

Bonnie and Robert Lloyd
of Lloyd Cellars.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LLOYD CELLARS

GOOD MEDICINE

THE ADORABLE “PRESCRIPTION” FOR LLOYD CELLARS’ SUCCESS

by Jessie Birschbach

Prior to my interview with Robert and Bonnie Lloyd, I had already written this story off—or rather, written it in my head—as a run-of-the-mill profile of an experienced winemaker who has found success by going into business for himself. You can’t blame me for that given Robert’s pedigree, firmly stamped with a shining Chardonnay grape: The graduate of the viticulture and enology master’s program at the University of California, Davis—who bears a solid resemblance to Steve Irwin and is just as charismatic—has crafted his liquid gold for the likes of La Crema and Rombauer, two of the country’s biggest Chardonnay powerhouses, while working with other producers and varieties through his company Lloyd Wine Consulting.

But it turns out that this account isn’t merely about the masterful winemaker Lloyd has become. As a refreshing surprise, it’s an endearing love story. The constant current of adoration and support that flows between the couple after 25 years was palpable, even over the phone: As Bonnie told me, “When I met him, the passion that was in eyes—I mean all he could talk about was wine and winemaking...I got excited because he was so passionate.” And the result of this perfect partnership, aside from the obvious successful marriage, is their thriving winery, Lloyd Cellars.

Back in 2008, Robert was doing very well as the head winemaker at Rombauer, even in the midst of an economic slump. Bonnie, however, could see that he wasn’t quite happy. Having once owned and operated a lucrative venture of her own (a dog-walking and pet-sitting business), she felt confident that he could start his own label. “Everyone thought we were crazy to take the big pay cut,” Robert told me. “We had two little kids to consider too, but there’s no way I would have gone out on my own without her saying, ‘You know we can do this. Let’s do what we’re passionate about!’”



Conceived by Bonnie Lloyd, the name of this value-driven Chardonnay refers to prescriptions written for alcohol during Prohibition.

Twelve years later, Bonnie’s loving push has yielded a Napa-based portfolio of wines from Sta. Rita Hills, Alexander Valley, Carneros, and Clarksburg. Lloyd Cellars has experienced steady growth and plenty of praise. But Robert has shrewdly capped its case production, mostly due to his preference for the minimal and delayed use of sulfur dioxide: “I’m not going to grow beyond what we can control especially because it is a risky style of winemaking,” he said.

It’s a risk worth taking, in his view. “When making Chardonnay, the first thing to consider is temperature control, but secondly, we don’t use a lot of sulfur dioxide,” he explained. “It’s the middle of May and I still haven’t added any sulfur to the 2019 Chards.” Instead he relies on natural carbon dioxide and temperature to stabilize the Chardonnay while optimizing micro-oxygenation; otherwise, the “sulfur gobbles up all the oxygen, which to me, defeats the purpose of using a porous barrel.” Robert feels strongly that this technique is a big part of why Lloyd Chardonnay goes down so smoothly.

But the big and rich yet fresh style that has become his specialty is also a function of terroir. The higher malic acid levels that naturally occur in Chardonnay from Carneros and the Sangiacomo Vineyard in particular work perfectly for his approach, he said, likening his 20-year relationship with the Sangiacomo family to his happy marriage. “It’s our 12th vintage with them, and the beauty is that I don’t even have to tell them what I want—we just know each other,” enthused Robert, who values his other grower relationships just as fully—so much so that he also makes a single-grower Chardonnay from Clarksburg called Prescription. “I felt like James [Reamer of Reamer Farms] wasn’t getting the recognition he deserved,” Robert explained. “That’s why we even put his name on the label.”

Prescription’s intricate label was conceived by Bonnie, who also came up with the name. (She credits Christin McDaniel of Distill Branding with help on the design.) “During Prohibition, doctors would actually write prescriptions for alcohol,” she noted. “I thought since this is just meant to be a fun wine with a value-driven price point, a younger, hipper crowd would appreciate that.” Bonnie also designed the Lloyd Cellars labels to evoke those of chic perfume bottles, making the elegant Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir, for instance, seem all the more luxurious. (“She’s not just cute, she’s creative,” gushed Robert.) For that wine, Robert employs another unique winemaking technique involving a French press–like contraption that he calls a “submerged cap device,” which allows him to lengthen his ferments and vent off the ethanol that in turn concentrates flavor. Maintaining what he calls the “brambly, rich, and spicy” character of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir is paramount.

But perhaps nothing is more paramount to Robert than his love for his wife. And fortunately for us, the byproducts of his devotion are the wines of Lloyd Cellars. ■■

TASTING NOTES BY PUBLISHER MERIDITH MAY

Prescription 2018

Chardonnay, Clarksburg

(\$20) Sourced from a single grower, this white—which underwent 95% malolactic fermentation in stainless steel with some oak treatment—is a definite cure for the common Chardonnay. Aromas of baked apple and tapioca precede mouthwatering notes of guava, creamed corn, cookie dough, and lemon blossom. **92**



Lloyd by Robert Lloyd 2018

Chardonnay, Carneros,

Sonoma County (\$40)

This expression was made primarily with grapes sourced from three separate blocks in the certified-sustainable Sangiacomo Vineyard; a small percentage comes from Truchard Vineyard. These prestigious sites clearly influence the intensity and purity of fruit in the barrel-fermented wine, which aged for ten months in American oak and was left on the lees until bottling. Carneros Chardonnay is associated with crisp acidity and fresh stone-fruit flavors, and this is no exception; it also offers aromas of pineapple, lemon, and white flowers that lead to notes of buttered pecan, vanilla, peach, and daffodil. **94**



Lloyd Cellars by Robert

Lloyd 2017 Pinot Noir,

Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Ynez

Valley, Santa Barbara

County (\$50)

Thanks to the calcium-rich soils of the Sta. Rita Hills AVA and cooling winds from the Pacific, this Pinot Noir shows great natural acidity and intensity of flavor. Profound aromas of rose petals and sweet red cherries in wet earth give way to notes of orange peel that glide through raspberry liqueur, mocha, and cedar on the palate, followed by a luxuriously juicy finish of fresh plum. **94**

