

Mia Klein

Winemaking Consultant and Owner

Selene Wines, Napa

2,500 to 3000 case production

On Making Sauvignon Blanc

Back in the days when you couldn't take home an unfinished bottle of wine from a restaurant, Mia Klein worked at a fish restaurant in Hermosa Beach. And that is where she began tasting wines--after work, out in back. A year later, when she and her mother moved to San Francisco, Mia got a job at Victorian Wine and Spirits, in Noe Valley. It was tiny, but its owners were dedicated to California wines. They gave really good recommendations to everyone, for any price or occasion. Wine was a part of life, and everyone's relationship with it was comfortable. Mia thinks wine is complicated no matter how far you are in it, so guidance is great (she always asks a sommelier or chef to suggest a wine), because as percent of success in the taste of a bottle goes up, so does the fun. Mia believes every meal around a table is an important occasion. It's about the enjoyment of life, and not just with family. A business meeting is less mechanical, more organic with wine.

Mia studied enology at UC Davis. She worked with Ann Noble with whom sensory was a big focus. In 1983 Mia went to work at Chappellet under winemaker Cathy Corison, whom she thought was wonderful to work

for. When Cathy made Mia assistant winemaker, she urged her to choose the next step carefully. Mia says assistant winemaker is an incredible job. Great attention to detail is a necessity, job change inevitable. Mia had sought out wines to taste two to three times a week while at Chappellet, and tasted a lot of Sauvignon Blanc. She got a chance to make it when she went to Pepi in 1988 as winemaker, with Tony Soter consulting. Tony was making Spottswode there and his Etude. Mia connected with winegrower Larry Hyde in Carneros when they were looking for Merlot budwood for Pepi, and again in 1990 when they found phylloxera at Spottswode. Spottswode had had their own Sauvignon Blanc on the creek, but their Cabernet was making a reputation, so Sauvignon Blanc was the first to go in a replant to Cab.

In 1991, Mia and Tony went to Rombauer where Francoise Peschon was assistant winemaker. There they made Viader, Araujo and Spottswode, Tony made Etude, and Mia made her first Selene. They had purchased Sauvignon fruit from Frediani in Calistoga and Larry Hyde for Spottswode. Spottswode and Selene split the Hyde 50/50. Two years later, Mia and Tony went to his Etude, where she also made Selene (Francoise was now at Araujo, and four years later, in 1997, Rosemary Cakebread was at Spottswode).

Selene first made Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot, adding Cabernet Sauvignon and

Bordeaux blends in 2002. The Sauvignon Blanc fruit from Hyde Vineyards is from cuttings of the musqué clone at Ventana Vineyards on the Central Coast. Mia says the musqué does excellently in cool growing areas. It seems to mature rapidly with flavors of melon, citrus, tropical mango and papaya when ripe (fruit for Cain Musqué came from Ventana), but musqué also performs in warmer regions, e.g. Araujo. It has wonderful viscosity in the mouth. Hyde pH's tend to be low, but the viscosity is still there. Sauvignon Blanc can span temperature differences, not unlike Cab. A sauvage varietal, it can express itself (unlike Pinot Noir) in a variety of circumstances. The chalky, limestone soils of Sancerre are ideal for it. You want the lightest soil you can get, according to Mia. Hyde Vineyards has warmer, lighter soils and less wind in that part of Carneros. The oldest musqué block for Selene at Hyde was planted in the 1980's on its own roots; a second block in the mid-1990's and a brand new block in 2000 are on 1103-Paulson, right next to those leased to Spottswode. Depending on yields, Selene makes 1000 to 1800 cases of single vineyard designated Sauvignon Blanc.

Mia believes it's never good to be monochromatic. Nature, the universe will spite you, whether it's the economy, something political, or pricing--so many things. No doubt Cab is king, Chard is, too, but Mia thinks Sauvignon Blanc has gotten pretty darn interesting, interesting enough so it won't disappear off the face of Napa Valley. "Take Beaulieu



PHOTOGRAPH: PRISCILLA UPTON

Vineyard's four acres of Sauvignon Blanc in Carneros", she says, "there's commitment."

When the Selene and Spottswoode fruit is picked into half ton bins at Hyde, it hasn't far to go. Rosemary is waiting at Spottswoode and Mia is at Laird Family Estate where she has made Selene since 2001. At harvest, Laird has one or two dozen winemakers all sharing information during their custom crushes, which Mia really likes. She's at the winery ahead of the press. A lot of whites go through Laird--it has two membrane tank presses, two doors. Mia chooses a tank that is smooth inside because she thinks roughness causes a lot of phenolics to come out. Whole cluster (seeds must stay inside the skin) goes to settling tanks for 24 hours at 45 degrees (50 degrees actual). They inoculate with yeast, rack off solids right to the barrel for fermentation--50% in 60 gallon French oak and 50% in 72 gallon stainless steel to avoid over-oaking (an aldehydic flavor can come through from used French oak). Depending on the year and lot, it can take three weeks to two months, or as much as ten to sixteen weeks to finish in the barrel. Mia feels Sauvignon Blanc can oxidize a little more easily than other whites, so they rack it off the oak to tank while the stainless barrels get stirred every week sur lies. The wine goes to bottle in late February or early March, has a couple of months to recover, and is released late May or early June. The most important thing for Selene, stresses Mia, is to be able to do again everything you did.

Since 2000, Selene has been using a two-piece synthetic closure for white wine. It mimics a cork and has a shelf life of three years, which Mia feels is fine for Sauvignon Blanc. She wants zero taint because someone may never taste another bottle of her wine if it's their first and it's corked. For corks Mia makes three sensory tastings and rejects about 50% of what she samples. She says variation is not visual but in what you taste. Selene needs about 40,000 corks a year. Corks come in bales of 8 to 10 thousand corks. For the 4 to 8 bales she needs, Mia will sample over 30 bales; each sample is 30 corks. These are soaked in wine or dilute vodka for 24 hours and then you taste. Taint varies. Mia wants her Sauvignon fresh, the way she enjoys it. French ones are made to age. There are a few Sancerres ready for market, but most white Bordeaux need five years. Mia finds them tart, with a lot of free sulphur dioxide at the outset, and they develop different attributes which she doesn't particularly enjoy. She thinks Selene Sauvignon Blanc is great with shellfish of any flavor, especially barbecued oysters, some lobsters. Her favorite meal? Fresh Hog Island oysters, garlic, pesto BBQ, cheese and a salad. Perfect. Sauvignon Blanc should be served cool, at its cellar temperature of 55 degrees.

Besides Selene, Mia has three consults: She's been with Dalla Valle (1000 cases) since 1996, Fisher Vineyards (6,000 cases) and Bressler (less than 500 cases) since 2000. Dalla Valle and Bressler are all red, Fisher is

red plus a Chardonnay. Most of Mia's clients over the years have had estate vineyards, and their own winery. "Still", she says, "they don't have complete control. They can't. Stuff goes wrong. It's that personal connection that's so important and rewarding--not banks, partners, or money. Are there enough grapes, enough wineries? Yes. So, need isn't why these wines are made. It's about great relationships."

Mia feels the enjoyment of wine is all about sharing information. She loves her customers e-mailing her their reactions -- 'It was our anniversary and your wine was so good.' It's that extra layer, that extra glue to a special experience wine provides that really makes Mia's eyes sparkle.