

Sandy Belcher

Owner and Winemaker

Arns

60I Mund Road, St. Helena

1,000 cases

Sandi Belcher is from Virginia, where she grew up in the loving midst of her Greek family. After graduating from William and Mary in Williamsburg, however, Sandi went off to UC Davis for graduate work, convinced her future was in caring for large animals or at least large agricultural crops. And once at Davis, wine totally won her over. Sandi says it was just like gardening and infinitely better than dissection or having to pull calves at five in the morning when it was freezing out. She took a degree in chemistry and agriculture and, in the course of her studies, researched Chardonnay with class-



mate Larry Hyde (now of Hyde Vineyards and HdV). She also worked at Chateau Montelena and Heitz Cellars and the UC Davis vineyard experimental station in Oakville. In Oakville, Sandi made wine with fruit from vines she had helped trellis using a number of different methods and at Heitz she helped with its now-legendary Martha's Vineyard 1974 Cabernet Sauvignon. After graduation, Sandi traveled around the world working in wineries before returning to Napa Valley.

In 1979 she was hired as winemaker by Long Vineyards on Pritchard Hill in St. Helena, where she worked alongside Bob Long, with Zelma Long consulting. Bob oversaw development of the vineyards and Zelma its wines. Sandi says she always seemed to be

on the forklift in early photographs as Long Vineyards began to grow from 800 to 2,000 cases and from a production of only Chardonnay to Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Riesling, and Sauvignon Blanc. Sandi was winemaker at Long until the property was put up for sale in 2005, and in that time she did extensive clonal research, especially on Chardonnay.

Meanwhile, Sandi and her partner John Arns took on the ownership and management of an Arns family property on Howell Mountain at about 800 feet, “Tilting Rock Ranch.” In 1869, its 160 acres had been homesteaded by a German who planted apricots and Zinfandel. In the 1880’s during his tenure, stone used to build Greystone Winery (now CIA-Greystone), was quarried from two pits dug into the hillside. The German died in 1912. The ranch’s next owner was a stonemason and plasterer who added a planting of Cabernet Sauvignon. In the late 1950’s John’s father acquired the property from the mason as a place for weekends in the country when the family lived in Kensington and Mr. Arns was on the board of a division of Chevron in Berkeley. At the time, Martin Ray of Santa Cruz Mountains was scouring Napa Valley for Cabernet. He found and bought from Arns; locally, Burgess and Ballentine also bought its Cabernet and Sandi supposes had a hand

in managing its vineyards as well. The Arns family took over farming the property in 1966, planting additional Cabernet. Meanwhile, John graduated from UC Davis with degrees in both enology and viticulture. In 1979 he established his own vineyard management company. Besides Arns, Long Vineyards became a client as did Melanson Vineyards. John’s father died in the 1970’s, and in 1979 John and Sandi embarked on a steady process of the development of Arns to six all-Cabernet vineyards.

Soil at Arns is red Aiken—loam and tufa—and is either very deep or a rock pile. Today, six different Cabernet clones, FPS 06 and 07, ENTAV-INRA 15 and 337, and ones from Fay Vineyards and Shafer Vineyards have been planted, with about ten acres in production in ten vineyard blocks. The old apricot orchard was planted to Cabernet as was a former hayfield, now called Eloise’s Vineyard. The 1.1-acre Meadow Vineyard yields just three barrels of Cabernet. The vineyard block by the winery had 50 to 60 year-old gnarly vines of Cabernet with a color problem. Sandy says its juice was white! It has been replanted. The newest vineyard is nearest the entrance to the property. Two large water storage tanks and the ponds that fill the two former quarries provide drip irrigation as needed.



Between 1979 and 1990, Arns sold its Howell Mountain Cabernet fruit to Randy Dunn. It also had sold to Mike Robbins at Spring Mountain and Merryvale for its “Profile,” and then in the mid 1980’s Arns built a winery. John had kept saying, “Yes,” and Sandi, “No,” because she had spent twenty years at other wineries and didn’t think Arns needed its own, since its grapes were so good. Now she is really, really glad they built the winery. With your own winery, Sandi counsels, you have complete control from the vineyard to the dinner table, which

she says is so important. 1992 was the first commercial release of Arns Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. This was 600 cases of 100 percent estate grown wine, which was all Arns made until it began to produce a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon in 2002. The first release of its Napa Valley Syrah was 2004.

Fruit at Arns is all picked by hand. At picking time John is on the tractor and Sandi is at the crush pad and 10 to 15 pickers are in the vine rows. The Vega 10 de-stemmer can do about 10 tons an hour. It has three augurs and can also be adapted for whole cluster. Sandi had seen this equipment in action at Quintessa and Robert Mondavi and knew it was what she must have. Before de-stemming, Syrah berries go into stainless steel fermenters for a three-day cold soak. The must is inoculated with commercial yeast and fermented dry. The new wine is left on the skins for three weeks and then by hand is fed through a basket press that Sandi says she loves and has used for years. The wine goes through natural malolactic fermentation in barrel. It is not racked; the Syrah is neither fined nor filtered; the Cabernet is filtered. The Syrah is aged between 24 and 30 months in one year-old French oak, Cabernet in 100 percent new French oak. The barrels in the small, immaculate, climate-controlled winery are stored in tiers of three.

To blend the lots, Sandi takes samples across to her lab on the back porch of the house next door. She says it is so important for samples to be at room temperature; the cold masks their flavors. At the time of this interview about 100 cases of 2006 Syrah were in a rented 200-gallon jacketed stainless steel tank ready to be bottled by hand Memorial Day weekend. Arns made 150 cases of Syrah in 2005. Sandi says the wine goes into stainless for about a month to get over its dramas after blending, before bottling. The 700 cases of its 2006 Cabernet are to be bottled over Labor Day weekend. After sanitization, a mobile bottler works from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and the cases of Cab are done. Sandi especially likes that Arns Estate Cabernet never leaves the premises until it is in the bottle. Because of hard frosts in 2008, its Cabernet vintage production is down 60 percent.

Fruit for Arns Syrah comes from Melanson Vineyard at 1400 feet on Pritchard Hill overlooking the vineyards of Colgin. The twelve year-old Syrah vines were planted by John and grow in very rocky soil in a block no larger than half an acre. Vines are the 174 Phelps clone, of Rhône Valley origins, on 110-R rootstock and planted in 6' x 4' rows; the berries are medium-sized. According to Sandi, Syrah is like Sangiovese: anything you add to it during vinification disappears, making a muddled wine, one not

true to its form. Additions of Viognier or Marsanne to darken color also the change taste. Sandi's benchmark Syrahs were the 1978 and the 1979 from Joseph Phelps. She characterizes them as "so approachable, so open." Sandi was just starting out as a winemaker and could only buy wine for her own table on a modest budget. She wanted Syrah because it goes well with food, it ages well, she could afford it, and the Phelps Syrah wasn't over-oaked or high in alcohol. Sandi says, "Syrah screams out for food."

Arns Cabernet is sold at the winery and in various countries and states in the US; the Syrah is sold only at the winery, and also at what Sandi calls amazing tastings and charitable events. She cited the 24th Annual Addy and Bruce Bassin Memorial California Barrel Tasting and Vintner's Dinner to benefit the Addy and Bruce Bassin Cancer Research Fund at George Washington University. Its very first tasting was the first-ever barrel tasting of California Cabernets. This spring 50 wineries participated in a tasting of 2007 Cabernet futures as well as the vintner's dinner the night before. Arns Syrah took first place at the dinner. There is much to be said for being able to keep a watchful and informed eye, hand, and heart on the wine you make. Sandi does say she misses making white wine, but that it is very difficult to find someone dedicated to

making good Chardonnay. She says there is so much absentee ownership in Napa Valley now and she wants to be able to see such a project through as a team.

Since 1981 Sandi and John have been consulting in Thailand on a 350-acre parcel with a restaurant on a platform up in the air where all the wines made from the vineyards below are sold. Sandi says she really likes getting away from the Valley for a fresh perspective. For a recent consult in China she was able to find a Cabernet that fully ripens in time to be harvested at 7,000 to 9,000 feet altitude.

Much of the reason Sandi has peace of mind while she is traveling is due to her daughter, Kathi, who routinely works with Sandi at harvest and at bottling but can be relied on at a distance to take care of things in the winery. Besides Arns, Kathi has worked at St. Francis Winery and Belvedere Winery, on the enology side of things, and is professionally trained in computer applications. Her mother says Kathi is organized, does all the IT for the winery, and has a good palate. She frees Sandi to travel and consult, which is a great, great asset. ■