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Guide

Mud City Weekender

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Corey Beck

President and director of winemaking at Francis Ford Coppola Winery

By Tony Poer

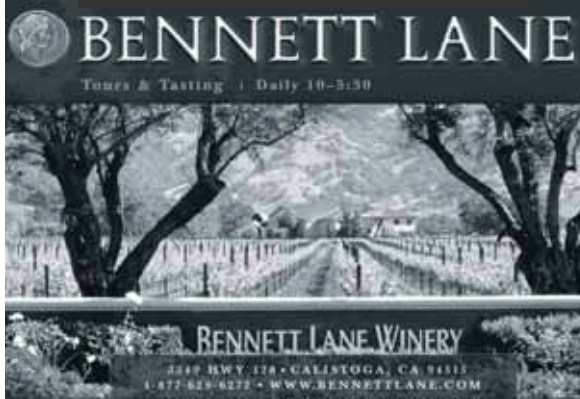
MUD CITY WEEKENDER

Corey Beck has some stories to tell. To fans of the winemaker who have followed his career, this would come as no surprise. He has worked the majority of it for a winery owner who also happens to be one of the world's best-known filmmakers. Story-telling kind of goes with the territory.

But even with a breadth of experience in every aspect of the business, the president and director of winemaking at Francis Ford Coppola Winery in Geyserville is, surprisingly, a guy not yet at the peak of his career. Respected around the industry for his deep engagement with wine, the Calistoga native keeps finding new ways to execute the ideas of a visionary boss and, at the same time, maintain his personal growth. If the latter is sometimes subjugated to the former, he isn't complaining.

See COREY BECK on page 8

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COREY BECK
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“Francis told me a very interesting thing once,” Corey recalled. “He said, ‘You know, I learned early on, why not make money at things that you love? Then it’s not really work.’ And that has always resonated with me.”

On a damp Friday in late January, he had the Mud City Weekender visit Coppola’s eponymous winery-resort in Alexander Valley for a conversation about the winemaking program he’s overseen for the last decade. Beneath Geyserville’s gray skies, the mansard-roofed, French Country-side design of the former Chateau Souverain winery, along with its deserted poolsides lined with shuttered cabines, suggested a moody, dead-of-winter afternoon in Deauville or the outskirts of Paris—or perhaps a movie set depicting the same. Reality intruded when a smiling young woman at the entrance pointed the way to the tasting room, where Corey awaited.

The veteran winemaker is 46 and still trim and fit from his days as a football player at Calistoga High School and in college. He led a quick tour around the tasting room, cocktail bar, and Rustic, the winery’s in-house restaurant. They share the cavernous space with the Movie Gallery, a large, two-level section of the main chateau decked out

with props and memorabilia from decades’ worth of Francis Coppola films.

Heading back down a stairway, Corey ran into a group of Italian viticulturists on a tour of their own with Lise Asimont, the winery’s Director of Grower Relations. The enthusiastic, fast-talking vineyard expert is one of his key team members. She would describe her boss in a follow-up phone call as “an outstanding leader” and add that he “looks at people and says, ‘You have the skill set that I don’t. You know the growers well, so do what it takes.’ And it takes a very dynamic and also humble person to do that.”

In contrast to the winery’s empty pool area and exterior grounds, the restaurant and bars were fairly bustling. Corey chatted for a moment with the Italian visitors, then led the way to a quiet apartment suite above the Chateau’s main entrance. He pointed out that the property’s resort-like amenities are very popular with families and tourists for most of the year.

“My foray into the business started early,” he began, seating himself on an oversized couch in the suite. “My grandfather, who was the vineyard manager at Chateau Montelena, planted the vineyard for Jim Barrett in 1970. So, growing up as a kid, my first job was driving a tractor at age 12 in the vineyard. I continued to work with him all through my high school summers and then

graduated.”

Finishing at Calistoga High in 1988, Corey had no idea at the time that he would end up in his grandfather John Roller’s line of work. He was a gifted enough athlete to be able to continue playing football, first at Sonoma State and then at Butte College, a football powerhouse north of Sacramento. “After that,” he said, “I was ready to get on with my career. It just kept reverting back to some of my fondest memories, and it was always in the vineyard with my grandfather.”

Rolleri enjoyed a long career in vineyard management, so it was fitting that his grandson would decide to transfer to UC Davis to pursue wine as a field of study. Corey graduated in 1994 with a degree in Fermentation Science and then returned to Calistoga, where he promptly started working in Montelena’s cellar. His first job out of college turned out to be a career launching pad, and there was some personal symmetry, as well.

“It was interesting, because I knew everybody there,” he said. “The one thing I will always go back and say was that it was learning how to make world-class Cabernet and Chardonnay in the same house. You know, there aren’t many wineries, in my opinion, who could say that for both varietals, at least at that time. [Montelena] was known for both, and that was amazing.”

Corey has particularly fond memories of the ’94 Montelena Chardonnay, a wine he had an early opportunity to take from vineyard to bottle. He ran the crusher and press, tasted the separate juice lots with winemaker Bo Barrett and his assistant at

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the time, Gerard Zanzonico, and made other key decisions leading up to its bottling.

“It’s amazing when you’re in the winery every day, tasting the wines as they progress, and I think that’s when you feel like you have some ownership of it, and then when you make an acid addition, or whatever it may be, you kind of understand why—you know, why you’re doing it. And then, being at a small winery, taking [the wine] through the filtration process, the cold stability process, and, ultimately, into the bottle. So that was my first kind of ‘Wow!’ moment.”

Over the next four years, Corey learned Montelena’s ropes and gained valuable experience working with the winery’s grape growers, not only the Cabernet and Chardonnay farmers but also growers of Calistoga Zinfandel, Potter Valley Riesling, and his favorite variety, Petite Sirah. He also picked up cues from his then-boss, Bo Barrett, on making wine with elegance and restraint in mind, especially when it came to Chardonnay.

“Bo’s philosophy was, you know, if you’ve got great fruit, let the fruit stand for itself. The oak should only kind of enhance it. There was only, if I recall at the time, like ten or twenty percent new barrels every year with our Chardonnay. That’s a philosophy I love.”

(On the phone, the always-dry Barrett—who, like Corey, learned a lot about vineyard management from Roller—laughed and credited him with teaching them both “how to actually work, and how to be hard-working, contributing members of society.”)

If his grandfather’s connection to Montelena helped early on to pave the way for winemaking, coincidence played a part in how Corey Beck ended up meeting Francis Coppola. In late 1997, ready for a new challenge after four vintages in Calistoga, he heard through a friend of his girlfriend at the time that the director of winemaking at Niebaum-Coppola, Scott McLeod, was looking to hire an assistant winemaker for the Rutherford property. Coppola and his family were in the process of restoring the historic Ingle-nook estate founded by Gustave Niebaum in 1879. With McLeod at the winemaking helm, they planned to ramp up production.

“I faxed my resumé in, Scott picked it up and called me and



Francis Ford Coppola, whom Corey Beck calls “an idea machine.”

said, ‘Come on in,’” Corey recalled. “So that was it.”

For his part, Scott McLeod can fill in some of the backstory.

On a commute home from Skywalker Vineyards in West Marin County, where he’s head winemaker, McLeod said on the phone that dozens of resumé came across his desk for the assistant position. Coppola, it should be noted, introduced McLeod to his filmmaker friend, George Lucas, in the mid-90s, and they eventually hit it off over a winemaking project named for a certain Jedi knight.

“It was a very difficult position to hire for,” McLeod remembered, “because where we were was not where we were going. It was a rocket ship at that time that was just starting to explode.”

He explained that many of the candidates looked good on paper but lacked the right endorsements or applicable work experience. He liked that Corey was a Calistoga native, one of the things that set his resumé apart from the pile. Equally important, McLeod emphasized, was “the fact that he was very aware of wine quality but was also very

flexible and felt that he could become anything in where the job would take him.”

“We always felt that if you want something done, ask a busy person. We all had this tremendous amount of work to do, and Corey’s one of those people you can keep giving things to, and he was able to continue.”

Corey joined McLeod’s Niebaum-Coppola team in 1998, just in time for an exceedingly difficult vintage—by Napa Valley standards at that time, anyway. They worked side-by-side until 2006, when the Coppolas branched out to Sonoma County with the purchase of Souverain. Soon renamed Francis Ford Coppola Winery, it would become the production home for the family’s highly successful line of Diamond Collection wines and, as McLeod was well aware, many new wine projects. He was in the process of developing a consulting business and knew that his assistant was prepared for a big step forward. Coppola named Corey his Director of Winemaking in the transition to the Geyserville winery in 2006.

“For Corey, he had great opportunity along the way, as we all did,” McLeod added. “It

was hard to figure where it was going to go. You just knew it was going. The pace was going to be extreme. It was going to take you to places you never thought you could go, and it would be different a year later. And that’s exactly what happened.”

“It continues to this day. Francis is an idea machine. He’s always going to have another idea, and he’s going to want to have that idea manifest itself as a new wine. So, you have to be flexible, you have to be good, you’ve got to have a great team behind you and a great base of knowledge. Corey has all of that.”

Corey echoed McLeod’s thoughts on his boss’ breakneck creativity. He also clarified his own role vis-à-vis his winemaking and vineyard experience. By the time he was in his mid-30s, he had plenty of both.

“Our art department has, I think, more people in it than we have winemakers, so it gives you an idea of the amount of energy put into the creative side,” he said. “There’s never a loss for labels, and it’s up to us—and this is probably different than most wineries—and this is the part that

See COREY BECK on page 11

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Corey Beck is a 1988 graduate of Calistoga High School.

COREY BECK

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I love: Francis will come in and will say, 'Here's an idea. Here's the label I'm thinking. Now go find it and make it.'

"On the creative side, I always know that whatever Francis is going to give us, the wine needs to match up to that. And that's kind of our challenge. So, our stamp is really with our growers, and being able to work and develop with them. We take a lot of pride in this."

His frequent use of "our" and "we" in conversation are indicators of Corey Beck's inherently collaborative nature. He runs a

team of six winemakers—three each at Francis Ford Coppola Winery and Virginia Dare, the winery a few miles up the road in Geyserville that the Coppolas launched last November. He and his winemakers work with nearly 200 grape growers in California, from Santa Barbara to Mendocino. During the fall harvest and crush, they run daily tests on each of the many fermentation tanks to monitor and record the chemical makeup of the red wines, referred to in the winemaking business as the phenolic content—or, simply, "phenolics."

Asked to describe phenolics in plain English, Corey explained that "basically it's everything that you see in a red wine, from color

to tannin to catechins, which represent the bitterness characteristics. In layman's terms, I like to say it's the stuffing; it is the wine. So you're able to look at the wine and see how much tannin, how much color, how much bitterness you have in it."

As part of the analytical process involved in working with so many growers, Corey's team schedules grower feedback meetings and tastings with all of them at the end of each harvest. The growers receive a three-page report card, in which they see a full phenolic breakdown of the wines made from their vines.

"Everything's right there in front of them," he said. "Then they taste the wine, we taste the wine, and then we give them the wine that it's going into so that they have a reference. What's nice about it is that—it probably sounds like it's tedious and a lot of work—but what's interesting is that we started it in '06, and we add five to ten new growers a year, so the base is still there. Now the growers come in and they're like"—Corey smiled and motioned a grower slapping his hands together—"Ok, how did I do with my phenolics?"

"You know, one of the big things—and hopefully one day this is one of the things I can hang my hat on—is that with the growers, my feeling was that there was this relationship between the grower and the winery to where the grower drops off the grapes at harvest and then doesn't see the winery until next year during the growing season. That is something I wanted to get away from."

"It's wonderful," he summed up. "There's ownership on both

sides for what we're trying to do. So now I feel like it really is team-oriented. The growers who grow for us, they know exactly what we're asking them to do."

Lise Asimont, Coppola's grower relations director who toured the Italian viticulturists, was reached on the phone before heading out of the country. She has worked with Corey for ten years and admires his communication abilities with the growers she manages.

"From the beginning, it was 100% support every time," Asimont said. "If a grower wanted to sit down with the head winemaker, whether his title was president or the GM or whatever his title was at the time, Corey would move his whole schedule around and sit down with that grower and make them feel like they mattered, because they do. So that's how he did it, where he was always available to people. He always knew from the beginning that wine is made in the vineyard."

"You know, he spent years pruning and pulling out in the field with his grandfather. He knows what it takes. I think a lot of that is the reason why Corey is so supportive of growers."

The support flows in two directions. When Corey launched his own side winemaking project under the C. Beck label in 2004, he kept his focus narrowed on two bottlings: Cabernet Sauvignon from Barr Smith's Barlow Vineyard just outside of Calistoga, a source that goes back to his Montelena days; and Petite Sirah from the Sullivan Vineyard at the northern tip of the Calistoga AVA. He pointed out that Petite Sirah

was his favorite grape to make because he remembered vineyard walks with his grandfather, who would tell him about the old-school Italian growers' field blends of Zinfandel, Charbono, and Petite Sirah.

"He showed me what a Petite Sirah cluster looked like, which is so different than a Zinfandel cluster, and how you break the skin and stain your fingers. I just thought that was really great. It always kind of stayed with me, and I wanted to make it. So, I started C. Beck with '04 Petite Sirah."

"When we started with Corey he was fairly young," the grower Barr Smith said on the phone. "I think he's become a lot more confident in both what he's doing and what he's asking us to do."

Smith has some high-profile Calistoga clients in Frank Family and Sterling Vineyards, but he's been selling Corey the same block of his sought-after Cabernet since the 2005 vintage.

"He takes into account people's views on what they want their wines to taste like, and then he works to make the best wines under those parameters that he can. He's very easy to work with.

See COREY BECK on page 20

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COREY BECK

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It's a good relationship."

Corey and his wife, Claudia, have kept the C. Beck case production limited to 500 cases between the two wines. In relation to the 40-plus individual labels he oversees in Geyserville, it's a small project that works well as a creative outlet for the couple. On top of making a pair of single-vineyard wines from high-quality fruit, all of the label design and packaging decisions are theirs alone. Claudia additionally runs all of the C. Beck sales. At Francis Ford Coppola Winery, the well-staffed art department handles the design end of things; it's an extension of their boss' creative mind.

Corey related a story about the origin of the winery's Diamond Collection Malbec, one of more than a dozen wines produced in the popular series. In 2006, Francis Coppola was in Argentina, making the film *Tetro*. Sitting in a Buenos Aires café on a Sunday afternoon, he drank a glass of Malbec and was, at that moment, inspired to create a wine from the signature Argentine wine grape under the Diamond series. He emailed Corey immediately.

"So I said, 'Terrific, I can go peel off some Malbec, and we can make a little bit. I knew the style and everything. And Francis says, 'I will have a label for you on Monday. It's going to be a celestial blue label, the same color as the Argentinian flag.' So, Monday rolls around, the art department had a rendition of this beautiful, celestial blue label, and, I mean, it is like the Argentinian flag. And we still make the Malbec today. So, I mean, that's how his mind works. There's a lot of trust that goes on with it and that he has with us."

There is a consistent acknowledgement, regardless of who's asked, of Francis Coppola's direct influence over the winery and the day-to-day conducting of the business that comprises it. Corey

is especially aware of this. As a career-long crafter of fine wine, he's reliant on his boss to continue to be, as Scott McLeod called him, an "idea machine."

Asked via email to comment on his winemaker and employee of nearly 20 years, Coppola replied that the relationship is symbiotic. "Not only has he taught me many things about winemaking and introduced innovative techniques into the wine program," the filmmaker wrote, "but it's the genuine friendship that he's extended to me over the years and the friendship between our families that I truly cherish."

He added, "When I purchased the Sonoma winery in 2006, I did so with Corey in mind to run the winemaking department. It's been wonderful to see him grow into the outstanding winemaker he is today."

That winemaker in 2016 is highly accomplished and very busy, not least because he and Claudia have two boys, Samuel and Nicholas, aged nine and seven. As their winemaker-father, Corey recognizes their possible future in his own past.

"I love to bring them out during harvest, walk a vineyard or two on a Saturday and taste the grapes. They love that," Corey shared. "We're very cognizant of trying to teach them the wine business. But more importantly, like with my grandfather and what he did for me... he'd make it fun."

John Rollieri would take his grandson fishing at the local reservoir during hot afternoon breaks from vineyard work when he was a kid, taught him to drive a truck as a teenager, and took him mushroom hunting when he was home from college, after the endless pruning was done.

"It was more than just work, or more than just the vineyard. It was tied into other things, and I think that's important. So when I'm asked the question about teaching them the wine business, it's that—plus these other things that I learned growing up, specifically from my grandfather."

Tony Poer's Tasting Notes

Francis Ford Coppola wines

The wines tasted for this article represent a small sampling of the many

bottlings produced by Corey Beck and his wine-making team at Francis Ford Coppola Winery in Geyserville.



They're also precisely 100% of the wines Corey and his wife, Claudia, make under their C. Beck label at Summers Estate in Calistoga with the help of Beth and Jim Summers' winemaker, Ignacio Blancas.

2013 Francis Coppola Reserve Chardonnay, Dutton Ranch, RRV 2,300 cases; \$32

Hazelnut/caramel notes on nose, some green apple, minerality, wet stones, touch of sweet cooking spice. Juicy palate,



apple-y sweet, candied citrus, very rich palate, very focused, forward fruity but zippy acid balance. Touch of tartness and minerals through long finish. Excellent balance. A Chardonnay for the cellar.

2012 FFCW Cabernet Franc, Knights Valley, 1,500 cases; \$42

Pleasingly herbal/spicy aromas, also cranberry, tart raspberry, sour cherry; violets, cracked pepper, citrus peel. Zingy red fruit palate, high-toned red/black cherry, plum, fresh berries, touch of meatiness, grilled meat in finish. Lots of acidity lift, long finish, medium tannins. Five-to-seven year cellar red.

2012 C. Beck Cabernet Sauvignon, Barlow Vineyard, Napa Valley 250 cases; \$48

Perfumed, aromatic Cabernet, fresh red/black berry nose, coffee, cocoa, dusty earth notes, touch of

dark chocolate and herbs, orange peel, black cherry. Forward tannins, mouth-filling wine, chewy up front. Dark red core of fruit, black cherry, Bing cherry, blackberries, wild raspberry, red plums. Layers of fruit, vibrant, lively, great balance. Elegant and structured, very polished, easy 10-year cellar Cabernet.

2012 C. Beck Petite Sirah, Napa Valley 250 cases; \$38

Baked fruit, earthy nose, spicy, aromatic. Wild berries, a little fresh soil, minerals, red earth, some vanilla notes and mint/menthol. Juicy, forward, wild berry palate, a little meatiness to follow, candied red fruits, chewy tannins, hard red candy through finish, very complex Petite Sirah. Great structure, firm but not forbidding tannins. Another five+ years and it'll be ready.

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