

Fifth Generation Winemaker Joseph J. Wagner

By Sherrie Wilkolaski

Oenophiles appreciate the craftsmanship that goes into winemaking, from planting the crop, harvesting the grapes to the magic that transcends the barrels. At the heart of it all is the care that goes into the winemaking process, that impresses us as we raise the wine to our lips, swish and then spit. One such impressive family of winemakers, the Wagners, has been making wine for five generations in Napa Valley, California. Their Meimoi and Belle Glos history originated in the 1880s and is currently in the hands of Joseph J. Wagner a winemaker with a passion for Pinot Noir. He has been overseeing vineyard operations and winemaking since 2002. He sat down

to talk with *Luxe Beat Magazine* and during the interview, he took me down the Wagner family memory lane and when we were done, there is no question where their success comes from.

Running a business is hard work. Running a business with your family must be even harder. I asked Joseph what it was like to be a fifth generation vintner and this is what he had to say about his family's business. "When you're talking about a family business, I was fortunate to be raised in a grape growing and winemaking family. Having the amount of knowledge and know-how from generations before me set an immense foundation for me to build

upon. Along with the opportunity that was in front of me when I joined the family business, came a great amount of responsibility for the current times, but more importantly, to pass the family legacy on to my children in a better state than when I received it. The focal point of being any generation of a family winemaker is expanding upon the trade that I was taught, and handing that down to my children while working alongside of them. We each have our domains that we focus on, which create a broader scope of understanding for wine styles throughout the entire family. We often share our experiments...both the good and bad, which stir up great debate and eventually a rapid

evolution of new styles. We can take each other's successes and build upon them."

With such a strong family work-ethic and drive to keep the legacy of the Wagner family alive for generations to come, I wondered where the name "Meimoi" came from. As it turns, out it means "coast" in the language of the native, coastal dwelling Wappo and Yuki tribes, and pays tribute to and symbolizes the origin of their Pinot Noir.

"Meimoi began as a blend of Pinot Noirs from Sonoma's Coastal regions with the 2002 vintage. The concept of diversity of character was well intact over the years, and then with

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is the beauty of it. Over the years, I have toyed with Zinfandel and have found that it is just as expressive as Pinot Noir, but allows for more winemaking control. It also happened to be my Grandfather's favorite wine to drink, so there is a bit of the nostalgia playing into Zin, becoming one of my favorite wines to work with. The challenges are still there, but it's like a child that listens rather than one who is always bucking the trend (like Pinot). We will be launching a new red Zinfandel in January, called Beran, which encompasses the best regions in the state for the variety. It has been a pleasure to bring all the years of experiments to a wine in bottle."

His favorite time of the growing season is autumn, "Grapes are coming off the vine after a year of heavy input to make sure they are just right. Then the foliage starts to go yellow, the high temperatures segue into beautiful cool fall days and the entire California wine country is a stunning mix of beauty and comfort." He unfortunately doesn't get to spend as much time in the vineyards during the fall or during other times of the year. He averages about 10 hours a week and moves around to Sonoma, Monterey, Santa Barbara or Napa. "The more time I can get out there, the better. That's where the magic starts!"

The wine that is his all-time favorite is Belle Blos, Las Alturas Pinot Noir, "From scouting the barren land, planning and planting the vineyard, then creating a vineyard designate Pinot that has become a hallmark of Santa Lucia Highlands is really something special for me to have under my belt. The whole process of finding a site such as that, and

creating a wine that can be enjoyed for years to come, will always be a highlight in my mind. It's the way it should be done." His appreciation of craftsmanship is clear and he is enthusiastic about the future of the Meiomi legacy. It's the little things that create those "ah ha" moments in the life of a winemaker. He said they recently discovered that, "cryo extraction and cold fermented Pinot Noir created wines of profound depth and character. It was so unconventional, but so simple. It set the bar for how we make our Pinots and has had a lasting change to all that we do with red grapes. Also, Meiomi recently received the "Wine Brand of the Year" award from Market Watch, which was a huge kudo to the entire team! Being able to receive such an award on behalf of all the people involved was huge."

Team work, successful science projects and legacy are very commendable, but I'm curious as to his individual ego as it relates to his career. He's been given this path in life, walking the vines and squashing grapes. Is this is true passion? It most certainly is. He has big plans and is constantly working to grow the family business, while still making an impact on the wine industry, "I would like to bring the research and development side of grape growing and winemaking to the customer. There is so much to learn, and so many wines out there, that most consumers don't fully get their questions answered. I would like to create an environment that brought those experiments to the foreground, with a detailed explanation as to why, what and how we came up with it. If the customer is educated, they will help push the wine industry harder in the right direction."

the 2008 vintage, I wanted to expand the diversity while staying coastal. I moved into Monterey and Santa Barbara Counties, which augmented the flavor and textural profile to an enormous degree. It's also allowed us to maintain consistency from vintage to vintage. Since the 2008 vintage, the style has maintained a very consistent character. More recently, we added a Meiomi.

Chardonnay with the same concept of sourcing. I am very happy with how it has come along to complement the Pinot Noir."

Joseph had no formal wine education, just worked alongside his

father and learned the job as he went along. "I started with vineyard, then winemaking, then sales, and finally business management. I had my weaknesses and made mistakes, but it was that hands-on learning that cannot be replicated by books. Winemaking and grape growing are very reactive processes. You never know what you are going to be faced with when you wake up in the morning. For me, it's the challenges and independent learning that I enjoy the most."

It is no secret that Pinot Noir is in his blood and it's what he cuts his teeth on, and he says there is always something new to learn about it. "It is a very challenging grape and that





Joseph J. Wagner's Recommendations

Recommendations for the novice wine drinker

The Meiomi Pinot Noir is a nicely rounded wine. For a novice wine drinker, it is full of character and very forward in expressing berry tones and sweet oak notes. It's voluptuous up front, but the back is not tannic and drying, so it's a great way to get acquainted with high end wine styles.

Biggest challenge as a winemaker

Balancing the artisanal side with the business side; vineyard,

winemaking, sales, accounting... they all have different needs and need to be in balance. If one side overbears, the business will not thrive.

Best place to showcase a wine

I love pairing wine with food. There is no better place to showcase a wine than at the dinner table. Learning the basics of food and wine pairing should be taught in high school. It turns food into a meal.

Educating the consumer is one thing and a bold initiative. For his fellow winery owners and farmers, he says it's a lifestyle choice more than a get rich quick scheme. "This business takes patience and tying up money for a good period of time. If you are looking for an heirloom on which to work with your kids or grandkids,

and money is not a concern, it is the right fit. Like any other business, it is competitive and people will do the most outlandish things to get a share of mine. Starting with a focused vision, not deviating from it and being patient will do anyone well in this industry." Meiomi works with growers in Napa, Sonoma, Santa

Barbara and Monterey, and it is a natural fit, as they grow in those areas as well, "It's nice to talk about our farming practices and relate them to theirs. It's kind of like shooting the bull...but there is typically something learned through such interactions. We have created some amazing relationships through

working with growers over long periods of time. Being a family company and grape growers ourselves has been a major piece to our understanding of the growers' needs, and it is reflected in the great relationships we have now."

He says being a vintner is a great gig, "but it's no retirement project. I can go days without seeing my family even though I'm five miles away. Duty calls, and time needs to be put in, but when winter comes and the wines are laid to rest, there is nothing more rewarding than knowing you have created a wine that will reflect that vintage's trials and tribulations for years to come."

The feeling of "family" seems to extend further out than just their own land, and I have the sense that blending of grapes from a multitude of growers is one of the secret ingredients that makes Meiomi wines so special.

To learn more go to www.meiomiwines.com.

