

Gary Farrell Winemaker
Theresa Heredia.



THERESA'S MELTING POT

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS, SOIL DIVERSITY, AND
A SUPERSTAR WINEMAKER CREATE THE RECIPE
FOR SUCCESS AT **GARY FARRELL WINERY**

by Jess Lander

MY INTERVIEW WITH Gary Farrell Winemaker Theresa Heredia in early November met a hard stop at 4 p.m. Although harvest had wrapped up a few days prior—the latest Heredia had ever received grapes in her career—she and her team had an important night ahead.

They were preparing for their annual Grower Appreciation Dinner, an event that sheds light on just how seriously the Sonoma County–based winery treats its relationships with growers. “After the harvest is over, we like to bring them all together so that we can spend time breaking bread and drinking wine, talk about the harvest, and catch up on other things,” Heredia explained.

Some of these relationships, like the very first with Joe Rochioli of Rochioli Vineyard, go back more than 36 years and predate the winery’s first vintage. It was during those days that founder Gary Farrell, working alongside esteemed vintners like Rochioli, Davis Bynum, Tom Dehlinger, and Robert Stemmler, helped pioneer viticulture in Sonoma County’s prized Russian River Valley. Because of





Soil samples from the dozens of vineyard sites used for Gary Farrell Winery's Pinot Noir wines.

this, Gary Farrell Winery is often looked upon today as a leading ambassador for the cool, foggy, and red-wooded growing region, proving its talent for producing exceptional and small-lot Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

The only problem? Small lots mean limited production and availability, making it difficult for Russian River producers to get their wines in the hands of the masses. That's where Gary Farrell's Russian River Selection Pinot Noir steps in: One of just two wines the winery sells wholesale, it tells the complex yet complete story of the region in every bottle.

“An Expression of the Russian River Valley”

Heredia refers to Gary Farrell's Russian River Selection wine as “the melting pot of all the neighborhoods,” referencing the unofficial subregions within the 160,000-acre Russian River Valley that are defined by growers and vintners working within the AVA. “The Russian River Valley is big,” she added. “There are different microclimates and different soil types, so even though we don't have many governmentally identified smaller neighborhoods within it, we still as growers and winemakers are trying to learn about the different neighborhoods and the qualities in [their] wines.”

If you were looking at a map, you'd see the Middle Reach neighborhood to the north; bordering Dry Creek Valley, it's what Heredia calls “classic Russian River Valley.” The warmest neighborhood, the Middle Reach, is home to the Gary Farrell Winery estate and some of the region's oldest vineyards, including Rochioli and Bacigalupi. In the middle-east section of the region is the flat Santa Rosa Plain with the hilly Laguna Ridge sandwiched between it and the foggy, coastal Green Valley, the only neighborhood that's an official sub-AVA of the Russian River Valley. To the south of Green Valley, finally, sits the cold and windy Sebastopol Hills.

As you work your way from the top to the bottom of the map

as well as from east to west, the temperatures tend to get cooler and the fog denser, which spurs both an evolution of red-to-black fruit characteristics and a strengthening of tannins. In blending these neighborhoods together, the Russian River Selection serves as a complete representation—the winery's “assemblage,” Heredia said in her best French accent—of the Russian River Valley. The wine's 2016 vintage was made with the best fruit from 22 different vineyard sites, almost all located within the Russian River Valley.

“When you taste the wine, you can taste and smell and feel the expression of each of these different components,” Heredia explained. “You can taste the succulence of the Middle Reach, you can taste the acidity and earthiness and austerity of Green Valley and Sebastopol Hills, and you can get the opulence of Santa Rosa Plain. They all contribute something to the blend. That's the goal, to be an expression of the Russian River Valley as a whole.”

An Unwavering Commitment to Quality

Of the nearly 30 wines Gary Farrell produces, the Russian River Selection gets the most attention and by far takes the most time to make. Despite this, it retails at just \$45. “It takes us about three weeks to taste through each of the individual components: all 22 Pinot vineyards, and then within them, different wines from different blocks, different clones, different barrel types, et cetera,” Heredia said. “You can get into a lot of minutia. We start on the big scale, we taste all of the stuff together at once, and then we break it down by vineyard and taste them individually. In the end, a lot of our hearts and souls end up in the Russian River Selection blend.”

Despite the wine's approachable price point, zero compromise occurs in terms of quality during the production process, according to Gary Farrell Winery General Manager Nancy Bailey. “Everything is made as if it's going to be a single-vineyard bottling and it's not blended until we're getting ready to bottle,” she explained.

TASTING NOTES

Gary Farrell Winery 2016 Russian River

Selection Pinot Noir (\$45)* Made with grapes sourced from 22 vineyards, the 2016 vintage is a quintessential Russian River Pinot: juicy with vibrant red-fruit flavors and fine, silky tannins. Aromatic notes of forest floor and rose petal emanate from the glass.

Gary Farrell Winery 2015 Rochioli Vineyard

Pinot Noir (\$80) Rochioli produced unusually tiny berries in the 2015 vintage, resulting in a bigger, more concentrated wine than previous vintages. A 20% whole-cluster press results in notes of crushed dried herbs after Rochioli's signature rose petal dominates the nose. Exquisitely balanced, this succulent and red fruit-driven wine has an intense cherry flavor and a velvety, mouthwatering finish.

Gary Farrell Winery 2015 Martaella Vineyard

Pinot Noir (\$65) Due to its central location in the Russian River Valley, Martaella represents somewhat of a hybrid of the region's neighborhoods. A rich blend of red and blue fruits, this wine is tangy like a crisp apple with a skillful balance of acid, tannin, and concentration. Although it's full-bodied and dense when first bottled, Martaella smooths out beautifully with age.

Gary Farrell Winery 2015 Hallberg Vineyard

Pinot Noir (\$55)* Hailing from the western Green Valley, Hallberg is powerful and earthy with a commanding black-tea presence and notes of violet flowers. It's juicy like a wild berry trifle with soft yet chewy tannins.

Gary Farrell Winery 2015 McDonald Mountain Vineyard

Pinot Noir (\$65) Making a grand entrance on the palate, this wine is often referred to by Heredia as a "sexy mofo." "There's a kind of exotic fruit-and-spice expression in this wine that is hard to put my finger on," she said. Dense tannins merge with an incredible natural acidity. Heredia doesn't add a drop, as this Sebastopol Hills vineyard has fantastic retention.

*WINE AVAILABLE FOR WHOLESAL

"If there are ever any barrels that don't fit, we don't force them. If Theresa says some fruit is not going to work and be the best quality it can be, we sell it. This is a huge commitment to quality, from the overall cost of making [the wine] as well as the freedom Theresa has to make it the best that she can."

Since joining the Gary Farrell team in 2012, Heredia has taken steps to continue improving quality across the board. She's made incremental increases in whole-cluster fermentation and extended maceration in addition to decreasing the amount of toast, all with the goal of imparting a greater sense of place in the wines. New equipment has also been brought in to support this goal, including an oak tank for whole-cluster fermentation, a new destemmer and sorting tables for efficiency and quality control, and a basket press, which Heredia says gently squeezes out the character of the terroir from the grapes.

These tools are used selectively in the making of each wine, with all 14 single-vineyard Pinot Noirs following their own personalized plan that enables them to fully represent the land they come from. This especially applies to Hallberg, Gary Farrell's only other wholesale wine: Selected among the other total single-vineyard designates to exemplify the premium quality of Gary Farrell wines, Hallberg also represents the extent of the Russian River Valley's potential for producing high-quality Pinot Noir.

Sourced from the Green Valley neighborhood, it's released only in 400 six-packs. "For certain special restaurateurs or retailers, they are looking for a more limited-production, single-vineyard offering from Gary Farrell and Hallberg is an easy choice," said Bailey. "It's hands-down one of the favorites and consistently makes a beautiful wine year in and year out, so there's never an issue of us not making a single-vineyard from it. It's nice to be able to show people the Hallberg and say it's a cornerstone of the Russian River selection." ❖



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