

A Q&A with celebrated wine maker Vanessa Wong of the Sonoma Coast's Peay Vineyard By: Dina Gan

Located on the true north coast of Sonoma County, in a region once thought inhospitable to grape-growing, Peay Vineyards has developed a reputation as a respected artisanal label in just a few years since its first offering. Now making top-ten lists and garnering wine critic accolades, Peay has a woman behind its wine: Vanessa Wong. Here, she reveals what it's like to be a woman with a taste for the vine things in life.

When did you first know you wanted to make wine? How did you get started in the business?

My first job, back when I was in high school, was working for a caterer. After a long day of catering an event, my boss would invite us to sit and relax for a few moments with a glass of wine. It was the late '80s and wineries were just starting to put the varietal grape name on the label rather than some generic name like "White Wine" or "Hearty Burgundy." It was then I started to pay attention to wine and remarked that the bottle contained "Chardonnay" and thought, "Wow this wine is made from a specific grape and it has a name!"

I became more interested in wine and worked at a wine and cheese shop in San Francisco while I was still in high school. Then when it came time to decide what I wanted to study in college, my older sister who was attending University of California Davis, handed me the course catalog and suggested I look through it to see if any area of study interested me. It was then I discovered that you could actually major in grape-growing and winemaking and that the coursework was all science courses, which was something at which I both excelled, and something pragmatic enough that my parents would approve. After my freshman year at UC Davis I worked my first harvest at Robert Mondavi Winery in the Napa Valley. This harvest will be my 20th harvest.

Co-owning a vineyard is a fantasy for most people. What is a typical day like for you during

the winemaking season? What do you like to do during the off-season, if there is one?

Harvest is the busiest time of year for the winemaking. It is when the grapes become ripe and ready to pick and when we vinify the grapes to make the wine. During harvest, we work seven days a week for about two months, often working 100 hours a week. We get up at first light to start picking the grapes on our vineyard. My husband, Nick, and his brother Andy work with our vineyard crew to make sure that we are picking the vineyard sections that I determined ready to be picked and ensure that they are picked with any specific instructions I have given. While they are doing that, I go and walk through the vineyard to taste the grapes and assess the vines to make a decision about what will be the next section we will pick because different parts of the vineyard ripen at different times. I also take samples of the grapes to bring back to the winery to analyze them for the sugar and acid level. We then truck the bins of grapes to the winery where we sort the bunches by hand, de-stem them and put them into tank for fermentation. I monitor the progress of the fermentations by analyses and taste.

There are many other vinification tasks that need to be done during the course of harvest time, like pressing grape skins, putting wine into barrels and, of course, lots and lots of daily winery equipment cleaning. I decide what to pick the next day, we clean all the equipment, go back to the vineyard and start the whole process over again the next day. So if people's fantasies of owning a vineyard include working like crazy, then they've got the right fantasy going!

Because we farm our own grapes, we are generally busy during the winter pruning the dormant vines and spring and summer cultivating the vines during the growing season. When I am not helping my husband in the vineyard, I am taking care of the wines as they age in barrel, working on wine blends and preparing for bottling and, of course, the next harvest. We do take the time to travel during our slowest time: in the dead of winter. We either go

to someplace warm for relaxation or visit some other wine growing region like France, New Zealand or Australia to learn more about the wine made there. I also love to cook and enjoy hosting an annual Chinese New Year banquet for friends and family.

What makes Peay Vineyards unique?

For me, one of the most important aspects of making quality wine is growing grapes in an ideal site. If you start with grapes grown in an ideal site, you are that much closer to producing a high quality wine. As a wine maker, my job is to coax out and accentuate the defining characteristics of the grapes to produce wine of distinction. I feel that the Sonoma Coast is a new frontier, viticulturally, with its unique climate and topography that lends the crucial elements for growing grapes for quality wine: long sunny days but cool nights, and mild autumns that offer slow but continuous ripening seasons. With our vineyard on the Sonoma Coast, we have an ideal location and I am able to grow balanced vines that produce fruit of the highest quality to make wines that express a sense of place, or what we call the terroir of the Sonoma Coast.

Which of the Peay wines is your current favorite?

Choosing one is like picking a favorite among your own children. I do have a particular passion for Pinot noir. I studied winemaking and worked in wineries for two years in France and my favorite place for the wines and the vineyards is Burgundy which is where they grow Pinot noir...

Do you ever conduct tours of the Peay winery?

While not open to the general public, we do host visits from customers who buy wine from our direct mail order. I like to show them the vineyard because that it is where it all starts. It is important to impress upon them that the quality of the wines comes from how mindfully we farm the grapes...

For more of this interview visit
www.jademagazine.com/63me_gan.html