

Delia Viader

Owner, Viader

1120 Deer Park Road, Deer Park

8,000 case production



Delia Viader and three of her four children came to Napa Valley 22 years ago in May of 1984. Delia and her family had been living in the East Bay while she studied at UC Berkeley. Delia rented a house in the Valley and undertook establishing vineyard on

land her father had bought as an investment in the early 1980's on Howell Mountain. Delia's father used to visit the Valley because he liked the wines. This was back in the days when Delia says wineries served their wines in shot glasses, a time she calls one of "barbeque with Bourbon." Delia was born in Argentina, grew up and was educated in France as well as at MIT, UC Berkeley and, later, at UC Davis. Delia's father was a diplomat of Spanish origin (her mother was English), and drinking wine was part of family life. Respect and discipline were also a very important part of family life. When Delia proposed developing vineyard rather than house sites, her father requested a formal business plan. She complied with plans that included vineyard, winery, caves and a house.

The 92 acres of land was in pasture and orchard. Delia consulted with Michael Landis, Richard Nagaoka (who made a soil study diagrammed the varieties to be planted), David Abreu, and Tony Soter. They all said "red." Delia wanted to make a Bordeaux blend with Cabernet Franc rather than the 100% Cabernet Sauvignon then in vogue.

Saint-Emilion's Château Cheval Blanc, a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Franc, was her inspiration, but it was difficult to convince the local wine community. Blending here was considered bastardization. Delia

thought Cabernet Franc's local reputation of being herbal and hollow was because it had been planted in all the wrong places.

However, the first project was deer fence, which was very expensive. Then, twelve acres of vines were planted up and down--no terraces, dictated both by economics and the general rule of European design. David Abreu complied with Delia's wanting II0-R rootstock, for which they had to wait, while everyone else pushed for AXR-I. And the hillside site dictated waiting. Soil at Viader is very shallow, just eight inches of volcanic rhyolite, tufa and basalt-sandy loam and rock. Some areas needed to be blasted or jackhammered. Vines were planted double cordon, not head-trained. Danny Schuster from New Zealand had recommended the tight 5' x 4' spacing practiced there. The vineyard would also be organic. Of course, when Mike Beatty's sheep were brought in to manage weeds, mountain lions took notice. Also, sheep have weed preferences, mowing some to the ground while totally forgetting others. However, the vineyards continue to be worked entirely by hand and erosion control is excellent. The vineyards were planted 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 40% Cabernet Franc, plus two acres in Petit Verdot. Some budwood came via David's managing vineyards at Spottswode and Staglin. The Petit Verdot came from Forman. While it never made it into the blend, in 1998 the Petit Verdot became its

own wine, "V" and the 12 planted acres have since grown to 33. With full canopy the vines grew only five feet tall and bore barely a ton (today they give a little more). Delia says new vines are from cuttings from the original vines; berries are small and of high quality.

The first Viader, a blend of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, was made at Rombauer, along with Dominus and Rombauer, in 1987 when the cement was still wet and Bob Levy ran the forklift. Tony Soter advised Delia on winemaking there until 1997. In July of 1991 Delia and her family moved to their new house. In 1997 Viader was made in its own winery and today Delia's second son, Alan is Director of operations (vineyard and cellar) with Michel Rolland consulting. From an early age Alan and his siblings, the youngest was born in 1993, all worked in the vineyards during the summer, picking out rocks and weeds. Alan had a particularly good eye for where rattlesnakes might be hiding. He went to UC Davis to study viticulture and became vineyard manager soon after graduation. Last fall Delia's father became gravely ill and she had to travel to Argentina in the middle of harvest. Alan took over full responsibilities and has now been appointed vineyard manager and winemaker.

Delia says they are trying to be more in tune in the vineyard as well as in the cellar.

Viader went biodynamic in 2001. They used to pick the grapes sooner, but now are more understanding of true physiological ripeness. Soil depth and stress--in the afternoon you can see leaves turn over as the vines conserve water--each play a part. The vines run east to west. Because of the vineyards' western exposure, it is ten to twenty degrees hotter in the afternoon; the canopy protects the fruit zone from direct sun. At least with constant air movement, there is no mildew or frost pressure! And these are such little vines, the leaves fall off on their own. There is no need to hedge, and little pruning needed. Vines are irrigated from May until after harvest according to the biodynamic calendar. The grapes have always been picked at night, starting at about 10:00 or 11:00 pm. Cabernet Sauvignon is picked at 25° Brix. The fruit goes through cold soak, and then ferments to dry in ten or eleven days in cement fermenting tanks from Burgundy. Delia says it takes at least 20 years for a winery to develop its own strain of natural yeasts, and because the vineyard is on former pastureland, Viader inoculates with commercial yeast. Master blend lots get extended maceration that may last months. Cement naturally maintains temperature for gentle fermentation. It is similar to wood, with similar fermentation temperature curves. In the past, Viader has used 600 gallon open-top fermenters as well as barrel fermenters. Delia feels there is a purer expression of vineyard with cement because it is so neu-

tral. Viader uses a combination of cement and wood (stainless is thought to produce a negative electromagnetic charge during fermentation). When the wine reaches the desired extraction-texture level it is pressed. Viader uses a basket press and keeps free-run, light and heavy press wines separate. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot go into 100% new oak for 24 months. The barrels are stored in tunnels dug into the hillside underneath the winery. The longest tunnel extends all the way through the mountain with a window at one end (so one may always see the light at the end of the tunnel!). The blends are built block by block, variety by variety (blocks are about one acre in size). Delia describes the varietal blocks running down the mountain as being in thirds. Fruit from the top third provides aromatics, the middle gives density and the bottom is more rustic and provides backbone. Malolactic fermentation goes through in barrel. Viader blends on the lees, with *bâtonnage* as needed and racking only as necessary (and less overall). The wines are tasted and topped every week. Alcohols have crept up over the years, but roundness, body, and structure are also much more refined and fine-grained tannins help maintain a certain elegance—density, everything in balance. Before release, Viader holds blind tastings of its wines among trusted friends with good palates. Delia, herself, has always had a good sense of taste and smell. She worked in Grasse one summer in a

perfume factory and Professor Ann Noble at UC Davis dubbed her “The Nose” in her group for sensory valuation.

From her business model, Delia trusted that she could support herself and her children, but not by making just one wine from hillside vineyard. After Viader in 1989 and V in 1998, came the Dare label, which now includes an estate Syrah, a blend of estate and Stagecoach Vineyards Cabernet Franc and a Tempranillo also from purchased grapes. (Delia notes that in Rioja, Tempranillo is aged in American oak to build structure; at Viader it goes into French oak for suppleness and to enhance its earthiness, its mineraliness.) The V is a challenge Delia enjoys: “to make round what is so square in tannin structure.” At Viader they believe wine is not a meal in itself but that it should enhance the meal. Wines have to bring pleasure, to elevate the meal above ordinary. As to her style of wines, Delia says, “I prefer seduction over power, not that big hit of tannin over your head.” Delia advises those who wish to follow wine writers’ and critics’ points to trust their palates. She thinks rather than changing what you drink, you should change what you read for the points you want.

Since its inception, Viader has exported one quarter of its production to Europe and Asia, which is unusual for a small case production winery. In 1992 Viader was in five countries; today, it is in 18 and has

interns from all over—lots from France as well as Portugal, Germany, South America and Spain. Delia’s daughter helps in sales and marketing, although she has now started law school as well. Delia says it was quite a challenge in 1990 to convince the international market that American-made wines were really world-class wines. Robert Mondavi single-handedly helped change the quality image of American made wines in the international market by joining forces with Chateau Mouton Rothschild and opening the doors for smaller producers like Delia to follow. A further challenge has been to maintain market share with the fluctuation of the American dollar.

Each year Delia tries to make wine better than the year before, not better than anyone else but better than before. She says it makes you humble, yet keeps you striving. She is especially humble partaking in winemakers’ dinners in countries whose languages she speaks—in France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain or Italy especially, with its 31 generations of Antinoris! Being a vintner/winemaker is a career you can have until you die because it involves so many facets of one’s personality; it really engages Delia and gives her a lot of satisfaction. She says, “Little by little, you get really passionate about this work of art—harnessing all this incredible energy in the vineyard and winery, all the endless possibilities and permutations.”