

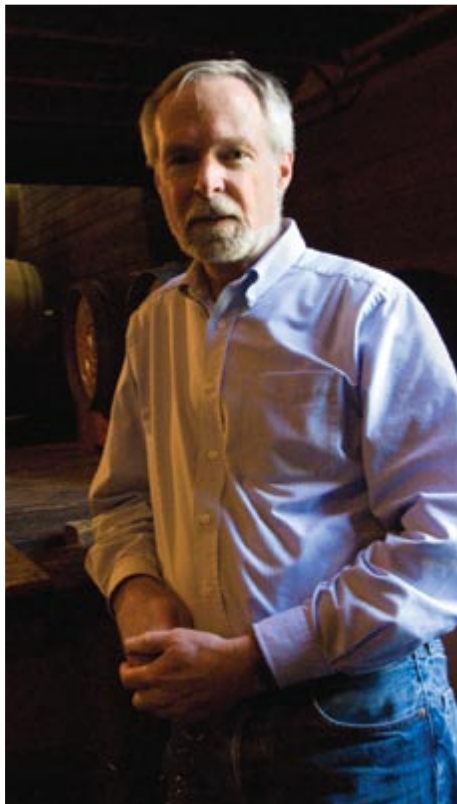
# Interviews

## David Whitehouse

Winemaker and Vice President of Vineyard  
and Winery Operations  
Trefethen Family Vineyards  
1160 Oak Knoll Avenue, Napa  
60,000 cases (400,000 vines)

David Whitehouse has been with Trefethen Family Vineyards since 1975. He came to Trefethen from Callaway Vineyards and Winery in Temecula. David had first studied biology at Bates College in Maine and then had gone to Viet Nam in the Navy. When he came back from the war he worked in San Diego and took a few courses at UC Santa Barbara in wine tasting. He confesses his future came down to optometry versus winemaking and winemaking won. David took a second BA at UC Davis in the 1970's when classes grew from six to thirty six students and even to ninety in a wine production class for which he was Teaching Assistant. After Davis, David became a research enologist for Zelma Long at Robert Mondavi Winery, where he had been a student intern, and from there to Callaway and Trefethen.

David says Gene and Katie Trefethen had been looking for agricultural property in



Napa Valley for some time when they found the 280-acre Eshcol estate (and three hundred more acres) in 1968 in what is now Oak Knoll District. Since the end of Prohibition the winery had been used just for storage. It had no roof or floor. In 1973, quite by chance,

Katie met John Wright of M&H (Moët-Hennessey) Vineyards. John and the Trefethens brokered a deal. M&H would make its wine at Trefethen until the M&H winery—soon renamed Domain Chandon—was ready for winemaking. So, with Tony Baldini as vineyard manager for Trefethen, Gene and Katie's son John became winemaker and made wines alongside Domain Chandon through its 1977 harvest. John also joined a wine technical group in Napa and instituted an internship program at the winery. He thought wines should be a reflection of the fruit coming off the vineyards, and planned for Trefethen to be a red and white house. Today, 65 percent of Trefethen fruit goes to Trefethen, and the remaining 35 percent is sold to other wineries, such as its Chardonnay to Cakebread and Schramsberg.

The first Trefethen vintage, a 1973 Chardonnay high in alcohol, was made but not bottled. In 1974 John made both Chardonnay and Riesling. In barrel the Riesling was bone dry and the Chardonnay heavily oaked. They split the Chardonnay into half stainless steel and half oak. David says John and his wife Janet liked

the combination and philosophy. The final Trefethen Chardonnay aging recipe is now 15 to 20 percent in stainless steel and the rest in barrels. In 1976 the Riesling didn't finish fermentation and its residual sugar beneficially changed the fruit character. David says basically their Riesling has been that way ever since, with .5% to .7% residual sugar (undetectable by many).

In the 1960's and 1970's the prevailing style of pruning was the "California sprawl." Such things as crop levels or canopy management just weren't in the books. However, new techniques began to emerge throughout the wine community and in the early 1990's, because of phylloxera, Trefethen replanted its vineyards, taking advantage of innovation. Since the average life of a vineyard is twenty to thirty years, David says replants require planning far out in time. Vine rows were trellised, and new rootstocks and budwood planted in lots of combinations. Trefethen also began counting clusters and making crop weight estimates.

Gewürztraminer was taken out, since Gewürtz was never going to be "the next white wine variety," but twenty acres of Riesling were kept because, David admits, "We all do love it." The initial Chardonnay was in Old Wente selections; today it is clones 4 and 5 and everything up to 13, plus Dijon. Heat-treated,

David says the Wente clone gives good production, good flavor. The poorly ripening Zinfandel has been pulled. In 2000 a few acres were budded over to Viognier for a wine presently available only at the winery. To put these changes in perspective, David cites various crop reports. Except for Cabernet and Merlot, varieties are decreasing in number in Napa Valley, and Chardonnay



is not maintaining its present levels. In 2007, of the 35,000 tons of white grapes harvested, Viognier accounted for 377 tons and Riesling 560, Sauvignon Blanc for 9,581 and Chardonnay 24,000. However, 57,000 tons of Cabernet was produced.

In the "old days," David says everything was done the same in the vineyard at Trefethen,

but in the last ten to fifteen years there has been a lot more cooperation between vineyard manager and winemaker and a synthesis between winemaking and vineyard managing. Today, each block or part of a block is farmed in a particular way according to team decisions. The estate vineyards are either organic, certified green or sustainable. Hillside Vineyard will be certified organic in August. David thinks this kind of change allows Trefethen to see what can be learned to maintain the quality of the ground and preserve *terroir*. There are cover crops now and less disking and spraying. A change in soil brings a change in rootstock or drip irrigation, and technical equipment allows Trefethen to do things in more detail than it could have in the past. Controlling moisture is extremely important and probes and pressure bomb readings are significant new aids. Members may recall meeting David and Director of Viticulture Jon Ruel during the Wine Library's 2006 Harvest Seminar in Oak Knoll District and a visit to Trefethen's winery and vineyards.

Trefethen picks early in the morning, starting at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. The Riesling is pressed whole cluster; the juice goes into a stainless steel fermenter and settles overnight. It is then racked and inoculated with yeast. Its stainless steel fermentation is relatively cool; chilling can stop the process. A small tank

of sweet reserve is also made for blending. Riesling is bottled the first week of December. With high acidity (low pH), it ages extremely well. After whole cluster press, Chardonnay is also inoculated with yeast, as David finds natural fermentation very risky. It is then aged in 25% new, 75% old French oak (the red wines are aged in French and American oak barrel combinations). However, lots are treated differently. Some stays on the lees, some goes 20 percent to 25 percent through malolactic fermentation for complexity, and to round off the wine so it is drinkable early. Two Chardonnay blocks are planted to sparkling wine clones, the rest to still. David says the Chardonnay has good acidity with tastes of pineapple and grapefruit—great fruit. In the old days a Chardonnay might last twenty years; today it is less than ten, depending on the vintage. David calls Chardonnay a tremendous food wine.

David is in charge of long-range planning, case production and budgets at Trefethen. He is part of a team, but says he couldn't do his job without a computer. When asked about the future David says with eagerness that the Malbec has done extremely well. Trefethen has two acres in production; more in the ground is on the horizon. ■