

# Ray Coursen

*Owner and Founding Winemaker*

*Elyse*

*2100 Hoffman Lane, Yountville*

*12,000 cases*

Ray Coursen, founding owner of Elyse, likes to cook to relax and says winemaking is cooking, just without a flame (wine-growing, on the other hand, he considers more like housekeeping). Once you are secure in your source of fruit, Ray says, to make wine you have to be artistic enough to fear, yet push the limits, know when to give, to “ride out” problematic wines. Ray grew up on a dairy farm in New Jersey; the cows taught him not to push. Ray’s family drank wine on holidays; when the grownups drank wine and beer, there were sips for the kids. Ray started to enjoy wine on his own once he was out of high school. At a wine shop in his hometown you could buy something beyond Mateus. The owner was into May wines, Mosel, very good French Burgundies and Inglewood, BV, Almaden and Martini. When a buddy of Ray’s went to CIA in Hyde Park, he got Ray cooking and really tasting wine.

Ray met his wife Nancy, a California native, in Boston. They talked Ridge when they met--Paul Draper, Ridge Monte Bello (Nancy’s father was a wine collector).

They moved to California in 1983 and Ray went to work one mountain over from Ridge at Mount Eden Vineyards. The next year, Nancy and Ray moved to Napa Valley and Ray became a home winemaker. He made one and a half barrels of Late Harvest Zinfandel with fruit from Beverly Morisoli’s vineyard on Niebaum Lane, Rutherford. After helping Nancy run a B&B, and working for Tonnella Vineyard Management, Ray went to work at Whitehall Lane Winery. His own first commercial release was a Morisoli Zinfandel in 1987, made at Whitehall Lane. It was made from a Morisoli vineyard block planted to a Northern Italian-style field blend that was 88 percent Zinfandel and 12 percent Alicante Bouschet, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Carignane, Napa Gamay (Valdiguié), Grand Noir--a cousin to Pinot or Gamay, Muscat Hamburg, and four vines of Black Empress.

The oldest part of this vineyard is documented as planted in 1915. Today’s “thing,” according to Ray, is to buy land and sell grapes. “Buy twenty acres, plant it to Cabernet and sell ten tons, ten tons, ten tons. Blending is a choice. Back then, they *planted* a wine and the whole family picked.” Ray’s observed a lot of “tractor disease” (vines knocked down) in older vineyards in Napa Valley. However, in some Old Vine vineyards like Morisoli, they are replanting with original



*Mike Trotta and Ray Coursen*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE L. CERVONE

budwood—the same clones, planted to the same percentages. A flagship vine is that wine's backbone. Ray likens new vineyard to a puppy—it needs time, work and discipline to express itself.

For ten years Ray made wine in several wineries until he bought the former Pradel Winery in Yountville. He started Elyse on its crush pad—a cement slab alongside a former horse barn, in 1996, re-naming the winery in 1997. Its adjoining one and a half acre vineyard had been planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, clone 6 on 110-R, in 1995. In addition to his own fruit, Ray buys 97 percent of the grapes Elyse needs from 17 other vineyards. In 2005 Elyse made about 12,000 cases and is on its way to producing 15,000. Including Ray, there are four full-time winery employees, plus one more at harvest. Elyse has 20 different bottlings. It bottles at Miner Family Vineyards and stores its wine off-site. Elyse makes four Zinfandels, four Petite Sirahs, three Cabernets, a Syrah, a Rosé blend, and a Rhône blend and port wines under the Elyse label and Cabernet, Petite Sirah and a Rhône blend under its Jacob Franklin label.

Ray likes to use 40 to 80 percent new American oak barrels for Petite Sirah and Zinfandel, and 20 percent new American oak for Cabernet. The barrels are next used for Syrah or Rhône-style blends, and

then port. As Ray puts it, “Port wines are aged in experienced barrels.” Ray thinks of the wine as “in vessel” rather than “in oak.” In 2000, Ray made Cabernet Sauvignon port, aged 18 months; in 2002, Zinfandel Port from Chase Family Vineyard; in 2003 and 2004, Petite Sirah Port; and, in 2005, Cabernet Sauvignon Port. Ray thinks they’ll probably stay with Cabernet. (A stuck fermentation inspired the making of port wines.) L’Ingénue, a white Rhône-style blend of Rousanne, Marsanne, Viognier and Grenache blanc, is available only in the tasting room. To stay current, Ray reads constantly. He prefers a fruit-forward style. Ray adds a little Viognier to his Syrah. (In Côte Rôtie today, winemakers can add as much as 20 percent.) Ray says the white stabilizes the red pigments and adds aromatic color. White grapes ripen sooner than reds in Côte Rôtie—they are at 25° Brix when reds are at 23°. According to Ray, white grapes were originally picked to eat during harvest. (There’s 12.1 percent residual sugar in Coke Classic®; twice as much is in ripe wine grapes.)

Zinfandel was Ray’s first wine--it gave him his major push. In 1991, in addition to Morisoli, Ray bought Zinfandel from the Park-Muscadine Ranch (now Randy Dunn’s on Howell Mountain) and in 1992 he bought Petite Sirah. When Ray’s kids went off to school, they met Auty and Adrian Hayne’s kids, which led Ray

to buying Zin and Petite Sirah from Auty’s father, Otty, at Hayne Vineyards. The first designated Elyse Zinfandel was Hayne Vineyards 1998. In 1999, Ray started buying an old clone Petite Sirah from Chavez-Leeds below Whitehall Lane, Rutherford. In 2005, Ray also bought Petite Sirah from Laurie Wood in Rutherford (Laurie’s budwood had come from Otty in 1997). There are four different Petite Sirah budwoods at Hayne, some or one of which may have come from Fred Marsh on Spring Mountain. Ray also buys Laurie’s Zinfandel and Petit Verdot, a non-Hayne clone Petite Sirah from Russ Oles and Zinfandel from Korte Ranch, St. Helena. Four other vineyards provide fruit for Syrah. Ray knows good wine comes from good grapes and consistency is the key to both.

Elyse wants it fruit picked into open, half-ton plastic bins. At the winery, fruit is destemmed to keep the seeds within the berry, unlike in what Ray calls “the harsh old days.” They do 75 to 80 percent whole berry, open barrel fermentation, relying on the fruit’s own yeast to ferment the fruit. During fermentation, they punch down twice a day by hand, and press off the wine at the end of two weeks, when most of the tannin extraction is done. The new wine settles in two days in closed stainless tanks and then goes to barrel. In the ten to twenty months the wine is in wood, oak absorbs the tannin.

Ray prefers a heavy toast—for smoky, bacon, coffee, mocha flavors. At Elyse, they use a Burgundian wand for *battonnage*.

Ray prefers his Claret, Petite Sirah, and Zinfandel big, fruity and soft. He says they age well, yet drink well young. Ray particularly admires Ridge, Ravenswood, Quivera and Nalle Zinfandel. Elyse adds a touch of Zin to Petite Sirah to match the tannins and bring up the flavors, the fruit tone. Elyse also adds a bit of Petite Sirah to Zinfandel to bring up its flavors and lay the bases.

For Ray, style in winemaking comes out of location. There is no right or wrong. In Napa Valley, fruit from vines facing west is bright, while fruit with more light from the east is more like preserves, jammy. Winemakers are careful with young vines and respect the old. However, each winemaker chooses when to pick, how long the wine spends in barrel—for a particular style of wine. Almost five years ago, Ray hired oenologist Mike Trotta. Mike came to Elyse from Napa Wine Company, Bernardus and Yalumba (in Australia’s Barossa Valley). Last November, Mike was given the title of Winemaker. Ray’s plan is for Mike to “take it up a notch” at Elyse.