

Ric Forman

Proprietor, Forman Vineyards
1501 Big Rock Road, St. Helena
3,600 case production

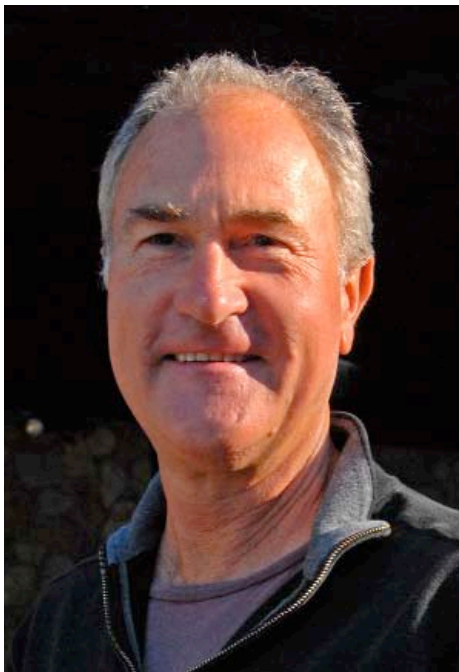


PHOTO: PRISCILLA UPTON

Ric Forman grew up in Oakland where his first love was chemistry. When he was ten or twelve, Ric successfully fermented fruit from big cherry trees that grew on the place where he and his family spent each summer in Grass Valley. After experimenting with

fermentation, Ric tried explosives in his own new lab at the Oakland house. He and his friends built cannons that required massively toxic mercury fulminate. They turned fishponds into geysers and experimented with rocketry. They blew things up in the neighborhood in rotation, but the experimenting came to an end when Ric burnt down his family's house (distilling fermented sugar water). It was six months before he and his family could move back. When Ric went to see the aftermath of the Oakland Fire of 1990, absolutely nothing remained of where he grew up but stains in an alley from the explosions long before.

Ric's interest in science led him to earn a BS and then an MS at UC Davis in enology and viticulture. In 1967, Ric helped with the harvest at Stony Hill and in 1968 at Robert Mondavi. In 1969 Sterling Vineyards hired Ric to help design, build and run its vineyards and winery. Ric was sent with Dick Graff to Europe to learn more about winemaking. They went to Italy and Germany and traveled extensively in Bordeaux and Burgundy. Dick had formed an equipment company for fine winemaking and had a special interest in French barrels that had attracted Peter Newton's support (Peter had founded Sterling in 1964). Dick and Ric spoke at length with Christien Moueix at Chateau Trotanoy and brought back not only barrels for making Chardonnay and Cabernet at Sterling, but also French winemaking

techniques. All Ric had known about wine-making technology was from UC Davis: big stainless steel tanks and cool temperature fermentation. "Wham, I saw all this tradition and, boy, I loved this, too." Ric said methods for fermenting Chardonnay in barrel, racking barrel-to-barrel and fining that he and Dick brought back are standard practices today. Ric has continued to visit France almost every year since his first trip with Dick in 1970.

When Ric came to Sterling it was bare ground. He, Dick and Martin Waterfield, the comptroller of Sterling enterprises, developed a flow plan (Martin was responsible for what Ric calls the winery's "Moorish effect"). Cabernet and Chardonnay were planted at several properties. Ric made the second Merlot ever bottled in Napa Valley (Louis M. Martini made the first). Sterling later added Diamond Mountain Ranch—where planting its Cabernet took four years. When Sterling was sold to Coca Cola in 1975, Ric stayed on as winemaker. He also bought a 25-acre piece of property on Howell Mountain, to which he later added contiguous 10 and 5 acre parcels.

In 1978, Peter called Ric and suggested they start a new venture. Ric hunted far and wide to find land for their new partnership, Newton Vineyard. The hilly 750-acre piece he found above Madrona Avenue in St. Helena was a stirring challenge. Ric

worked hard at Newton planting hillside vineyards to red Bordeaux varieties and establishing a unique underground facility. While the work was exhilarating and demanding, in its midst Ric realized the venture would never become his ideal of a sole proprietorship. After Peter and Ric dissolved their partnership, Ric began to develop his land on Howell Mountain, with a preference for Cabernet, while he consulted for other wineries. Among his clients were Inglenook, Villa Mount Eden, Kendall-Jackson (then in Lake County), and with Charles Shaw on a big Nouveau Beaujolais project. Ric made his first Forman Cabernet at Charles Shaw in 1983. In 1984, Ric bottled both a Forman Cabernet and Chardonnay there, but since 1985, all Forman wines have been made at Forman. In addition to consulting and establishing his own vineyards and winery, Ric also made time to help teach the first classes in wine appreciation in Napa Valley offered by Jim Beard for the Napa Valley Wine Library Association.

Today, Forman owns or is in partnership on 90 acres of fruit. The Big Rock Road estate is planted to: Cabernet, 5 acres; Cabernet Franc, 1.5 acres; Merlot, .5 acres; and Petit Verdot, .75 acres. (Almost all Petit Verdot in Napa Valley is from cuttings from two vines Dr. Olmo gave Ric from UC Davis to try at Sterling.) The soil at Forman is deep—200 feet of extremely well-drained, austere soil from what Ric

thinks must be an uplifted river bed—a volcanic river-run of stones and brown sand. Kelly Maher consults on fortifying the soil, advising organic amendments. Forman practices no till on the hillside and uses cover crops to control water, temperature, and vigor. Forman does use an herbicide, but an organic fungicide. Only vines on the hills are irrigated and no frost is protection needed. Ric and David Abreu planted Ric's vineyard unterraced; the vines run straight up and down, two to three thousand per acre, oriented how the hill goes rather than the sun. David and Ric introduced this close vine spacing, Vertical Shoot Position (VSP), from France to Napa Valley in 1982, after their trip together. Ric had wanted to show David how the French cultivated their vines at the start-up of David's vineyard management company in which Ric was a partner. Today, David and Ric lease the Thorvilos Vineyard, adjacent to Forman, for the Forman and Abreu red wines. Forman Chardonnay comes from Star Vineyard in Rutherford in which Ric has been a partner since 1986.

Each of the 30,000 estate vines at Forman is touched 14 to 16 times a year. Ric says they are constantly pecking at them: tucking vines into the trellis system, suckering, tipping the vines (nipping off the tips) to keep them a uniform height. They leaf the vines on the morning side once and later do a "green harvest" so no grape cluster

touches another. Halfway through the growing season they thin and thin again at veraison, when they remove any lagging fruit. Just before harvest sunburned or raisined fruit is removed. Ric says grapes at harvest come to his winery flawless, "Not that raisined, shriveled fruit before the tannins are even ripe that monster, overly extracted Cabernet requires for a style in which mouth feel has been developed over aroma."

Grapes are picked very early in the morning, when the fruit is cold. Reds are crushed and whites pressed whole cluster. Ric likes to then store the must in a crushed state without yeast (cold soak) at 55° or lower (with a dose of SO₂). Forman has evolved from picking Cabernet at 22°Brix to 23.5°Brix to now picking at 25.5°Brix to 26°Brix. Ric says the wines do taste better—more texture, with acids not so high or shrill in your mouth, a pleasant fruitiness rather than green and austere, like a berry cassis. He says the tannins are more charming and hold up better to the oak, yet are not over the edge in respect to many California wines.

Pumpovers are very important to get a flooding through of juice to extract flavors with every change in degree. Forman has a computer-controlled pump for each of its sixteen stainless steel fermenters and can pump over as many as eight times a day. In eight to twelve days the must is bone dry

and the tank sealed with a CO₂ cap. Now the wine is pumped over once a day, briefly. Ric tastes every day. The tannin changes from broad to soft. Styptic phenolic molecules actually polymerize and the phenolics grow softer, more comfortable to taste, with a richness. Within two weeks the wine is pressed. Most of the pressed wine is added back to the free-run for texture and flavor. Ric commits to the blend straight away. He knows which lots go together, which will go into Forman and which into his second label, Chateau La Grande Roche. The blended wine is inoculated with malolactic bacteria and goes immediately into barrel before malolactic fermentation. Barrels are 20% old, 80% new French oak and stored single file in ten storey deep caves Forman dug in 1988.

When Ric began importing true thin-staved Bordeaux barrels, not the thicker, wide-staved transport barrels then in common use, the willow hoops at their ends didn't hold up to humid conditions. Ric had the hoops replaced with wide metal bands; this "Chateau Ferric" style is now standard here. The red wines are stirred with a stainless steel French whisk sur lies in barrel for the first two months. When malolactic fermentation is done, sometime between November and February, the wine is racked, bunged and not racked again until the following November. Ric racks barrel-to-barrel using the French air pressure method. He and his son, Toby, have

now developed an air pump with which they can push wine from one barrel to another in less than five minutes. The wine is fined with egg white and sits until March, when it is carefully racked a third time before bottling.

Toby manages vineyard for Forman next to his house in Angwin and does all the tractor work for the Forman vineyards. He is also a gifted metal worker, fabricating structural as well as decorative pieces. Toby can't put the time into Forman that his father does, because he's so busy with construction jobs—some of which are for the winery, but he does know every step of production. He has been to France once with Ric and David Abreu and his father says it's time for Toby and him to go again.