

BARRETT & BARRETT

# Bo & Heidi start family winery



COURTESY PHOTO

Calistogans Bo and Heidi Barrett have established a new family winery, Barrett & Barrett, which they hope will be the next generation of wines and venture for their daughters Chelsea and Remi, who are already in the wine business.

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

New wineries and wine labels are a regular feature of Napa Valley, as dependable as the summer tourists and winter rains. But how many take three decades to evolve? And how many are helmed by a married couple whose industry credentials are the equivalent of stars on Hollywood Boulevard?

At last count, the answer was one.

Barrett & Barrett, the eponymous, first-ever venture between Heidi Barrett and her husband, Bo, is one of Calistoga's newest wine projects. It was created—you could say better late than never—by a married couple who also happen to be two of California's most accomplished winemakers.

"We had never really worked together on wine," gravelly-voiced Bo Barrett said recently. "We had always kept our careers separate, which was the way things developed. Did we do it on purpose? That's just the way the world works: sometimes you just go with the flow."

A few days into the newest release of the only wine they produce under the Barrett & Barrett label, a Calistoga Cabernet Sauvignon, the couple took a moment to pause and reflect on the launch of a brand that carries "both" their



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names.  
 “It’s like the old saying,” said Bo. “A winemaker has one foot in the vineyard and one foot in the cellar. In this case, we’re kind of splitting that, and it works out really well.”

Seated next to him at a table adjacent to their vineyard, the breeze blowing strong and cool for a fall morning at the top of the Valley, Heidi Barrett interrupted with a laugh. “It’s one winemaker in the vineyard, one winemaker in the winery—although we do overlap a bit.”

The Barretts have been the power couple of Napa Valley winemaking for many years. In Heidi’s case, she’s been an industry force since the late 1980s, most notably at Dalla Valle Vineyards in Oakville, at Grace Family in St. Helena, and from her 14-vintage run making one of the world’s most sought-

after wines, Screaming Eagle. Bo took charge of winemaking at his family’s iconic Calistoga estate, Chateau Montelena, way back in 1982 and has maintained the winery’s international reputation for long-lived, collectible Cabernet Sauvignons ever since.

Yet, for their outwardly high profiles and frequent travel around the U.S. and the world, Bo and Heidi have remained low-key Calistogans, cruising around in a pickup, tending the vines of their home vineyard north of town, and overseeing winemaking respectively at Chateau Montelena and at La Sirena, the Napa Valley label Heidi debuted in 1994. She produces La Sirena from the cellar of Jericho Canyon Vineyard, a short drive up the Old Toll Road from the Barrett & Barrett property. They raised three children in, as they describe it, “this lovely little hamlet.” Two of them,

daughters Remi and Chelsea, are following in their footsteps.

La Sirena is a boutique label, and with its 300-case production, Barrett & Barrett is an even tinier project. Both are dwarfed by Chateau Montelena’s annual output of well over 30,000 cases. Significantly, this historic winery on Tubbs Lane was on the verge of changing hands in 2008 when Bo’s late father, Jim, came close to selling it. Bo’s longtime tenure as head winemaker would have likely ended.

It was out of these near-ashes that the Barrett & Barrett concept emerged.

“The propellant,” Heidi recalled, “was that Montelena was almost sold, and we knew it wasn’t going to stay in the family at that time. Or we thought there was a chance it wasn’t going to carry forward and continue with the Barrett family.”

“So we thought, ‘Well, let’s start our own little thing that could carry on in our family, and that we could pass onto our kids and keep it going for generations.’ And then the Montelena sale fell through, which turned out to be a great thing—it’s wonderful that it can now stay in the family—but meanwhile we’ve already started this fun project that we want to just keep simple... and keep it as a great collaboration.”

The cooperative nature of Barrett & Barrett appears very much as Heidi described it, a winemaker each in the vineyard and the cellar. They planted Cabernet Sauvignon vines on the property, the former location of a prune-drying facility, in 2008 and brought their individual talents together to create an ultra-premium red wine in the Calistoga AVA. Fittingly, it was Bo and Heidi themselves who lobbied the

U.S. Congressional Wine Caucus in 2003 for Calistoga to be granted its own viticultural status. (And yes, there is a wine caucus in Washington, DC.)

Pivoting from his day job at Montelena, Bo admits he had to adjust his winemaking scope.

“For me, a small lot is like a completely different art project,” he said. “It’s just a different world where you’re going to work with four barrels instead of, you know, 200 barrels. So that’s why I like working this way, because most of my career has been to [make] enough wine to be sold around the world, at a global level or for a global market like Chateau Montelena enjoys.”

“It’s very yin and yang,” he added. “On a large lot, you have more options, and you can put

See **BARRETT** on page 14

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**BARRETT***Continued from page 13*

a lot of pieces together to make this big, structural wine. But in a small lot, you have to be so completely precise. I like it because it's so tiny, and it's a lot of fun for me."

Heidi comes from a somewhat different end of the spectrum, having built her reputation since her days at Dalla Valle on more limited production consulting projects. Unlike the large-estate fruit that Bo works with at Montelena, Heidi's experience has mainly been with creating Cabernets that are the sum of smaller vineyard parts, or even the result

of blending fruit from different Napa Valley AVAs.

"Some of my projects and my clients that I work for have small estates," she said, comparing her winemaking approaches for her clients and La Sirena to that of Barrett & Barrett. "They have multiple lots, maybe from that estate, but it becomes a blend, and it's a lot of fun work with within that, and also [for] some of my clients, we source fruit or have a combination where they grow some of their own, and we also source some fruit. So I work with all of those combinations, and it's never a dull moment. You never know year to year what it's going

to be, and each year has different challenges. But it's always fun to put that blend together."

Circling back to the subject of the rows of vines fifty feet behind her, Heidi pointed out that "technically, this is a single-vineyard, but there's complexity within."

"It can be a lot more complex with blending, but it doesn't necessarily have to come from different vineyards. Like you can say 'single-vineyard,' but if you have multiple lots within a single vineyard you can also get complexity that way, as we do here in our vineyard."

When the late-morning breezes finally drove the Barretts

and their interviewer inside to taste a couple of the Cabernets, "complexity" quickly went from being winespeak terminology to the empirical center of conversation. The 2009 and 2010 Barrett & Barrett Cabernet Sauvignons turned out to be marvelously complex wines (see sidebar), with abundant quantities of berry and cassis fruit, zingy acidity, and tannins that narrowed from chunky to edgy as the two vintages aired out in over-sized Bordeaux glasses, left behind perhaps, or perhaps not, by the prune-drying people.

With the just-released 2010 in his glass, Bo commented on its big texture and initial flavors and how limiting grape skin-to-juice contact—or maceration—during fermentation affected these characteristics.

"Some people are interested in having the vintage really strongly stated. So by not doing long macerations, you can really capture more of the fresh fruit and what it was that particular year. So we'll see, because the '09 and the '10 will be two different wines."

Holding up her own glass, Heidi elaborated her husband's point.

"We get plenty of color [from grapes] right out of the chute," she said, "and that's more a function of our style of winemaking. I do that across the board. If you're getting everything you need, once we have everything, we capture that. We just press. We don't wait for it to diminish."

"It's kind of our hope and

promise for the wine, the option of ageability. It's the same with La Sirena Cabernet: we do the same thing, and I've heard that back from people. I've got that track record. Going back with this style of winemaking, I know it works. It's not just said out of hand that we hope it will last 20 years. I know they will."

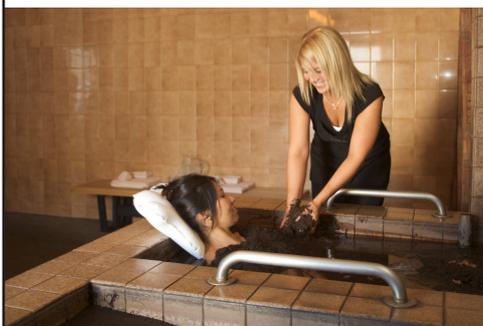
"And," she said, with refreshing frankness, "I think this is an expensive wine. I want to give our customers options for when to drink it."

"We believe there's a niche in the market where people will be patient," Bo continued. "Our philosophy is that people are paying us for the very best they can get. They want all that the vineyard has to offer. So we really want to pack it all in the bottle and give them the option to taste everything that the vineyard put out."

The Barretts' back-and-forth over the open bottles was relaxed and familiar, but also extremely informative. The only downside to tasting their wines with them is realizing how little of the stuff actually gets made. With only a handful of exceptions, it ends up in their customers' homes and cellars.

In downtown Napa, the wine bar 1313 Main frequently stocks Barrett & Barrett. A further-flung outpost for all things Barrett—including La Sirena and Chateau Montelena—is Vino & Friends, a popular wine shop and bistro in Fresno. The owners, Jen and

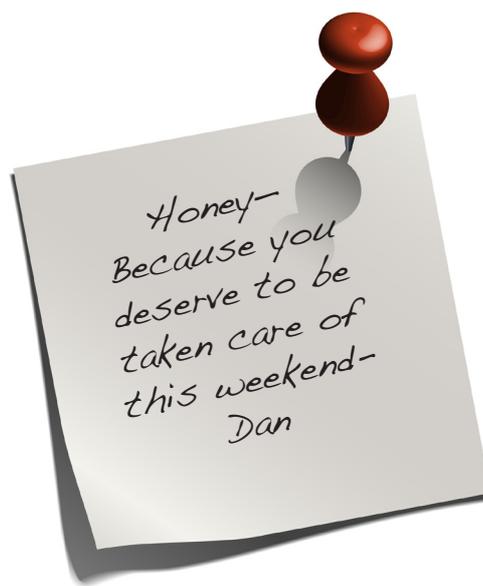
*See BARRETT on page 20*



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Bale Grist Mill

## BARRETT

Continued from page 13

wines by their daughter, Remi, who handles sales and marketing for both the La Sirena and Barrett & Barrett labels. The Van Fleets are enthusiastic about the new Cabernets.

"I've been able to get all the vintages they've made so far," Chuck shared over the phone. "Barrett & Barrett stacks up really well against other Napa Valley wines."

Fresno has developed over the last few years into a wine-thirsty town, and Vino & Friends is a dependable outlet. Chuck knows his customers, many of whom are dedicated collectors.

"With the flavors that we're getting now, I think it's well-worth the money. And I think in terms of ageability, it also stacks up," he said. "I mean, that's just yet to be seen, but with the pedigrees of the winemakers, there's no reason why it shouldn't."

"Heidi and Bo want to make good wine, and they want people to enjoy it. It's what makes them fun as winemakers."

At 27, Remi Barrett has already logged many travel miles selling La Sirena, her primary job responsibility. She and her younger sister, Chelsea, who is the assistant winemaker for Joel Gott Wines in St. Helena, are, in their parents' eyes, the possible future of Barrett & Barrett.

"I think we'll just see what happens with the girls," Bo said of his daughters, "and if they want to join us. Remi's already joined us in our business. We would need some help in production because we're both so busy between Chateau Montelena, Barrett & Barrett, La Sirena, and Heidi's clients. At this point in time, we're really not growing Barrett & Barrett."

"Again, it's almost like an art project. It's something we want to do for fun, to make this really cool and interesting wine that has both of our signatures on it. But to develop it as another product or a brand, we'll probably hold off until the kids want to get into that kind of role."

"The next round would be our daughters," Heidi confirmed. "Remi and Chelsea could be round two of Barrett & Barrett. If they want to, we have something set up for them to carry on."

Echoing her mom's thoughts on the project, Remi said via

## Tony Poer's Tasting Notes

# Barrett & Barrett

Heidi and Bo Barrett's Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard, three sloping three acres planted on a 16-acre property off of The Old Toll Road, lies within the Calistoga AVA. These are the second and third vintages; the first vintage, 2008, was unavailable to taste for this article.

### 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon, Calistoga, Napa Valley

Dark crimson to opaque in glass. High-toned aromas of berries and cassis, hints of blueberry. Spicy-meaty notes develop in the glass, with cedar, tobacco, and subtle graphite. Very firm tannins envelop fruit, only begin to soften grip with 30+ minutes of aeration. Cassis and red cherry as it breathes. Red fruit-driven. A touch of meatiness through finish. Integrated but super-bright acidity. Classic cool-vintage Cabernet. Very young and pure. Minimum seven to 10 years in the cellar.

\$250

300 cases produced



### 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Calistoga, Napa Valley

Deep red-purple to opaque in the glass. Abundant savory and non-fruit aromas out of the bottle. A bit rustic. Cedar, tobacco, turned earth, pencil lead. Nose develops slowly in this dense wine. Blackberry, some dried cherry, cooking spice, sweet red pepper. Traces of blueberry. Big, chewy tannins, very firm structure and acidity. Huge black fruit palate, blackberries and black cherries, "black" cassis. Bordeaux-like dry tannins in the finish. A mouthful of Cabernet! Age it for 10+ years. Will last much longer.

\$250

300 cases produced

email that, "My parents really wanted to create something of their own that could stay within our family. I love the Barrett & Barrett name because it can work for any configuration of us working on the project and expresses the spirit of family collaboration that was really the impetus for this wine's creation."

With the pair of young Cabernets starting to develop some intriguing characteristics in the big glasses, it was, sadly, time for Heidi and Bo to head off to the next task of the day: hand-wrapping and signing magnums of the 2010, probably at their kitchen table, and then lugging wooden Barrett & Barrett cases to their

warehouse.

Bo commented on how surprised their customers would be to know that a pair of such well-known winemakers did much of their own grunt work.

"But," he said, "when you get a bottle of our wine, it's actually right from Heidi and me. It's hard to explain, but we feel obligated. We're doing this thing, and it has our signatures on it."

"Why do we do it?" He paused for a moment, then smiled and shook his head at himself. "I don't know why we do it." Heidi laughed out loud.

"But it's our thing, this is what we do. And I think that's part of the fun of it."