

John Komes

Proprietor and President

Flora Springs Winery

1978 West Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena

50,000 cases

John Komes, a founder of Flora Springs Winery, says vineyard designations are about *terroir*, and *terroir* is the most important quality, other than the actual clone of the grape, in making wine. He feels appellation is important because it helps identify the flavors you should expect in the wines you choose.

When Flora Springs was founded thirty years ago, its wines were built by John and his sister Julie Komes Garvey, and, after 1980, also with Ken Deis. Now Paul Steinauer, who came on in 1990, is winemaker, John's son Nat has pretty much taken over John's work, and he says his nephew Sean is where his sister Julie used to shine. There are also three new tasting rooms under construction on Highway 29, designed by MA+D (Miroglio Architecture + Design) of Oakland. One of the reasons Flora Springs chose the firm is because its principal, Joel Miroglio, is originally from Napa Valley.

The tasting rooms will each have a theme to suit the wines tasted within and presentations and seminars on the weekends; the top deck will have an excellent view of the new Hall

winery building going up next-door that was designed by Gehry Partners of Los Angeles. The wine bottles of Flora Springs and the closures are also getting a new design. As John says of his family, "They shouldn't have to sell my product; they should sell their product." However, he is on fire about the tasting rooms project. He says it is at the



very center of Napa Valley, and all his work in construction has made him very, very comfortable with reading plans.

After UC Santa Clara and the Navy, John went into building construction in the Bay Area. At 35, John's wife got him involved

with a wine appreciation class in Pleasant Hill. John was surprised to find that he really could taste wines. He says he joined a wine-making club in order to defray costs, he was enjoying so much wine. The club had access to old vine Zinfandel in Contra Cost County; along with Zin, the club also made splashes of Riesling and Columbard and John learned their respective winemaking techniques.

When John's father Jerome retired as a director of Bechtel Corporation, he and his wife, Flora, took a *piéd `a terre* at Silverado Resort while they looked for property. Stephen Girard, Milt Eisele and Gene Trefethen were colleagues of Jerome's and he and Flora had made many trips to the Valley. Eventually, in 1977, the Komeses bought the old Louis M. Martini property off West Zinfandel Lane. Soon after, John and his wife came up on a Saturday to visit, unannounced. They walked the property for three hours, looking at the buildings as John decided which to take over. He thought the one furthest away; he would build a house and commute to work. When they rang the doorbell they learned that Jerome didn't need any help with his g**d***ed retirement project. However, after some family discussion, John and his sister Julie and their families moved to Napa Valley to make wine. To keep things fair, their brother Mike in Texas followed his dad onto the

board of what had become Flora Springs Winery. Julie and her husband Pat Garvey became teachers in the Valley and John was soon involved with the Far Niente remodel, a house and winery at Flora Springs, a tasting room at SA Anderson, with Carl Doumani at Stags' Leap Winery, and BR

Napa wines at the time; now, the market is pretty much full."

The first vintage at Flora Springs was a 1978 Old Vines, which John said was a disaster. They gave away at least 200 cases. However, his sister's and his 1979 Cabernet Sauvignon



Cohn in Sonoma. He also constructed warehouses, including the Napa Valley Wine Warehouse in St. Helena, while the Komeses were building up Flora Springs. He says about the timing of Flora Springs, "It was at the infancy of wine coming to the Valley. There was a great need for

and Chardonnay took gold at the Los Angeles County Fair. Meanwhile, his dad kept buying properties, ultimately acquiring 1,100 acres, 650 of which are planted. As Jim Lider laid out new vineyard at the start of Flora Springs, Pat shadowed him. He also took classes at Napa College and with the Napa

Valley Wine Library. These were the 1980's when AXR was the rootstock of choice. The vines have all since been replanted because of Phylloxera. However, John says Phylloxera brought a renaissance to the wine industry with all the studies of rootstocks and clones for replanting it provoked. Reds used to be just Cabernet. Now vineyards are carefully designed and the grapes are better. Flora Springs has gotten rid of its overhead sprinklers in favor of wind machines, although they are not much needed, and vineyard property in Carneros was acquired just a couple of years ago. All the vineyards are family-owned and all continue to be managed by Pat. Flora Springs takes 20% of the fruit and the rest goes to other wineries.

Red wines are made in the 1885 winery building on the property. Its cave was enlarged to accommodate a forklift. John says the cave is 56° naturally, plummeting to 54° in the winter and 58° all summer. Entrances at all elevations provide a naturally ventilating airflow. A newer winery building, Casa Blanca, is for white wines. In 1989 the Wine Spectator named Flora Springs its top Sauvignon Blanc. Soon after, John was one of twenty pouring Sauvignon Blanc at a tasting in Los Angeles. A lady came up to him and said there was one better than Flora Springs, "Ladoucette de Baron de L" (a reserve Pouilly-Fumé from the Loire

Valley). John told Ken to get a couple of bottles. He liked it, so Ken researched the winemaking. He said it involved a particular clone and kind of winemaking—there were all sorts of styles at the time: grassy, barrel-aged, stainless steel.

In 1990, they made a dedication to their Sauvignon Blanc at Flora Springs. It sold for \$25 a bottle and they made 500 to 700 cases. John said the wine should have its own name because of its style, its grander taste. They called it "Soliloquy" because it came from one grape, one vineyard, and it rhymed with "Trilogy" (their blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc). That one vineyard, 40 year-old vines on St. George rootstock, was in Oakville where Flora Springs has 100 acres in front of Silver Oak. It was also the source for their own unique Sauvignon Blanc clone. John says the varietals are expressed in different ways at different properties. UC Davis cultured the vines to produce clean, virus-free stock for Flora Springs that John says has richness but no grassiness. Davis had no former sample with its particular DNA.

It has been John's observation that grassiness ("gooseberry" in New Zealand) has to do with Sauvignon Blanc's huge foliage as a plant. They didn't prune back in those days. Generally, the leaf of the plant died before

the bunch was ripe because of heavy foliage. It is that dry-leaf that gets into the grape, producing grassiness, but pruning allows ripening before the leaf dies. John says in making wine it is constant education. He has constantly conferred with Pat who is always going to seminars. Flora Springs has kept making Soliloquy, but with its melon, honey flavors there was almost too much richness and not enough acid. So, they added fruit from half a block of another Sauvignon Blanc, and now the blend is fifty-fifty. John calls Sauvignon Blanc versatile. It's great to drink and to savor. For receptions at the winery he likes to pair it with light vinaigrette salads or asparagus, any veggie sort of thing. He says, "The taste of 'Soliloquy' goes on and on; it doesn't go away, unlike most Sauvignon Blanc, which goes right through the head."

At harvest, the fruit is picked early, starting at 3:00 a.m. It goes whole cluster into a bladder press. From there, half the juice goes into stainless steel, and half into German 1,600 gallon oak ovals that John bought from Gil Nickel twenty years ago. The must is inoculated with yeast. After fermentation it is left on the lees in the ovals and agitated every two weeks for six months. This process gives the wine both body and an oak-aged quality, which John feels is advantageous to Sauvignon

Blanc, because otherwise it tends to be fast to the palate. Aging dulls, softens the flavor pattern as lees coat and buffer the acids. In the wine, the finish is there with acid but it is initially masked. After clarification and filtration, Flora Springs bottles 3,000 cases of Soliloquy in-house. John says California white wines keep three to five years. He also says most recipes for winemaking, including aging, are not valid on a world basis. For instance, the French model for Sauvignon Blanc was 23.5°B, but here the grapes weren't ripe; the pips were still green. "Letting our grapes ripen gives bigger flavors and higher alcohols because that's what God gives us and not what He gives the French."

To John, Chardonnay is the queen of the vineyards, the richest of the white wine varieties, and is 20% of Flora Springs' production, or 10,000 cases. It was the golden grail in the 1970's. Although stainless steel was used for aging in the big wineries, oak barrels came into use in smaller wineries. Then, FPS (Foundation Plant Services) at UC Davis developed clean fruit stocks. Flora Springs' first prizewinner was a partially barrel-fermented Chardonnay. Fermentation was underway when it went to barrel. After fermentation stopped they took it off the lees to be safe and put it in clean, washed barrels to age. When Ken Deis came on as

winemaker, they went to barrel fermenting the entire thing—aging on the lees with *bâtonnage*. Today they do whole cluster press and inoculate with yeast for fermentation in stainless steel tanks. After 48 hours the wine goes into all French oak, 50% new. After six months, the wine is blended, consolidated and bottled. John is not a fan of malolactic fermentation. It is used sparingly with their Napa Valley grapes because they don't have the acids the French do.

Napa Valley fruit has big, solid fruit flavors up front. Chardonnay goes from fruit, to oak in the middle with an oily texture you can feel, to the finish. The Flora Springs Chardonnay is blended from three different vineyards: East Zinfandel contributes rich, ripe fruit; it lacks acid but has great fruit tone. Oakville contributes a constant middle tone, yielding to the oak to let it show. Carneros takes the fruit out; it is high in acid, which causes the finish. John likes Chardonnay with lighter meats or to start a meal because he finds Chardonnay filling. He calls the Flora Springs 2006 Chardonnay a little fat, with its big pear taste and lingering feel of French oak.

Not only the tasting rooms and wine bottles are changing at Flora Springs. 2007 was the last harvest for its Italian varietal wines, and John *likes* Sangiovese. When his sister and

brother-in-law went to Italy, he said they came back wanting do these Italian wines. John also liked them—at the bar. Even a cheap Italian Pinot Grigio that dried out your mouth could become great with bruschetta. And, Italian styles are very different; Americans have not been successful with Italian varieties. Also, you can't make California wines for an Italian price, so there's no point to imitation. However, Bordeaux grapes do very well here in Napa Valley. What will happen after we're gone? John thinks that like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in France, our Napa Cab will be regionalized. ■