

## Celebrating 25 years at Pine Ridge

### Winemaker Stacy Clark has spent two-and-a-half decades making world class wine

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Spending 25 years at the same job is a major accomplishment for most.

In the wine industry, it's extremely rare for a winemaker to celebrate a silver anniversary in the cellar where he or she got a start.

Stacy Clark has been making important decisions and making wine at Pine Ridge Winery now for two-and-a-half decades.

Although she now works for Leucadia, the company that bought out founders Gary and Nancy Andrus more than a decade ago, Clark has not only been making Pine Ridge wine but she's seen Napa Valley evolve into one of the major wine regions of the world.

Even Stacy finds it hard to believe she's been at the helm of a winery operation for two-thirds of its existence.

Pine Ridge was founded by the Andruses in 1978 and Clark came on board in 1983. Her first experience with Napa Valley fruit was with another Stags Leap District operation, Stags Leap Wine Cellars, while she was a student at UC Davis.

Asked how she came to work at Pine Ridge, Clark said Pine Ridge was the first to offer her a job after she mailed out dozens of resumés just prior to graduation.

"I was hired on as an enologist, and I spent the first two weeks painting barrels," she recalls. Gary Andrus was winemaker and his assistant was Grant Taylor, a popular cellar rat who went off to New Zealand to launch his own winemaking operation. She said this was long before the wine caves were carved out, when "everything was outside. We were a little primitive then."

Pine Ridge has grown slowly but surely from Clark's first harvest, when production hovered around 20,000 cases. Today, production is slightly more than 35,000 cases of wine made from estate fruit, with merlot, cabernet sauvignon, malbec and a new Bordeaux blend accounting for the lion's share of the output. Pine Ridge also produces a distinct blend of chenin blanc and viognier from the Lodi region, with production

totaling 45,000 cases.

The parent company, Leucadia, also owns and operates Archery Summit in Oregon and is putting together a new red wine project in Washington.

“Nothing sits still in this industry,” Clark says with reference to her longevity in relation to Pine Ridge and beyond.

“You don’t even judge wine the same way. Wine made 50 years ago is not the same wine made today.” Clark feels that wine quality has improved substantially — and winemakers got on board with that or were left in the dust.

She believes Pine Ridge has made great strides in the current decade. “We have the land (for planting vines) and an extensive palette of (grape) varieties to work with,” she adds. “So we’ve been busy fine-tuning and balancing our wines.”

Clark credits former CEO George Scheppler with giving her the tools to accomplish some of that fine-tuning. Formerly co-CEO at Opus One, Scheppler brought with him cellar practices like cluster sorting, cold soaking and extended maceration, she points out, all of which have allowed her to improve wine quality.

And it was Scheppler, she said, who asked her if she wanted to produce an outstanding reserve wine that could become a hallmark for Pine Ridge.

That discussion led Clark to put together a program for a new appellation based wine, Fortis, made with fruit from the best blocks in five distinct appellations. “It’s a cabernet based wine and always will be,” she adds. One day the blend might contain all five Bordeaux varieties, but right now there’s no cabernet franc in this new reserve wine, first produced in 2003. In 2004, 74 percent of the blend was cabernet sauvignon, while that percentage amps up to 83 in 2005.

Clark oversees vineyard operations along with veteran viticulturist Pascal Marty, much as Andrus did when she signed on at Pine Ridge. But that’s what Clark prefers as she knows wine is really made in the vineyard by employing sound, sustainable farming practices.

“There’s always something new to challenge you,” Clark says of the daily regimen, “something else to do. I find it energizing. I’m pleased by the good investments the owners have made that help with grape handling as well as innovations (employed) in the cellar.”

Asked the difficult question to single out proud moments and accomplishments over the years, Clark doesn’t hesitate in chatting up the ultra-reserve wine, Fortis.

“But I’ve appreciated the day-to-day ... there’s a flow ... even solving silly stuff has been satisfying. I’ve worked with a lot of good people over the years, including a number of wonderful guys from Germany and France — and I’m still working with a French university (student program).

“As for wine, well, I’ve been really proud of our Stags Leap wines year in, year out.”

And what does the future hold? Clark says come fall Pine Ridge will be releasing a 2006 Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon, a blend from all estate vineyards “that’s stylistically different from the other cabernets.”

### Outstanding wines

Fruit for Pine Ridge’s estate wines comes from Carneros, Stags Leap, Oakville, Rutherford and Howell Mountain appellations.

Pine Ridge produces its Lodi blend of chenin blanc and viognier, plus a Carneros chardonnay and a very small production chardonnay from Stags Leap District. There’s also a Carneros merlot and a Crimson Creek merlot, plus relatively small case lots of malbec and a malbec-based blend called Onyx. Annual output also includes four distinct cabernets from Stags Leap, Oakville, Rutherford and Howell Mountain appellations, along with Fortis.

During a recent visit to the winery, we got to taste a trio of outstanding new releases:

Pine Ridge 2005 Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75): Cherry and spice aromas give way to a minty, lush mouthful of cherries and blueberries, accented by mature tannins and a chocolate-covered cherry finish.

Pine Ridge 2005 Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$80): Big and beautiful, this is a supple wine bursting with black cherries and blackberries, with a most

inviting nose that promises berries and gingerbread cookie spice. It’s mostly cabernet with subtle splashes of petit verdot and merlot blended in to provide added layers of flavor. This is a full-bodied wine that you can enjoy with dinner tonight or cellar away for some special dinner in your future.

Pine Ridge 2005 Fortis (\$135): A well-balanced wine with incredible structure, this ultra-reserve bottling is a finesse wine, a tête de cuvée from vineyard blocks and sub-blocks that emerge as standouts from the vintage. There’s lots of berries here in both aroma and taste — raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, even cranberries, along with an ample supply of ripe, red cherries. Hints of dark chocolate and coffee linger on the lush finish. It should be even better when released in the fall. A wine for celebrating just about anything, just so you’ll have an excuse to pop the cork.

