

David Ramey

Owner and Winemaker

Ramey Wine Cellars

202 Haydon Street, Healdsburg

35,000 case production

In the NVWL Summer 2003 REPORT we wrote about Larry Hyde of Hyde Vineyards, and mentioned a menu tacked to Larry's office wall from a White House dinner in 2002 at which Ramey Chardonnay, Hyde Vineyard 1999 had been poured. Since 1996, Ramey has continuously produced a vineyard-designated Chardonnay from Hyde Vineyards in Napa and, since 1997, one from nearby Hudson Vineyards. Although these Chardonnays are from the same appellation, from vineyards just 2¾ miles apart, their characters are quite different. David Ramey likes to think of these two vineyards as different Premier Cru sites, as Pucelles and Cailleret in Puligny-Montrachet, in the Cote de Beaune of Burgundy; in the same appellation but with special, distinguishing characters. David doesn't quite know what causes these differences. Is it clonal, soil, the tending? Of the two wines, he says Hyde is the more floral, feminine and charming; a little crisper, a little more fruit in flavor. Hudson is muscular, masculine, with blocky shoulders: a four-square wine. Both are from Old Wente selections with some multiples

of Long Vineyards and Robert Young selections, but no Dijon clones.

David wasn't always steeped in the subtleties of wine and winemaking. He grew up in Sunnyvale, went to UC Santa Cruz, and graduated in American Literature. But, while at Santa Cruz, David spent a quarter at UC Berkeley, rooming at a friend's house up in the hills. Photographers, entomologists and all kinds of interesting people came for dinners with wine and stayed long into the night to discuss everything under the sun. These stimulating conversations were the catalyst for change in David's career path. On his way to teach English in Columbia on a Mexicali-Hermosillo road trip, the coup de foudre struck: "Why not make wine? Happy people, an aesthetic statement, and it doesn't harm the environment."

David enrolled in science classes at San Jose State and then went to UC Davis for an MS in enology. He graduated in 1979, when Professor Webb was chairman of the department, Ann Noble was teaching, Professor Olmo was semi-retired and David's classmates included Cathy Corison, David Graves and Dick Ward, Lee Hudson, John Kongsgaard, Gil Nickel and John Williams and all the grape varieties studied were French. David took French and decided

to go to France after he got his degree. Professors Amerine and Kunkee gave him fourteen names to write for work. Of the seven that replied, Christian Moueix of Chateau Petrus said, "Yes."

That summer David found himself doing pumpovers at Chateaux Latour-a-Pomerol and Feytit-Clinet in Pomerol and Magdelaine in Saint-Emilion, where he said he certainly learned about barrels. He stayed through harvest and then went to Australia for harvest there. Then David came home to join Zelma Long at Simi in Healdsburg. In 1984 he left to replace Merry Edwards at Matanzas Creek, where production went from seven thousand to thirty thousand cases. In 1989 Christian Moueix invited David back to France for a second harvest and to discuss working together. First, though, from 1990 to 1996 David spent time as winemaker at Chalk Hill. He finally went to work for Christian at Dominus as Executive Vice President and Winemaker during the two-year construction of that winery, from the ground up. David was really the owner's representative on site, working with the architecture firm of Herzog and de Meuron. Dominus proved the genesis of the Ramey brand, since no white wine was made there. David made Ramey Chardonnay at Luna where UC Davis classmate and friend John Kongsgaard was winemaker.

Leslie Rudd next asked David to assist with the transition of Girard to Rudd, which he did from 1997 to 2002, with the Ramey wines now at Rudd. David says his wines were treated just like all the other lots in the cellar and caves, which was wonderful because it allowed him to grow to fifteen

David brought Ramey to Healdsburg in 2002 where it shared space downtown in a winery with Selby until space exclusively for Ramey became available. Half of Ramey's production is red, half white. Today the red house of Ramey is in a site formerly occupied by Clos du Bois, and prior to that



thousand cases. As Rudd developed its direction, Ramey took over the Russian River and Carneros Chardonnays and the Jericho Canyon Cabernet David had initiated, since Rudd would now be all estate vineyards.

a Sunsweet prune drying facility, “an ag processing site right within city limits,” as David likes to point out. The Chardonnay winery is in a new, leased build-to-suit building a few blocks from the red winery. David says its zoning, water and sewage are

all beautiful, with plenty of power and city sewer and water. The kitchen periodically hosts visiting chefs and its wine library is filled with older vintages. According to David, it's more common in France to have wineries right in the city than those castles in a vineyard we often find in California wine country.

Why does Ramey make Chardonnay? David calls the fruit the king of white grapes and the wine the red wine of whites. Chardonnay is the only white wine routinely fermented in oak—the only white wine in which oak plays a major role. It is also the only white wine that is routinely malolactic. Currently, besides Napa Cabernets and two Sonoma Syrahs, Ramey makes six Chardonnays. Three are single vineyard (with more to come) and three appellation designated. The designated vineyards are Hyde, since 1996; Hudson, since 1997; and Ritchie, since 2002. In 2000 Ramey introduced its appellation designated wines of Russian River and Carneros and, in 2003, Sonoma Coast.

David feels the climate in California is more maritime, not as North-South as in France, and the fog belt a more dominant consideration for California Chardonnays. Many of the vineyards from which Ramey buys fruit are planted to David's direction. But, really, the selection is done when David sees

the site. He doesn't deal with vineyards that are going to crop ten tons per acre, and he looks for growers who are passionate about wine quality: their name may be on the bottle (95% of a vineyard designated wine must be made from fruit from that vineyard). Ramey does retain a viticulturist, Daniel



Roberts, who is in the vineyards every two weeks from first pruning to almost harvest; then David is in the vineyards all the time.

For Ramey, most fruit is picked early in the morning, some at night. Chardonnay goes directly, whole-cluster, into a Puleo press which can handle ten tons at a time. Ramey

whole-cluster presses for phenolic delicacy (a 1986 Matanzas Creek development). The juice settles overnight in a fermentation tank, is racked to another tank with about half its lees, and then goes into barrels to ferment with its own native yeasts. Ramey uses all French oak, mostly from François Frères (although a little Hungarian oak from the François partnership is starting to help out). The vineyard designated Chardonnays are in $\frac{2}{3}$ new oak, $\frac{1}{3}$ for the appellation designated Chardonnays. The wine is fermented dry, then it is topped up and stirred weekly (*bâtonnage*) until native malolactic fermentation is complete. The wine isn't racked once malolactic fermentation is complete and is celledared at 57°. About 10% of the appellation designated Chardonnay is in stainless steel barrels to add a bit of crispness and fruit. The wine is *sur lies* aged for 12 months if it's appellation designated, 20 months if vineyard designated. The barrels in the winery are in tiers two deep and five high in a very roomy climate controlled space. The finished wine is bottled unfiltered on a self-contained traveling bottling line co-owned with Chateau Montelena. David says the Chardonnays keep about ten years from vintage. Once bottled, they are ready to ship and enjoy. Classical counterparts to Chardonnay are the richer fish dishes such as sea bass, monkfish, salmon and scallops.

David has 30 harvests under his belt, which has allowed the Ramey style to be developed empirically over decades. However, throughout his career David has been involved with tasting groups, tasting, talking and learning. He says, “There is always discovery, which brings little continuous improvements if we’re lucky.” He calls having a palate an extra. What’s more important is aptitude and application. Ramey also has a great team: David and his wife and ten employees. Since hiring a sales manager, David doesn’t have to travel as much as he used to, which is good. When asked about the next generation, David says his children are fifteen and seventeen. “It’s too early to say and there’s absolutely no pressure to decide.” ■