

Joel W. Aiken

Vice President of Winemaking
Beaulieu Vineyard
Rutherford

Joel Aiken grew up in the Fresno area. He went to UC Davis first as a biology undergrad and then as an enology grad. He came to the Napa Valley for the Inglenook harvest in 1980 and jokes that his first job is still going on. Joel had gotten to know the area while working on his Master's degree thesis when UC Davis Professor Ann Noble had had him work on barrel aging, with Dr. Vern Singleton advising in sensory education--phenolics, tannins, color, barrels. The chemistry of barrel aging. There were few theses with a practical application in those days, and very few barrel-makers.

Joel was put to work on French versus American barrels. Barrels coopered in the area in the French tradition for the very first time were done by the Tonnellerie Française in Calistoga, which had brought French wood over as staves. For part of the project, Joel worked with a winery in Sonoma County in a small experiment with American oak from the midwest, doing a small fire toasting and barrel aging. Uncharred whiskey barrels had been in use by BV for decades. BV had overcome the new barrel taste by a soak with hot soda ash to leach out any green flavors. They also filled their barrels with water and a dash of citric acid, and stored them in the lower tiers for two years. They were then deemed ready for



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Georges de Latour Reserve Cabernet. André Tchelistcheff had come to Beaulieu in 1938. He had to begin his own style of barrel aging with American oak because, in 1939, there was no French oak. Only war. Georges de Latour, founder of BV, died in 1940. Joel thinks M. de Latour and André must have figured out a new barrel recipe for BV before M. de Latour died. Now, of course, there are coopers all over, but they didn't exist back then.

Joel's own first taste of wine was in Fresno (college had been more about beer) but wine was only served occasionally in his family. This all changed for Joel at Davis and in Napa when he began his graduate work. When Joel came to BV, Cabernet was the focus, which Joel thought was great. He had tasted old BVs at Inglenook in its wine library. He had read of these old Cabernets, of course, for they had been, and are, written about as legendary.

BV has made Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet since 1936. Presently, their other reserve Cabernets are: Rutherford Cabernet, Napa Cabernet and BV Coastal Cabernet, made mostly from Central Coast fruit. Their Tapestry is a blend of 75 to 80 percent Cabernet and Dulcet is a Cab/Shiraz blend. BV also makes Merlot, alone and for Tapestry. 12,000 to 15,000 cases of Georges de Latour are made; 65,000 cases of the Rutherford and 100,000 cases of Napa Cabernet; 20,000 cases of Tapestry; and 5,000 of Dulcet.

Total production has increased very little in the 22 years Joel has been with Beaulieu. BV still crushes more Napa and Rutherford Cabernet than anyone else in the Napa Valley: 5,000 tons. Half their fruit comes from BV's own vineyards, half from growers who have been with BV for 10, 20 and even 30 years. 150 different wines go into the Cabernet reserve program of 240,000 gallons. Just getting the reserve wines into barrels takes months, even moving 40,000 to 50,000 gallons a week, as they do. Over the last 10 years Joel has had to spend less time in the field, especially because of BV's Coastal program. Now that BV has a Central Coast team, Joel can spend more time in the vineyards again. The quality of the wines demands integration of the teams, smarter decisions and monitoring through the year both in the field and the winery.

Georges de Latour founded BV in 1900, fortuitously post-phylloxera, bringing hundreds of rootstock cuttings from France as

well as Cabernet budwood (for years BV bought Cab from Jerry Draper on Spring Mountain. Jerry may have gotten his budwood from Georges de Latour). In 1982, Joel, with Tony Bell as operation manager, help set up a clonal Cab program under Dr. Oscar Goheen, a professor at UC Davis and its vine library curator. 14 different clonal selections were planted in vineyard block BV4, about 16 acres, 95 percent on AxR. The propagation clones were ones they simply liked but were never commercial before. Clone 4 had been brought from Mendoza, Argentina by Dr. Goheen. Clone 6, which became the favorite "Jackson Clone", derived from the few vines still propagated in Jackson, CA, remnants of experimental viticulture in the 1800's by UC Berkeley and to which Dr. Goheen had a map. For 10 years barrels of wine from each clone were made with Dimitri Tchelistcheff, André's son, consulting. Joel says certain lots just stood out, leading to blends from various clones and their integration into BV's various vineyard blocks. Different soils, the growth, vigor and balance were all noted, and the effects of drip irrigation, which wasn't common then. Today, BV is doing spot research on clones of Malbec and Petit Verdot as well (they use Petit Verdot for its blueberry, fruit character, because it is bright, bright).

Joel thinks the fruit is so different now from what it was in the early 80's, with two-wire trellising, California sprawl, leaf roll virus; even the getting ripe was different. Then, 22 or 23 Brix was great. Wineries gave bonuses for 23 1/2 Brix. Now everyone has

their own parameters. Cabs of the 1980's had an herbal, vegetative character. There was upright growth in the vineyards, no pulling of leaves--shady--and he old UCD Clone 7 had a vegetative taste in its own right. Replanting because of phylloxera has brought new spacing, new rootstocks, clones, and a more upright trellising. Soil use has changed, there are cover crops, leaves are pulled, irrigation is micro-managed. Farming now goes on throughout the year.: managing the canopy to get rid of that "green" character; getting the air through; and, in the later 90's and early 00's, holding water back for smaller berries, concentrated fruit, less green flavors, less bitter, harsh tannins. Seeds are looked at as part of harvest now and are more brown when picked. Equipment changed. There was a lot of processing of wines in the 50's and 60's, actual stripping. Now it's much more gentle. De-stemmers with rubber fingers let whole berries through. BV was one of first wineries with bladder presses.

André instituted open-topped fermentation at BV. At 80° to 85°, pumping over 2-3 times a day, with some of the wines punched down, in 7 to 10 days the wine ferments to dryness; they don't hold it. Must pumps are now so advanced you could pump live gold fish. At the end of fermentation, the wines are nearly drinkable. Barrel aging used to be three years, now it's 22 months, in half French, half American oak, with periodic racking, always keeping the vineyard blocks separate. Today's barrels--their wood sourcing, longer aging of the staves, thinner staves

which breathe more, slower and deeper toasting--make for more harmonious wines. It's that Old World/New World style thing, and a lot is climate driven. For the BV Cabernet reserve program, wines go into newer oak early with yeast, bacteria present--you get a coffee, fresh meat sort of fragrance. Natural settling gets the big stuff out. Malolactic then goes through.

The whole structure of Cab, its acidity, tannin--there are sufficient differences in tannin components that should help Cabernets mature, yet Joel finds that about 15 percent of modern Cabs are showing age since they went out the door. An intense, jammy flavor may become awkward. The great Cabs of Inglenook and BV historically came from Rutherford--great fruit with different barreling. Great Cabs now also come from Stags Leap, other hills and their alluvial fans, like Rutherford Bench. A drop of fifty feet moves through BV's 120 acres of vineyard in Rutherford. Its vineyard blocks are well-drained, with no pooling water, its vines balanced.

BV not only has a history of owning fine vineyard land, it has always been engaged in vineyard, barrel and fermentation experiments. Joel, a participant in many of these, has become a significant part of BV's history in general and its Cabernet program in particular.