charles Krug's jug wines back in the day. Eventually they shifted to growing Cabernet Sauvignon, selling those grapes off in the eighties to Warren Winiarski at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. Her father started bottling his own wine in 1993. But with their Cabernet plantings on AxR1 rootstock, the threat of phylloxera was too much to bear, so replanting began. In 2005, Diana's father called her back to the family property to help.

"We had a Brett bloom in the cellar from 2002 through 2004, and my dad needed help," she says. "We were working with David Ramey as a consultant. While we were making wines in a bigger style back then, he was a great help and inspiration in getting the cellar cleaned up, and helping us with native yeast ferments."

With her Burgundy background, the Napa native returned to her roots with a different approach.

"I was hanging with Burgundy drinkers all the time, obviously," she says. "And there's nothing more uncool to them than California Cabernet. Plus, my palate was formed by what I was drinking all the time. So I decided to back off on the big wines around '08 or so."

The road changes from paved to dirt on the way up through the hillsides to her family's vineyards. We stop in a parcel of Petit Verdot—the only grapes she hasn't already picked this year, as this late-ripening variety hasn't hit the sweet spot for her just yet—where she checks the seed, skin and pulp development in the grapes. "We're really close," she says.

Snowden Seysses' vineyards are tiny parcels, and only 25 acres of the property are under vine. Most of the parcels are clearly rugged, with varying exposures and dips and rises throughout.

"I like that unevenness through the parcels," she says. "When I first came back [to Napa] and the replanting was getting started, I saw all these elevations and [exposures], and with my starry Burgundy eyes I said, 'We can't blend these.'"

When replanting was finished in 2013, Snowden Seysses applied that Burgundy metric, keeping fruit from two of the parcels for separate bottlings. At the very top of the property is Brothers Vineyard, at 850 feet of elevation. From this 10-acre parcel, a small portion of what she considers the best fruit is bottled separately, a total of just 700 cases annually. Down the hill, at about 700 feet of elevation, the fully east-facing, 1-acre Los Ricos parcel produces just 75 cases annually.

Rounding out the portfolio is a bottling labeled The Ranch, a blend of two other blocks. Primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, along with 20 percent Merlot and 5 percent Petit Verdot, this 1,000-case bottling retails for about \$50, a square price for Napa Valley Cabernet these days. "I feel it's important to have an affordable wine for the world," she says.

Snowden Seysses is in Napa only about three months of the year. But she hasn't forsaken her Napa roots in favor of a Burgundy approach. With both sides of her wine world running harvests at around the same time, she admits, "I'm always missing something. But at the same time, I'm always getting ideas from one side for the other side."