



1997 MERLOT WINEMAKER'S SELECTION, ESTATE

Paso Robles is a relatively young wine region, with the exception of Zinfandel. We were fortunate that in the early 1970's, grape growers experimented with Merlot plantings here. What resulted was a vineyard much sought after by North Coast wineries for its exceptional Merlot fruit. This vineyard is located 1/2 mile south of our Fratelli Perata location, on a hill of our same elevation. So with Andre Tchelistcheff recommending Bordeaux varietals in the area, and the concrete results of wonderful Merlot within a stone's throw, our vineyard included Merlot when planted.

Here's a vineyard on hillside, rocky soil, great exposure to the sun, benefitting from an air corridor from the Pacific Ocean 25 miles to the west, with temperatures warm during the day, but beginning at 2pm to cool 40 degrees at night. Here's a winemaker whose Italian heritage teaches him to train his vines to produce no more than 2 tons per acre, who recognizes, before it was popular, that stressing the grapevine produces more intense wines, who will not make a wimpy Merlot.

Here's a Merlot, when entered at the Los Angeles County Fair, Pomona, was thought to be a Petrus, and resulted in a personal visit from one of the Fair's judges (vintage 1990, our first wine ever entered in competition, a Gold).

And now we have the 1997 vintage. Any hype one has heard about this vintage is true. A rainy winter ending January 31, followed by a warmer than usual growing season. The clusters on vines were abundant. The harvest was early and fast. Wineries were awed by the quality of the fruit; they were soon filled to capacity with fermenting juice as the fruit all ripened in a very short time frame. Wineries unprepared left fruit too long on the vine. We were ready however, and although the days and nights were long, long for six straight weeks, all the fruit came in rich and ripe and in good balance. We were happy to be able to borrow one new French oak barrel from Meridian Vineyards when we fell short (Thanks, Chuck Pettigrew, cellar master!).

Bonded in 1987, after many vintages of Merlot, we are of the opinion that this Merlot may be the best ever, rivaling the 1990 and 1993. There is no lack of fruit here, no way one could say, "Give me the Cab, I want a wine with character. With this Merlot, there is depth of fruit, huge body, long finish. The use of abundant new American oak, with some new French in the mix, contributes to its complexity.

The 17 year old Merlot vines yielded fruit at 24.3 Brix, with a pH of 3.4, beginning harvest on 9/5/97, ending on 9/19/97.

As with all our varieties, the hillsides are harvested as the grapes reach peak of flavor, not all at one time just to get done. The grapes were crushed to 1 1/2 ton open top fermenters, where the cap was hand-punched 4 times per day during this primary fermentation. Since there was such abundant fruit this vintage, the pressing was very light, 1 bar, to avoid any bitter flavor from overpressed wine. The wine was pumped to a high percentage of new oak barrels, with the remaining up to three year old oak. Prior to bottling, the Merlot was blended with 12 Cabernet Sauvignon and 6 Cabernet Franc. Bottled August, 1999 with a production of 245 cases. Eminently ageable, this is a great wine.