

# Françoise Peschon

Winemaker, Araujo Estate Wines  
Calistoga

Araujo Estate is on the eastern side of the Napa Valley in Calistoga, close to the foothills, its vineyard blocks bordered by olive trees. A few recently dug test pits between the vineyard rows reveal well-drained alluvial soils, rubber-band colored and full of cobble, brought down long ago from the Palisades by Simmons Creek. The creek is now only a narrow seasonal stream, albeit a very stony-bedded one.

Forty of the 160 acres of the estate are planted to grapevines on St. George and French varietal rootstock. All are phylloxera resistant but the French stock is thirsty. St. George roots can go down 40' for water, a characteristic more and more admired at Araujo as it seeks to carefully monitor and control irrigation of its vines.

Françoise Peschon is in the vineyard every day. When you get the work done right up front, in the field, she finds the work in the winery is very easy. Terroir is distinct. It took centuries to figure it out in Europe, for everything to have that common thread. At Araujo the property style has to do with fog in the morning, breezes in the afternoon; picking just parts of a block; thinning; the times of thinning; the number of clusters per shoot; irrigation according to pressure bomb readings--putting a leaf in a bag in a chamber to test osmotic pressure (optimum ranges are



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*Françoise Peschon*

from Crop Care); the weather; fruit set--small when it's hot because high temperatures lock cell division. Françoise now has the help of Michel Rolland who comes three times a year from Bordeaux to consult on the vineyards and wines--when to thin, what to emphasize. He brings an international palate, which is wonderful.

Françoise came to Araujo from Rombauer when Mia Klein and Tony Soter were there. Tony was doing his own and Delia Viader's wine. Mia told Françoise they needed someone on site for a little project she and Tony were consulting on for Araujo. Araujo's first vintage, shared with Joseph Phelps, had been in 1991. Françoise went to Araujo in 1993 and in 1999 became winemaker.

Françoise had grown up down the Peninsula. When her parents retired to Middletown, Françoise finished school in Palo Alto. Inspired by all her trips through the Napa Valley, going home weekends and vacations, Françoise went to UC Davis for enology. After Davis, Françoise spent a year at Chateau Haut Brion. Her family is from Luxembourg and shares a family connection to the Chateau. There Françoise fell in love with Cabernet. To her the idea of an estate wine is so perfect. Buying fruit from the Napa Valley just isn't the relationship. After France, Françoise first went to Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. From there she went briefly to Rombauer before Araujo.

What is now Araujo had been planted to

Zinfandel and Riesling in the 1880's. When Milt Eisele bought the property he planted it to Cabernet in 1969, sold first to Ridge, then Conn Creek and then to Joseph Phelps. Phelps had said the next wave would be Syrah in the 1980's. He was sooooo far ahead. Milt later grafted his Syrah over to Cab, but not all the grafts took. There were still about 100 plants of Syrah when the Araujos bought Milt's vineyard in 1990. Tony Soter's forte was in laying out the vineyard blocks. He loved the Syrah and planted more. Araujo now makes about 400 cases of Syrah in addition to its 1700 to 1800 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon, for which it also grows Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Merlot, which is iffy and not always in the blend. For the Sauvignon Blanc it also grows Viognier.

Araujo Cabernet budwood comes from a mother block of Milt Eisele's which is 38 years old and head-trained. Its vines bear small berries in loose clusters tasting of black currant, chocolatey, cedary, and a mineral quality too, from the soil (Shafer has this same Cab they use in their Hillside Select). All the production vines are pruned bilateral cordon, vertical shoot for even-ripening. If sunburn's a factor, you can trim the fruit to one side. Manipulate the fruit zone. The vine orientation is mostly NE-SW.

For six years Araujo has farmed organically. John Williams at Frog's Leap says organically farmed grapevines can get phylloxera but they won't die. Araujo has been using cover crops, like peas or oats, depending on the block, which add biological activity to the soil

and increase water holding capacity. Roots go deeper. In the 1980's at UC Davis, making "correct" wines was the objective. They didn't taste good, but they were pH correct. So, the wineries had a "sugar window", the concentration at which they'd buy fruit, aside from its taste or condition. They also gave bonus points for big tonnages. Now, we're outside that "window" and anyone, according to Françoise, can make awesome wines these days. Farming parameters have changed. Once wineries contracted with growers in blocks and tons. Now there are acre contracts.

Araujo has a year-round crew of six with a few friends and relations added at harvest. Fruit is picked in 40 pound trays, taken to the winery and shaken to get out the raisins and spiders. It's destemmed--the jacks taken out--then a basket press for reds, bladder press for whites, whole cluster. Reds go into stainless, temperature controlled fermenting tanks with twin tops so no pumping in; fruit is funneled in the top front opening, the one in back is for the cap. Cabernet is aged in 100% new French oak, from several different coopers, for 22 to 26 months underground in Araujo's extensive caves. The blocks are fermented and aged separately. Wine should be in contact with the earth because of the pull, because it is alive. Wine caves are dark, humid and close to the earth, the perfect place to raise wines. Françoise likes to leave blending until late because you can't take out later what you put in early.

For three years, with the help of Amigo Bob, Araujo has also been farming according

to a biodynamic calendar. There are opportunity days and black days. On black days you do nothing. On opportunity days you drop fruit or pull leaves or plant or turn cover crop. This kind of farming is for the long haul, an investment in the land. In the old days the sky was the map, now the calendar is the guide.

Araujo Estate Wines also produces honey and olive oil, maintains an extensive herb and vegetable garden, various compost heaps and a red worm farm. Pomace is shoveled out of the tanks and distilled to grappa. Owl and swallow houses have been put up and insectaries planted for good bugs. The estate is a constant test of whether or not you are doing the right thing, of how the organics play off one another. Jeff Dawson is their consultant for organic farming.

During her year at Haut Brion, Françoise took a course in Bordeaux on the wines of the regions. The final exam was to identify a red wine as to its district and varietal make up. It is ingrained there: this relationship between fruit and location. But not as an end in itself. Wine is a complement to eating. It should be more of a beverage here, less of a prize. But that the style of wine is classic, elegant is paramount. Françoise does the tasting and blending in her office, combining the various varietals from the vineyard blocks to achieve wines worthy of joining those she first fell in love with in France. 'Why isn't everyone a winemaker?' Françoise wonders. 'It's such a perfect job.'