



## *Fratelli Perata Winery*

### **1999 CABERNET SAUVIGNON Riserva, Estate**

There are times when you just know. You know where you're going, how to get there and what you want when you get there. For Joe and Gino, this is Cabernet Sauvignon. They are going to make a great Cabernet, they know they need to start with the right fruit, and they want it rich, full-bodied, and complex.

The idea is to produce not just ordinary, by the jug, Cabernet Sauvignon, but a Cab you enjoy for the full potential this particular variety can offer. For these Italian-American brothers this meant starting from the very beginning.

The Paso Robles area was a very young grape-growing region relative to the French varieties when Joe first pulled off of Highway 101 and headed west towards the Pacific. He scouted out hills and valleys that looked very much like his grandfather's hills in Northern Italy. He knew Gino and Carol had searched Washington State briefly, Oregon with more interest, and northern California with much more interest. He knew they had not found what seemed quite right in southern California areas. Excitedly, he called for them to take a good look around the hillsides of Paso Robles.

Southwest of Paso Robles were the old Zinfandel vines of Pesenti Winery. In 1972 a small vineyard of Merlot was planted off Highway 46 West. These grapes were very much coveted by wineries all over the State. The brothers found hillsides providing good air drainage and sun exposure, and confirmed the short history of the Merlot vineyard in the area. Based on temperature histories taken over a two-year period, the current 40-acre parcel was purchased. It was perfect for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Vines were chosen from the then standard used in the Napa Valley plantings. The ground was prepared, transformed from barley fields to disked, surveyed, and staked, with irrigation lines ready for the tiny rootings. Gino dug the 18-inch holes with Joe coming up on the weekends from Camarillo, where their parents had settled after coming from Italy.

Those planting holes were an indication of things to come. The ground was rocky, very rocky. Water drainage was excellent; the vines would suffer on these hills. The young vines were watered to get the roots established, then only watered by rainfall as they matured. The hill used for our Riserva holds vines that look much younger than vines that have been watered and fertilized their whole lives.

The goal for all the vines is to have a root system putting all its energy into a few small clusters. We don't want lush foliage. The vines are severely pruned to limit grape tonnage. The clusters are small. In 1999 the clusters were very small, as were the size of the individual berries.

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The weather cooperated by providing a long growing season. The rule of thumb being: the longer the fruit hangs on the vine, the more desirable flavors develop. This is true up to a point of course. The famous bell pepper flavors come from Cabernet that is unripe or from an area that is too cool from ideal growing conditions. Cabernet that is over-ripe moves from cherry to prune, over-the-top jammy-flavors. In both cases, the wine is unbalanced. The fruit, acid, and tannins all need to be where the winemaker wants them.

Some wineries look for early drinking, fruity Cabernets. To us, these are white Zinfandel style wines. They are straightforward, easily sipped wines that are pretty forgettable. They don't stand up to many entrees, although they do have their place in someone's kitchen cabinet.

Joe and Gino produce a mouth filling Cabernet. It starts from the vineyard site, vines, cultivation, and timing of harvest. The 1999 were harvested on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. The vines produced only 1 ton per acre, incredibly low. Brix was 24.75 degrees; the pH was 3.54 with a total acid of 7.93. Gino can look at the berries in the cluster and recognize whether they are close to harvest even before the lab tests confirm it. The color was deep, and the berries are beginning to soften. The numbers agreed with the look of the fruit. The balance was good. It was a good beginning.

The fruit was harvested by hand, starting early in the morning. Before noon, the fruit was at the scale, then to the destemmer. It was cool, at 60 degrees. This allowed a naturally cool fermentation, keeping the fruit flavors from burning off. The ½ ton bins of fruit were tipped into the destemmer, where any undesirable elements were removed: rocks, clusters that don't have the perfect color, pieces of tape from the field. The fruit that was harvested in 1999 provided the best possible beginning for producing the Cabernet Joe and Gino want: good balance, sound berries, excellent color and flavors.

The wine was fermented in a 1-1/2 ton lot for 18 days. Each day the cap of grape skins was punched down into the juice to extract flavor and color. The juice was pressed into new Chateau French oak barrels on November 9<sup>th</sup>.

It has taken many years to find the best-so-far barrel that matches our Cabernet. Our first Cabernet was made in 1988. It is still really good (See the website notes on library wines.). We try a test run of different barrels every year, looking for the perfect match. The barrel can offer rough or smooth tannins, vanilla, clove, or smoke flavors. It varies in degrees depending on the species of oak, the location of the forest, how it was cut, aged, and toasted. Just like adding spices to your entrees, you search for what is best. For the 1999, we used the barrels we tested in 1996. That wine, as well as the 1997 received a gold medal in wine competitions. So it looks like we're closing in on that aspect of the search for the best Cabernet.

The wine was aged in these barrels for three years. The barrels were blended in a tank, and then bottled on August 17, 2002. Only 192 cases were produced. The wine has been bottle aging in storage, was pulled to be hand labeled in November 2003.

This is good. The 1999 vintage has the force of the 1997, but without the rough edges. It has a smooth fruity front, stays on the palate, and lingers after you've put down your glass. There is tannin and acid. It will age. But it sure is good right now. All the Riserva's are special, this is particularly so. Try it with prime rib or maybe even pfefferneuse.