



# In Praise of Humble Men and Ferocity of Terroir

## NEYERS VINEYARDS STILL FLIES UNDER THE RADAR

story and photo by Randy Caparoso

Do American wines that blithely ignore varietal expectations have a chance in today's market for loud or cooler-than-thou wines?

This past May, I paid a visit to the Neyers Vineyards winery, tucked into Chiles Valley in the hills east of Napa Valley's St. Helena, accompanied by Jordan Nova, Restaurant Director of 1313 Main St. in the City of Napa. Nova, who at the tender age of 26 has already done time as a wine director in Austin, New York and Hawaii, now presides over a \$1 million wine program studded with all the geeky wines in the world that young sommeliers love.

According to Nova, "At the restaurant we talk about 'soul' a lot—what really distinguishes the best wines from others." As it were, Neyers's flagship wine is a Cabernet Sauvignon called AME; and *âme*, according to Neyers Vineyards owner/grower Bruce Neyers, is French for "soul."

The 2013 Neyers Vineyards AME is ferociously concentrated, grown on a rocky hilltop bereft of topsoil, in Conn Valley—a corner of Napa Valley that few have glimpsed. The wine is draped in velvet and cassis-like, but just as pungent in wild, scrubby, *garrigue*-like qualities that simply do not fit the classic image of what constitutes "Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon." Then again, wines that do not quite conform to varietal categorization have been part and parcel of the Neyers brand since its inception in 1992.

This may explain why, after more than 20 years, Neyers Vineyards still flies under, or off, the radar. Says Mr. Neyers, "I recently had an experience in a New York steakhouse where, after presenting the wines, a buyer told me, 'These are the best wines I've ever tasted that I've never heard of!'"

Neyers freely admits that one of the



**Neyers Vineyards owner/grower Bruce Neyers and Jordan Nova, Restaurant Director of 1313 Main St. in the City of Napa.**

reasons for his brand's low-key rep among industry cognoscenti has to do with the fact that over the past 24 years he has also served as the National Sales Manager of Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant. "I know I'm being hoisted on my own petard," says Neyers, "because I spend more time promoting wines imported by Kermit Lynch . . . but at the same time, Barbara [Neyers's wife] and I have always been dead-serious about our own business."

Another reason why Neyers Vineyards is often overlooked is the very fact that these wines are crafted with a Kermit Lynch mentality. "Yes, I'd like our wines to have the character and soul you get disproportionately in a Saint-Joseph, a Domaine Tempier, Vieux Télégraphe or even a Corbières from Kermit Lynch." Towards that end, the attitude of *naturel* and 100% native yeast fermentation has informed the Neyers approach since the beginning.

Neyers tells us, "In the early '70s, when attending U.C. Davis, I was told that there was no English translation for *terroir* because there was no such thing in California wines and vineyards.

We have since found many beautiful instances of terroir here in California, if you go to the trouble of focusing on it."

Adds Neyers, "That's why I enjoy my relationship with Tadeo"—in reference to Tadeo Borchartt, who has been Neyers's enormously talented winemaker since 2004. "Tadeo respects terroir above all, and it shows in the wines—whether it's Carignan from 100-year-old vines growing in Contra Costa sand or Carignan and Mourvèdre from younger vines in Rossi Ranch (a biodynamic planting in Sonoma

Valley). And even in our Chardonnays, which all come from Carneros, but delve into the more mineral side of the grape. We don't send our wines out to critics anymore—we're not sure if they'd completely understand them."

Neyers's current stable of Chardonnays, in fact, include a steely, unoaked 2014 Carneros 304, and a sleek, flinty, leafy, whisperingly tropical 2013 Carneros blend. Their single-vineyard Chardonnays—the 2014 El Novillero and 2013 Chuy's Vineyard—are sharply etched with coiled, slaking acidity, minimal French oak, and varietal fruit qualities playing second fiddle to unabashedly flowery and sage scented perfumes. No butter, no fruit bomb, no *problemo*.

Comments Nova on the Neyers approach: "What struck me during our visit was Tadeo and Bruce's humility, which you taste in the wines. These are honest, humble wines, reflecting deep, unwavering respect for sites—terroir rather than flamboyance. More cerebral, in that sense—bending to the soul of the land in a manner that you can't help but respect."