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Sassy ZIATA

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

"It's all very ad hoc here."

So said Karen Cakebread, on a September stroll through her Calistoga vineyard, describing how an acre of carefully planned vines and a well-conceived boutique winemaking company came

into being. Here was irony, Napa Valley wine veteran-style.

As the proprietor of Ziata Wines, president of the Calistoga Winegrowers Association, and a former international sales director, she's one of the more dialed-in wine people in the Valley. If there's anything ad hoc in her universe, it's probably the Calgary Moose that hangs out under the shade of an old oak tree

behind her house. More on that later.

The Ziata label and Karen Cakebread's home vineyard were established at roughly the same time. Ziata (named for Mary Annunziata, Karen's mother) debuted with a 2008 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc and a Carneros Pinot Noir from the same vintage. In 2009, working with respected vineyard manager Josh Clark, she



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planted an acre of vines between her house and the Napa River. They're relatively recent endeavors, but with 25 years' experience in the wine business, Karen wouldn't fit anyone's description of new kid on the block.

"As the saying goes, you better like what you make because if you can't sell it, you've got to drink it," Karen half-joked during a tasting that preceded the vineyard walk.

Seated in a sunny room in her remodeled 1950 ranch house with a view of her vines, she talked about the Ziata portfolio. "I think that I chose my varietals because they're more food-friendly. I chose Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot as my 'start-up' wines. I love the freshness and sassiness of a good Sauvignon Blanc, and I think the wines have good acid structure and balance. For me that's the key to interaction with food."

The marriage of wine and food is a subject she knows well. Alongside her former mother-in-law, Dolores Cakebread, Karen managed the American Harvest Workshop at Cakebread Cellars in Rutherford for 18 years.

"I really cut my teeth at Cakebread," she said. "Dolores was and is very focused on wine with food. And she was also a chef herself, so I learned a lot from working there."

In addition to Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, there's an elegant, medium-bodied Cabernet Franc, produced from a vineyard in the eastern hills of Oakville, to round out the trio of Ziata bottlings. The wines are made at Napa Wine

Company's busy custom crush winery, also in Oakville.

Ziata being a Napa Valley label, a Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend is in the works. It will likely become Karen's flagship wine. But, like Sancerre from France's Loire Valley, "sassy" Sauvignon Blanc is close to her heart.

She calls herself "a citrus nut." Swirling and sniffing the 2012 Ziata Sauvignon, she said, "I think stylistically after working at Cakebread for so long and after tasting Sauvignon Blancs from around the world, I'm focusing on what I like. And I love that citrus component in Sauvignon Blanc. I also like acidity. It has to be balanced."

All three Ziata wines show excellent balance and have potential to be great food wines. Each is lively in the glass with bright acidity and an intense fruit that's tempered by sheer elegance. The Cabernet Franc, considered separately for this article, was rather hedonistically enjoyed with a roasted chicken and wild mushrooms. Karen's knack for wine that goes with food is undiminished.

Though she's a self-described "one-person business," Karen has an all-important partner in the production of the Ziata wines: her consulting winemaker, Anne Vawter. Conveniently, the Washington State native makes wine for a few other clients at Napa Wine Company.

"We work hand-in-hand through the whole process," she explained. "From the vineyards to crush and making those deci-

sions, to blending, I'm there with [Anne] the whole way. That's why we're such a good partnership."

"We have lots of fun together," Vawter concurred about Karen via email (and in the middle of harvest, no less). "I really listen to what she wants and what she likes. It's so important that she be excited about and proud of her wines. Fortunately, we have really similar likes and dislikes when it comes to wine, so I'm not operating outside my comfort zone."

Vawter boasts viticulture and enology credentials from UC Davis and, through some international winemaking experience, has a background not dissimilar to Karen's. She also spent four years working under the highly regarded Heidi Barrett at Paradigm Winery.

"She's great, and she's young," Karen enthused about her. "I would say she's in that category of that next generation of the up-and-coming winemakers."

"Fortunately, she lives here in Calistoga," she smiled, "so we do a lot of blending sessions at my dining room table."

Since the first Ziata vintages, Karen has accessed Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc from single-vineyard sources. To make Sauvignon Blanc, she's relied on a pair of vineyards in Rutherford and southeast Napa Valley. She described them during the tasting as complementary properties that "play really well together." For five vintages, each place has contributed to the racy, yet balanced, fruit profile of the wine.

"Definitely with my Sauvignon Blanc, I'd say the core is that stone fruit and citrus characteristic, and not so much the super grassy style" of New Zealand and other regions of the world.

Situated north of these dependable sites, Karen's Calistoga property is its own unique piece of real estate. The vineyard, bordered on one side by a very happy-looking vegetable garden, doubles as her backyard. The impressive Palisades dominate the view to the east. Because it's

"only" an acre in size, it's basi-

cally an extension of her home.

Soil reports done by the property's previous owners suggested that red Rhône varieties like Syrah and Grenache might do well in the tricky, clay-infused soil adjacent to the Napa River. "But that wasn't where I was going," she said. "So, me being me, I had to do what I wanted to do. And I said, 'Well, I'm always going to make Sauvignon Blanc, so why don't I plant Sauvignon Blanc?'"

Through her experience with the variety, Karen knew that Sauvignon Blanc was a hardy vine that could adapt and thrive in a variety of situations. As a Calistoga resident and president of the Calistoga Winegrowers, she was also hyper-aware of the stressed water table in Napa Valley, particularly in the immediate surroundings of the Calistoga AVA. Knowing that dry-farming has been a way of addressing this problem for decades, she mapped out a strategy to save water resources and execute a logical plan to establish the vineyard.

"I set up the vine spacing and everything from that model," she explained. "This year, I didn't irrigate much at all."

"I think I can start pulling back now on the irrigation. I just have to see. Every year is going to be a little bit different. The water is there if I need it, but otherwise I'd really just like to try to go to the dry farming, to go back to the roots of growing grapes."

See ZIATA on page 20



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ZIATA

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For all this planning and physical effort, it's interesting to hear her comment on what she views as the greatest challenge.

"The hardest thing to do in this business is sell wine," she confessed. "There are so many brands out there, and there are more people like me coming into the market. It's challenging."

"When I first began Ziata, I sold a lot of the wine direct to consumers and direct to the trade, actually fairly locally. Because it's just me; I don't have any employees."

Minus the sales help, Karen has nonetheless taken significant brand-building steps. She's gotten her wines onto restaurant lists up and down the valley, from fun, casual places like Norman Rose Tavern in downtown Napa to the more rarefied, Michelin-starred Solbar at the Solage Resort on the edge of Calistoga.

"I do all my own deliveries," she said, "and I process all my own orders. That's how I stay in touch with my customers." She is clearly unfazed by the slow north-south traffic on Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail that seems to get worse every year. She's hands-on at every level.

"I think it's finding the right partners to work with who believe in your brand and are excited about it and have a



Winemaker Anne Vawter

passion for it. It's really those people that help sell the wine. It's the guy on the floor at Bottega talking about the Cab Franc or the Sauvignon Blanc. It's the distributor or the broker that you connect with, and they see that you have a history. For me, after 25 years in the business, that's a positive."

"The guy on the floor at Bottega" is the Yountville restaurant's manager and sommelier, Matt Engelbracht. In a small wholesale market crowded with wine labels, not to mention bricks-and-mortar Napa wineries hoping to secure a spot (or more) on a wine list as popular as Engelbracht's, Bottega would seem to support Karen's sales aversion. But the opposite is true: he's a huge fan.

Full of energy and a consummate wine guy, he was recently quite happy to elaborate on Ziata's place in the restaurant's wine program.

"We currently carry the Ziata Sauvignon Blanc, as well as the Cab Franc. As far as pairings go, what I first liked

about the SB is it actually reminded me of wine that would come from the Alto Adige [or] Friuli." The comparison of Ziata to Sauvignons from a couple of northern Italian regions would likely meet with Loire Valley-loving Karen Cakebread's approval. "The bright green apple and acidity, as well as the notes of honeysuckle and bees wax, pair nicely with our fresh shaved Brussels sprouts salad."

"The thing about living in the Napa Valley," he added, "is that there's good juice everywhere, so what we try to do is seek out great relationships. I've had some great interaction with Karen and her wines. What I enjoyed the most about her is that she sells her wine herself. It's admirable that she's out on the front line."



Karen Cakebread and mom Mary Annunziata

As the sixth vintage of Ziata goes into the books, Karen and her winemaker each considered possibilities for the Calistoga vineyard as it begins to yield grapes they can use for the

Sauvignon Blanc bottling.

To celebrate the first-ever harvest a year ago, Karen decided to invite friends over for a grape-picking and a "Lucy Stomp." Ahead of this, Vawter encouraged her boss to let the fruit hang until it reached a super-ripe 28 degrees brix, so as to make a late harvest wine from a debut crop. Because, why not?

"That was sort of the kick-off of my own fruit," Karen explained with amusement. "It was just one of those kooky ideas. We won't be putting it into any competitive tastings, I can tell you."

Late harvest experiments and kooky ideas notwithstanding, she grows fruit more or less in the center of the Calistoga AVA, and she is getting the Ziata portfolio primed for the possibility of a single-vineyard Sauvignon Blanc from her own back yard.

"I planted this vineyard partially for that reason," she said. "Grapes don't happen overnight, so I have to figure out where this vineyard's going to go, and if I feel like it can stand on its own, then we'll see. I just have to wait and see what it reveals."

"I don't know what style of Sauvignon Blanc it will be," Vawter echoed in her email, having no doubt been up to her neck in grapes only hours, or perhaps minutes, earlier. "It may be a little animal of its own. Each site is so expressive, it will be an adventure to find out its personality."

TONY POER'S TASTING NOTES

ZIATA

2012 Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley

Pale, lovely yellow, green-tinged in the glass. Complex nose of citrus, mint, herbs, and chalky minerals. Ripe but balanced flavors of melon, fig, tangy stone fruit. Nice weight for SB, zingy acidity through the long finish. Super-concentrated. Classic Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc from a great vintage. Karen Cakebread's "sassy" wine. **200 cases. \$34**

2010 Pinot Noir Carneros

Pretty, deep garnet hue. Restrained nose of black and Bing cherry, secondary notes of earth, damp soil, mushrooms. Red-purple fruit flavors, fresh cherries, wild raspberries, mushrooms, grilled red meat. Firm acidity lengthens finish. Energetic wine, moderately tannic. Spicy and a bit brooding for CA Pinot. Easy 5-7 years of ageing potential. Grilled quail wine.

300 cases. \$45

2009 Cabernet Franc Oakville

Crimson to purple-black in glass. Bright floral aromas give way to red-brown earthy notes. Roasted red pepper, grilled stone fruit, very subtle tobacco. Subtle green notes. Medium-firm tannins out of the bottle. A bit chewy. Needs 2+ hours of air. Juicy layers of red and black cherry, plums, cassis liqueur. Hints of savory herbs and meatiness in the finish. Underlying earthiness, a touch herbaceous. 7-10 years in the cellar. Serious Cabernet Franc!

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