



Mountain Magic

Mount Veeder's superb Rubissow-Sargent wines demand recognition.

RICHARD PAUL HINKLE

*Second Generation winery owners,
brother and sister Peter Rubissow and Ariel Rubissow-Okamoto*

It was about 30 years ago when I first heard the admission. In a time when California winemakers wore gold chains and shirts opened nearly to their navels, it was a stunning turnabout to hear Jordan's Mike Rowan say, "When the grapes hit the crusher, 85 percent of what can be done to influence the quality of the wine *has already been done.*"

Understand, we knew that grapes had a lot to do with a wine's quality, but never had anyone here been so bold, been so direct, and been so open and honest about it.

Sadly, though you still hear people talk about the importance of the vineyard, it is still the winemakers who get most of the credit for the greatness of their wines. Still, as we do look more closely to appellations, viticultural areas, and specific vineyard sites, we are getting a bit better at acknowledging the soil, its slant, the climatological aspect of the vineyard, the clones and rootstocks planted and, *finally*, the close care and attention given by the viticulturist and his or her crew.

Peter Rubissow [the "o" is long] is quick to point to both the importance of the viticultural place and to his sister Ariel's attention to that place when assessing credit for the mountain density of his family's Mount Veeder-grown wines. (Yes, there is a winemaker, too, and we will give him his due in due time.) "My father, George Rubissow, discovered this spot more than 30 years ago," says Peter, once a jazz musician-composer who counted "growing things" as a core to his existence. "Dad bought a 45-acre farm near what is now the Hess Collection back in 1984 and started asking around about the possibility of planting grapes up there. The parcel runs from four to eight hundred feet above sea level, and has some plantable mountain benches, along with ski-slope-steep slopes that look out over the Carneros and the northern reach of the San Francisco Bay."

Peter, who was then studying music at Berklee College (Boston), came out each summer to help plant the vineyard and get it going. "John Brooks, who was the vineyard manager at the then-famed Veedercrest, supervised the planting. Dad had hired André Tchelistcheff to give him some pointers, and André

initially pronounced the site perfect for Chardonnay. Later, when we raised the possibility of the Bordeaux varieties — both red and white — he graciously allowed that they would do just as well as Chardonnay, maybe better. His enthusiasm really fueled our passion. We looked funny together — he was, maybe, five-four, and I'm six-seven — but he had a towering sense of self, and I always loved his impish sense of humor. We put in a state-of-the-art vineyard and initially sold the fruit to Joseph Phelps. Due to the economics of small hillside yields, sadly, we later pulled out the Sauvignon Blanc and the Sémillon, much of which had gone to George Vierra at Vichon."

George Rubissow and fellow Cal-Berkeley bio-physicist Tony Sargent teamed up to create a small brand (Rubissow-Sargent) based on the fruit the Rubissow family was growing on Napa Valley's Mount Veeder. During that period, Peter and his sister signed on at almost the same time, he to take on the marketing responsibilities, she to take on the vineyard's management. In December of 2007, George and Tony retired, selling the business to Peter Rubissow and Ariel Rubissow-Okamoto.

"Ariel gives extraordinary attention to every corner of the vineyard, every microclimate, every subtle difference in the land throughout the eighteen and a half acres we have planted to the five Bordeaux red varieties. She absolutely brings out the best in our fruit.

"When the fruit is harvested, it goes into the hands of our very capable winemaker, Timothy Milos [*my-loss*," previously with Cliff Lede and S. Anderson]. Tim is very technical — we do small lots, with extensive cluster — and berry-thinning, long cold soaks, wild yeast fermentations, and we use a variety of coopers to add to our fruit's inherent complexity. But we know that the wine's quality is mostly determined by the vineyard, which is why we like to say that 'Wine is the shadow cast by the grape.' Ninety-five percent of wine quality can be traced to the vineyard!"

Looking ahead just a little, Peter says that he and Ariel are going to create a second tier brand in 2009 that will include a

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\$20–\$25 “Napa Valley” appellation Cabernet Sauvignon and a similar Sauvignon Blanc — dry, stainless steel only — in the \$15 category. “We have been successful by marketing our wines to restaurants, and that has been what has built the brand. These wines will give us a by-the-glass presence that we haven’t had before.”

George and Tony are both pleased that their legacy is being carried on by a pair so dedicated (they’ve both been with the business for more than 15 years). George laughs, remembering the initial idea he had for naming the first

Rubissow-Sargent wine. “I have lived in Paris for a good portion of my life,” says George, “so I came up with *Les Copains*, which is ‘friends’ in French. As it happened, the business was a wonderful means of bringing my family together, a truly unexpected benefit. Sitting around my own father’s old dining room table at the vineyard, discussing the latest turns of a new vintage or changes in the weather, these have been times of great happiness and togetherness. In a world filled with doubt and greed, making beautiful wines is something of an oasis.”

RUBISSOW-SARGENT TASTING NOTES

- **2004 MERLOT NAPA VALLEY, MOUNT VEEDER, \$50.** Mocha and coffee in the nose; in the mouth, plump and fluid, with black currant, ripe plum and plenty of dark chocolate. If “purple” were a taste, it would fit as well. This wine is made solely from Merlot and is unfinned and unfiltered (as are all of the Rubissow wines).

Purple is, incidentally, Ariel’s favorite color. “I also like milk chocolate,” she says. “This vintage was an interesting one. We got half as much fruit as usual, twice as much heat, and the wines have *three times as much flavor!*” Adds Peter, “We’re aiming to make somewhat bigger, richer wines than our father made. In musical terms, we’re amping up the volume considerably. We’re looking for sexier, richer, more powerful wines.” If you want muscle,

Mount Veeder is certainly the place for it.

- **2004 “TROMPETTES” MOUNT VEEDER, \$65.** Mostly Cabernet Franc, this wine shows off that variety’s charming aromatics — rose petal and strawberry — and deeply lingering strawberry and red cherry fruit in the mouth that has dancer light-on-its-feet texture. It is a silken texture that nonetheless has depth and a lingering quality that easily enchants. The blend here is 65% Cabernet Franc, with a significant portion of Merlot (30%) and just a touch of Cabernet Sauvignon.
- **2004 CABERNET SAUVIGNON MOUNT VEEDER, \$75.** Mountain-concentrated fruit that is all black currant and blackberry, with hints of black olive, coffee and menthol for added

complexity and interest. This is a rich and oily wine, which coats your tongue with flavor and substance. “Lingering” just doesn’t tell the whole story. (Cabernet Sauvignon is 85% of this blend, with a little Merlot and Cabernet Franc.)

- **2004 CABERNET SAUVIGNON MOUNT VEEDER, \$125.** We talk of Colombian coffee that’s mountain-grown, and this wine has all of that utter and dark density, pure Cabernet Sauvignon (100%), with cassis, coffee, tobacco, mulberry and bloody filet mignon meatiness that is mouth-watering and delicious. The mountain richness is all there, without any of the harsh tannin that was once associated with that inference. Muscular, lush, almost lascivious. You can bank on it. ☞

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