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FINE WINE
Roger Morris

Making an impression with 'expressionism'

Fiddlehead's 'family' of wines is built on only two varietals

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Winemakers often talk about the "expression" of a particular variety of grape -- essentially how it tastes in different soils and climates and with differing winemaking approaches -- but Kathy Joseph has built her whole winery around the concept. She decided early in her career that she especially liked working with pinot noir and sauvignon blanc, and, 17 years after she opened her Fiddlehead Winery, she can use the two of them to pretty much satisfy any taste or food pairing.

"I'm interested in the family of variations within the two varietals," she said recently while re-introducing her "family" of wines on the front porch of Colliers of Centreville. It was a mild spring day, and lunchtime aromas wafted over from next door at Buckley's Tavern.

We began with two quite different sauvignons from Santa Barbara County, where the Fiddlehead winery is located in Lompoc. We then met the redhead of the family -- a crisp rosé of pinot noir called "Pink Fiddle," and two pinot noirs from her Fiddlestix vineyard, in the new Santa Rita appellation, and another from Oregon. We finished with a chilled dessert wine, a Sauternes-like sauvignon appropriately called "Sweetie."

Joseph learned winemaking in Sonoma and Napa at the Simi, Long, Joseph Phelps and Robert Pecota wineries before starting Fiddlehead, named after the tightly wound edible spring fern, in 1989. She was attracted to both the possibilities of Santa Barbara and Oregon *terroirs* and made wine at contract facilities in both places for a while.

She opted to put down her winery roots in Santa Barbara when she bought her vineyard there in 1996. Joseph still oversees the vineyard blocks where she buys grapes, including Oregon, although she now has the grapes shipped south in refrigerated containers. A moment of cinematic fame came when, after having dinner with her, the principals of the film "Sideways" wrote her sauvignon blanc into the script.

Her wines are impressive. The 2004 Happy Canyon sauvignon blanc (about \$24) tastes of tart peaches, minerals and apricot, while the 2001 Honeysuckle (\$32) has riper fruit and is more pungent.

The 2002 Oldsville Reserve pinot noir (\$40) from the Willamette Valley, in Oregon, has good flavors of tobacco, tonic-water bitters and a touch of cola, while the two Santa Barbara pinots -- the 2002 Seven Twenty Eight (\$38) and the 2001 Lollapalooza (\$50) -- are more tightly wound wines that need decanting and more age.

Joseph, a vibrant, expressive woman who describes herself as the "Head Fiddle," conducts an elegant symphony with her two expressive instruments.

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