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Technical Spotlight: Mira Winery

Custom-built Napa winery dedicated to single-vineyard, single-varietal winemaking

Stacy Briscoe



WHEN VETERAN VINTNER GUSTAVO Gonzalez and public policy professional Jim “Bear” Dyke walked into a bar in Washington, D.C. back in 2005, what resulted was no poorly executed joke but rather a chance encounter that ultimately evolved into a wine business partnership. It wasn’t until 2009 that the two sourced their first grapes, Napa Valley Syrah, producing just under 300 cases. Through Gonzalez’s grape grower network, he and Dyke were able to steadily increase their portfolio and build a brand that became known for its single-vineyard, single-varietal wine production. Last year marked the premiere harvest of their first estate grapes as well as a brand-new winery facility.

New Estate Vineyard

At the end of 2016, a piece of property located off of Washington Street in Yountville came on the market. Dyke was eager, Gonzalez pensive. “I knew exactly where this property was because it always flooded here,” laughed Gonzalez. The estate already incorporated a 13.74-acre vineyard planted to Merlot, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. However, when Gonzalez and Dyke purchased the place, they decided to rip it all out. “We needed room to build the winery anyway, which would take up about 5 acres or so. So, instead of messing around with it, we just started new. The vineyards that were here, they weren’t that good anyway,” Gonzalez said, specifically mentioning the poor drainage system that enhanced the land’s natural tendency to flood.

As part of the redevelopment, Gonzalez and Dyke hired viticulturist and owner of Michael Wolf Vineyard Services Inc., Mike Wolf, to produce a more viable plan for their vineyard. “Based on how wet it is here, we looked for the right rootstocks and combination of varieties that make sense, not just for wine production but also economically,” Gonzalez said.

The vineyard soil is quite fertile, comprised of consistently heavy clay loam with strong water-retention capacity throughout the acreage. Wolf assisted Gonzalez and Dyke in finding the right rootstock, one that can withstand the soil’s naturally nutrient and moisture-rich tendencies. Additionally, they planted inter-row cropping to help distribute soil nutrients, as well as mitigate weed propagation.

An important addition was a more aggressive drainage system. Flooding is no longer an issue—and neither is irrigation. “It’s naturally wet, so we don’t really have to irrigate. We’re actually *fighting* the water. In that sense, it’s very ‘Bordeaux-like,’” Gonzalez said, adding that much of the water is saved and utilized for the vineyard’s frost-protection sprinkler system.



Stacy Briscoe is a freelance wine writer for multiple publications. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-language literature, holds a WSET Level II certificate and is continuing with the WSET program. Outside of wine writing, she’s also a contributing editor for independent publisher She Writes Press/Spark Press.

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Owners/Principal Jim “Bear” Dyke, proprietor

Winemakers Gustavo Gonzalez, winemaker
Jesus Medina, assistant winemaker

Vineyard Manager Mike Wolf Vineyard Services

WINERY INFORMATION

Year Bonded 2009
Winery Case Production 6,500
Average Bottle Price \$75
Direct-to-Consumer Sales (%) 50%

VINEYARD INFORMATION

Appellation Yountville
Vineyard Acreage 10.45
Varieties Grown Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Sauvignon Blanc, Sauvignon Gris
Soil Type Clay loam
Climate Mediterranean
Additional Varieties Purchased Syrah, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Merlot
Vineyard Sourcing Hyde Vineyard (Carneros, Napa), Schweizer Vineyard (Stags Leap District), Oakville 360 (Oakville), Alsace (Rutherford)
Tons Used vs. Tons Sold No grapes sold
Sustainability Practices Sustainable in practice (not certified)

BUILDING THE WINERY

Year Built Completed September 2019
Size (square feet) Winery: 3,500; Hospitality: 1,500
Architect von Raesfeld & Associates, vra-arch.com
Contractor Andrews and Thornley Construction, atconstruction.com
Interior Design Hawkins Interiors, hawkinsinteriors.com
Landscape Architect Stephanie McAllister Landscape, stephaniemcallister.com
Flooring/Drains Devincenzi Concrete Construction, devincenzi.com
HVAC, Bell Products, Inc. bellproducts.com
Cellar Humidity Control Smart Fog, smartfog.com

WINEMAKING

Wines Made Single variety/single vineyard: Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Rosé, Petit Verdot, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Merlot, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir
Jimmy D’s Red Blend
Receiving Hopper Scharfenberger
Vibrating Sorting Table Scharfenberger
Destemmer Pellenc Winery M, Pellenc America, Inc., pellencus.com
Tanks Sonoma Stainless 3, 5, 10, 20 ton and portatanks, sonomastainless.com
Three 5-ton French oak tanks, Ovum French oak egg, Taransaud North America, taransaud.com
Tank Heating/Chilling Systems Johnson Thermal Systems, johnsonthermal.com
Punchdown Devices manual, Burgstahler Machine Works
Pumpover Devices Burgstahler Machine Works
Pumps Wright Revolution positive displacement/rotary lobe, Wright Flow Technologies, wrightflowtechnologies.com
Racking Wands Racketeer, Cellarmaster Supplies, cellarmastersupplies.com
Hoses Spiralite
Presses Pellenc SPC 50, Pellenc America, Inc., pellencus.com
Forklift Toyota, toyotaforklift.com
Bin Dumper Rotator equipped forklift
Barrels Taransaud North America, taransaud.com
Tonnellerie François Frère, francoisfreres.com
Boutes Cooperage, boutes.com
Tonnellerie Garonnaise, garonnaise.com
Tonnellerie Sylvain, tonnellerie-sylvain.com
Tonnellerie Ermitage, tonnellerie-ermitage.com
La Grange Cooperage (Groupe Charlois), charlois.com/en/la-grange-cooperage/
Botti Gamba, bottigamba.com
Mueller Stainless Steel Wine Barrel, Paul Mueller Company, paulmueller.com
Barrel Washing System Burgstahler Machine Works

Yeast/Nutrients/Enzymes/Other Additions

Yeast: RC 212, U43, D254, EC1118;
AEB: Fermol Premier Cru, Super 16
Scott Laboratories Inc., scottlabs.com
Enzymes: Vinozyme Vintage FCE
ML Bacteria: Viniflora CH16, Chr. Hansen, chr-hansen.com
Filters Pall Oenoflow, Scott Laboratories, scottlabs.com
Winemaking Management System InnoVint, innovint.us
Winemaking Software Innovint, innovint.us
Analytical Equipment Thermo Orion Inc. pH meter and Oxygen meter, thermofischer.com;
Hach turbidimeter, hach.com;
Anton Paar density meter, anton-paar.com;
Zeiss microscope, zeiss.com;
Atago digital refractometer and pH meter, atago.net
Other Key Winemaking Equipment
Custom tubs for tank fill

PACKAGING

Bottling Line Ryan Mobile Bottling, ryanmobilebottling.com
Glass Saxco International, saxco.com
Corks Lafitte Cork & Capsule, lafitte-usa.com
Capsules Lafitte Cork & Capsule, lafitte-usa.com/capsules
Label Design CF Napa, cfnapa.com
Label Printing CCL Label Industries, ccllabel.com
Case Goods Storage Valley Wine Warehouse, valleywinewarehouse.com
POS Software WineDirect, winedirect.com
Compliance Software Sovos Shipcompliant, sovos.com



MIRA WINERY



(L) Jim Dyke, proprietor; (R) Gustavo Gonzalez, winemaker

The newly planted vines are in keeping with that “Bordeaux-like” theme. Today, Mira Winery’s estate vineyard is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, two clones of Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Sauvignon Gris.

Gonzalez also observed that, due to its location on the flat valley floor of Napa, the vineyard gets consistent daylight from morning to afternoon. “That’s one reason we planted with this row direction,” Gonzalez said, pointing at the northeast/southwest orientation of his vines. The grapes are able to achieve full phenolic ripeness without gaining excessively high Brix. “Our Cabernet Franc was able to survive the hot, dry spell last October. They got ripeness at 23° Brix,” Gonzalez added.

The 2019 vintage was the first harvest for Mira Winery’s new estate vines, and yielded just 10 barrels total of Merlot and Cabernet Franc—the two varieties planted with “Uber Vines,” sourced from Duarte Nursery.

“Uber vines” are grown in pots and formed by grafting high onto rootstock trunks. They’re sold from the nursery at 3 feet in length and are said to produce more biomass, as well as yield earlier than traditionally grafted vines. So, instead of waiting three years for its first harvest, Mira Winery only had to wait two. The resulting wines will most likely be used as part of Mira Winery’s “Jimmy D’s Red Blend,” named for Dyke’s father, and the one-off of their single-vineyard, single-varietal portfolio.

Inside the Winery

The new 3,500-square-foot winemaking facility is permitted for 12,000 cases. Currently, Mira Winery produces about half that, around 6,500 cases annually.

Production at the new estate begins on the exterior crush pad, where hand-picked fruit from both their newly planted vines and their long-term growing partners from throughout the Napa Valley are delivered in half-ton bins. “Everything goes in as whole berry as possible into the tanks, and everything gets destemmed, but nothing gets crushed,” Gonzalez said, noting that the exception to that rule is a bit of whole cluster in the Pinot Noirs.

With “as whole berry as possible” in mind, it’s important that the winemaking team maintain a gentle touch with the incoming fruit. For Gonzalez, that means using gravity when and where possible. “You can spend as much money as you want to try to achieve the gravity goal. But we don’t want to do that because, at the end of the day, we’re not a huge winery,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez and Dyke had to think about how they could streamline their winemaking process to fit inside small square footage yet keep the integrity of the fruit. What it came down to, believe it or not, was their choice in forklift. When shopping for a new forklift, Gonzalez learned that while many come with a simple tilt-and-dump fork attachment, there are also attachments with rotating capabilities. By using a bin rotator to pour harvested fruit onto the Scharfenberger vibrating sorting table, Gonzalez fulfills his gravity requirement—at least at one end of the fruit processing routine.

Taking that logic a step further, Gonzalez, with the help of his tank manufacturer, Sonoma Stainless, modified a pump-over tub by attaching funnels on either side of the tub’s base, therefore making that piece of equipment fork-liftable as well. Harvested fruit moves along the sorting table and into the Pellenc destemmer; destemmed fruit then moves into the modified

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MIRA WINERY

tub, which can then be gently lifted and rotated into the processing tanks, fulfilling the gravity goal on the other side of the routine as well.

It's a seemingly simple solution that not only keeps the grapes intact, but also saves time, space and money. "We only have a 3,500-square-foot winery, not nearly enough room for a 12,000-case production, especially if you work with single vineyards and single lots and most production is Bordeaux varieties. You can't really turn the tanks," Gonzalez said. "Everything we designed in the winery is to minimize how many people need to work because there's [still] a major labor shortage going on."

Mira Winery is home to 18 tanks: 15 stainless steel (ranging in size between 3 and 20 tons) and three French oak fermenters. Gonzalez said he's been using oak tanks for Mira Winery production since 2011, most notably for their heartier red wines, such as the Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon. "What I love about wood tanks is that they're already breathing, giving the wine a softer texture. There's also the chemical make-up of the wood, the tannin, that binds the color and contributes to a darker color. And it keeps the same temperature for longer than stainless steel can," Gonzalez added.

It is this last point that he has fine-tuned over the course of his career, having worked with wood tanks in past winemaking positions. Gonzalez describes it as a Goldilocks situation: "I ferment at really hot temperatures—up to 90° F at peak. With larger sizes, they'll burn themselves out because



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PHOTOS STACY BRISCOE

there's so much material in there, generating so much heat. Too small, and it's the opposite—you don't get *enough* heat." Gonzalez has found the sweet spot with his three 5-ton Taransaud oak fermenters, observing that they generate enough heat—and maintain that heat—on their own. Due to the insulating nature of the oak wood material, the temperature decreases only slightly and over the course of several weeks, thus successfully fermenting the wines to completion. "Whereas with stainless tanks, if I don't turn the warm jackets on, the temperature is gone the next day," Gonzalez explained.

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Gonzalez only uses the wooden tanks during harvest for that primary fermentation process. They're then cleaned with a rigorous power wash, followed by a sulfur addition and air-drying routine. "Then we don't use them again until the following harvest," Gonzalez said.

Yet to be used in the new Mira Winery is the Ovum wooden egg by Taran-saud. Gonzalez and Dyke came across the egg a few years ago at a trade show in Bordeaux before the product was officially for sale. They kept their eye on it, saved their pennies and today, Gonzalez boasts, Mira Winery is the only winery in North or South America to have one in their facility. Unfortunately, the new toy didn't come in time for the 2019 harvest, but Gonzalez looks forward to experimenting with it in 2020—either with his newly planted estate Sauvignon Blanc or a sourced Chardonnay.

White Winemaking

White grapes at Mira Winery all go direct to press without any additional skin contact. The winery utilizes a Pellenc SPC 50 pneumatic press, where the grapes undergo a very gentle press regime. "I use a lower pressure to reduce bitterness. I try to avoid doing anything downstream: I don't like to fine or use clarification or anything like that," Gonzalez explained. "Every time we go to the next pressure, we taste and test pH. Once I see a big jump in pH or in the color or flavor, it's done. I don't keep pressing, don't try to rescue press wine for volume. I just stop." Post-press, white wine then goes straight to either French oak or stainless steel barrels.

Mira Winery produces two Chardonnays from two different sites, each with nuances that are enhanced by Gonzalez's specific winemaking regimes. He describes the Chardonnay grapes from the Las Trancas vineyard in Napa's Oak Knoll District as having higher overall pH with more malic acid than tartaric. "If you were to ferment all that malic into lactic, you'd end up with a really flat wine. But I like this vineyard for that style. With more malic and less tartaric, it's not so 'biting,'" Gonzalez said.

Thus, the fruit from Las Trancas ferments and ages in the winery's stainless steel barrels, an inert fermenting vessel that Gonzalez prefers over traditional upright stainless tanks as it allows the wine to have more surface area contact with the lees. "I'm not one to stir a lot," Gonzalez said. "I stir it while it's fermenting to keep the yeast happy;

but once that ferment is complete, no more. I just let it coast and get its flavor from those lees." The Las Trancas Chardonnay stays in stainless barrel for about nine to 10 months prior to bottling.

Chardonnay from Hyde Vineyard in Carneros, on the other hand, spends up to 24 months in French oak barrels (about 10 percent new) and is allowed to go through malolactic fermentation. "These grapes have a really low pH, so it takes a while for it to finish ML," Gonzalez said. He describes the fruit from Hyde Vineyard as more Burgundian, producing wines with more intensity when they're able to achieve ML and have significant contact with the oak wood. "In this case if you did stainless and no malo, it would really simplify the wine, and you wouldn't be taking full advantage of what these grapes have to offer," he said.



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Red Winemaking

Red wines at Mira Winery macerate between 20 and 50 days, depending on variety. Post-maceration, the juice is drained, and that free-run goes automatically into barrels. The remainder is pressed in the Pellenc SPC 50.

The pressing regime is opposite to the white wine program. Gonzalez refers to the first two press cycles as “rinsing off the grapes,” as the juice can sometimes be cloudy and still contain yeast, thereby affecting aromas and flavors. “With the pneumatic, we go to about 1.6 or 2 bars. It’s about as much as you can do with this kind of press, but those later presses are really good,” he said.

Pressed wine is allowed to settle in stainless tanks and then Gonzalez “lets it do its own thing in the barrel,” whether that means finishing alcoholic fermentation or, if primary is complete, going through malolactic fermentation. “Once ferment is over, I top them up and then don’t really mess with them until the following summer,” Gonzalez said.

Red wine stays in barrel for anywhere between 18 and 30 months, depending on the variety. While Taransaud is the dominant cooperage at Mira Winery, Gonzalez said he likes to mix in different cooperages (including Tonnellerie Francois Frères, Boutes, Tonnellerie Garonnaise, Tonnellerie Sylvain, Tonnellerie Ermitage and La Grange Cooperage), as well as experiment with varying toast levels and grain selection from those cooperages. “We make single-vineyard and single-varietal wines, so I don’t have a lot of ways to blend,” Gonzalez said. “The way I ‘blend’ is with different barrels. When I put those barrels together, I can get a pretty complex aroma and palate just based on the different barrel types.”



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MIRA WINERY

Rosé

A new experiment for Gonzalez and the winemaking team is a direct-to-press Rosé of Pinot Noir. “This was the first time we had a press with an automatic cycle for Rosé, so we thought we’d try it just to see how it turned out,” Gonzalez said. What resulted was a six-hour cycle that slowly released a very pale pink Rosé. “There was hardly any pressure for, like, three hours,” Gonzalez said.

Previously, Mira Winery produced its Rosé of Pinot Noir using the saignée method. It’s a method that Gonzalez said worked well because it allowed them to make use of any juices that came out during fruit processing. “It helped me make the Pinot better because I saignée the Pinot anyway so why not use that for Rosé instead of putting it down the drain?” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez doesn’t have a preference between the two methods. The direct-to-press was merely an experiment conducted at an opportune moment as he’d recently decided to trim the Mira Winery portfolio from two Pinot Noirs to just one. “It was the last vintage with that vineyard, so I decided to just make it all into Rosé, just for the experience,” Gonzalez said.

Finishing Touches

In keeping with Gonzalez’s hands-off approach, he prefers not to rack and will do so only once to prepare for bottling if he can get away with it. The longer-aged red wines, such as the Cabernets, will sometimes see two rackings, once mid-life and once at bottling. “I don’t like too much exposure to oxygen. I prefer the aromas to be delivered in the glass,” he said.

While he also prefers not to filter his wines, Gonzalez does sterile-filter his Pinot Noirs and Syrahs to prevent *Brettanomyces*. “We’ve never had a Brett problem, but one of the worst things to me would be to have a Pinot or Syrah get Brett in the bottle. It’ll lose all its flavor and aroma characteristics,” he said.

Wines are bottled on-site at Mira Winery by Ryan Mobile Bottling. Except for the non-oak Chardonnay and the Rosé of Pinot Noir, most wines will see a significant amount of bottle age prior to release—even the oak-aged Chardonnay stays in bottle for about 12 months. Red wines stay in bottle for anywhere between 12 and 24 months. “I’m a big proponent of bottle aging and not releasing the wines too young,” Gonzalez said, noting that the wines at Mira Winery are intended to age even further post-release. [WBM](#)



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