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The Chemist of Wine — This Grapes Guru Treats No Block of Fruit the Same

Gary Farrell Vineyard's Theresa Heredia Knows Winemaking Takes Plenty of Brains



Theresa Heredia, head winemaker at Gary Farrell Winery, is an admirer of John Keats, and she loves to create poetry with Pinot Noir.
(Courtesy Gary Farrell Vineyards & Winery)

I love to talk about wine with people who share my passion for it. We open bottles, we trade stories about travel and soil types, terroir and

residual sugar, and we talk of taste and food and restaurants. We recommend wines to one another, we drink, and we learn a lot.

In Wine Talk, I introduce you to some of my friends, acquaintances, and people I meet as I make my way around the world, individuals who love wine as much as I do, who live to taste, who farm and make wine. You'll appreciate their insight, and I hope you'll learn something from them as well.

On a trip to Sonoma and Napa this past fall, I tasted many

wines, and visited some outstanding producers, including Gary Farrell Vineyards & Winery, whose tasting room is beautiful. We drank some excellent Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and enjoyed the views of the Sonoma nature surrounding the winery. Harvest was under way, and the weather was gorgeous, crisp air and sunny skies.

Our guide for the session, Stephen Tellez, was an enthusiastic and engaging ambassador. He led us on a private tasting, and gave us a tour of the facility (it is a must-visit). When he mentioned that the winemaker, Theresa Heredia, was not available to see me because of harvest duties, I immediately wanted to feature her in Wine Talk, as I had read several articles about her and found her take on wine (and other things) enthralling. This Wine Talk was long in the making, but the wait, as you will read, was well worth it. (Her admiration of John Keats, and her inspired food-pairing recommendations, won me over.)

Heredia, who has been at [Gary Farrell](#) since 2012, has a bachelor's in biochemistry from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and was a Ph.D. candidate in chemistry (with an emphasis in oenology) at U.C. Davis, until she decided to follow her passion and become a winemaker. She

started her career as an oenologist at Saintsbury, then trained at Freestone Vineyards & Winery and Jospeh Phelps Vineyards.

“My approach to winemaking is very much about taking advantage of specific vineyard and fruit qualities,” Heredia says. “I like to tailor the winemaking techniques specifically to each block of fruit that we receive separately. My job is to treat it as gently as possible so that we end up with a balanced wine.”

Balanced and elegant: That sums up Heredia’s wines made at Gary Farrell. She’s an intelligent, well-read winemaker and I look forward to tasting more of her vintages.

PaperCity: Tell us about three wines you think are drinking well at the moment. What makes them worthwhile? How about a food pairing for each one?

Theresa Heredia: First, the Gary Farrell 2015 Martaella Vineyard Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley). I’d pair it with stuffed pork loin with sausage, cherries and fennel; serve with sautéed broccoli rabe and roasted baby potatoes.

Next, any 2016 dry Riesling from Hofgut Falkenstein. Pairing: Southeast Asian-style grilled whole fish with lemongrass, chilis, and coconut; serve with a side of jasmine rice. *[Author’s note: Chambers Street Wines, one of my favorite merchants in the U.S., has a good selection of Falkenstein Rieslings; if your favorite wine shop does not carry them, request that they attempt to do so.]*

Finally, a bottle from E. Guigal, a 2015 Châteauneuf-du-Pape. It would be perfect with Mediterranean-style leg of lamb, covered in Mediterranean spices, fresh garlic, olive oil, and lemon juice; serve with potato wedges and onions. *[Expect to pay \$45 to \$55 for this*

bottle, and look for it at your preferred merchant, such as Houston Wine Merchant or Pogo's Wine & Spirits.]

PC: If cost was no consideration, tell us the one bottle you would add to your personal collection, and why?

TH: If price were not an issue, I would absolutely buy a few bottles of Domaine de La Romanée-Conti La Tâche (1999, 2005, and 2010, for starters). I mean, come on! This is the motherland for any Pinot Noir lover in the world!

PC: What is your favorite grape, and why?

TH: I love to drink Pinot Noir, but I especially love to make wines from the beautiful, delicate and finicky grape. My reasons are many, but most importantly, I feel that when picked at optimum ripeness no two Pinot Noir wines taste the same. This grape, when made well, is very transparent and shows a tremendous amount of varietal character and site specificity (aka terroir).

Half of the enjoyment in a glass of Pinot Noir is its aromatics. I could easily spend an hour just smelling a glass of amazing Pinot Noir from Burgundy, Oregon, or a cool region in California. Pinot Noir is mysterious and seductive.

PC: How about one bottle that our readers should buy now to cellar for 10 years, to celebrate a birth, anniversary, or other red-letter day?

TH: Personally, I would pick up two or three bottles of either Échezeaux or Grands Échezeaux current releases, which can be somewhat affordable bottles of world-class Pinot Noir from Burgundy. It's one of the few extremely famous vineyards that can be had at fairly affordable prices upon release. Some producers currently available are

Grivot, Arnoux, Faiveley, Mongeard-Mugneret, Lucien Le Moine and, stepping up to more expensive prices, Méo–Camuzet, Emmanuel Rouget, Joseph Drouhin and, of course, Domaine de La Romanée-Conti.



The tasting facility at Gary Farrell is a must-visit when in Sonoma. (Courtesy Gary Farrell Vineyards & Winery)

PC: Where is your go-to place when you want to have a glass or bottle?

TH: Barndiva, in Healdsburg has a nice wine list, and they have great cocktails.

PC: If there was one thing you wish everyone would keep in mind when buying and drinking wine, what is it?

TH: It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks (including wine reviews)! Buy what you like, drink what you like. A great wine score may indicate a really nice wine, but it may not be to your liking. Trust your preferences and ask questions at wine shops and restaurants. I usually trust the sommelier at nice restaurants because their job is to

ask the client about his or her preferences and then recommend accordingly.

PC: What is your “wine eureka moment,” the incident/taste/encounter that put you and wine on an intimate plane forever?

TH: During my first visit to Burgundy, I shared a bottle of 1995 Denis Mortet Clos de Vougeot Pinot Noir at Ma Cuisine in Beaune, and that experience literally changed my world. That dinner and wine experience made me fall in love with the place, the food, the wine, the lifestyle, etc.

PC: What has been the strangest moment/incident involving wine that you have experienced in your career?

TH: One of my strangest and most scary experiences that I recall was during my tenure at Joseph Phelps Freestone Vineyards, in 2007, which was the first harvest at the newly constructed winery. We had two five-ton open-top oak tanks that we had just purchased, and we decided to do a 100 percent whole-cluster fermentation with our favorite block of Calera-selection Pinot Noir. The wine was absolutely stunning from the beginning of fermentation all the way through the end.

We would taste the wine each morning in order to decide when to press the wine off the skins, so one day we came in to taste from the tank and the wine tasted sour and almost spoiled, with a sort of lactic flavor. It was quite bizarre and very scary for a new winemaker tasting one of the most expensive blocks of fruit on the property.

We decided to press the wine that day, then we transferred it to barrel the next day. After malolactic fermentation was complete in the spring, and the wine had a chance to settle down in the cool cellar, we

tasted it from barrel and it was absolutely gorgeous again ... in fact, better than it had been in the fermentation tank. Lesson learned: Patience is a virtue in winemaking and in all aspects of life.



If you like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Gary Farrell should be on your radar screen. (Courtesy Gary Farrell Vineyards & Winery)

PC: What is your favorite wine reference in a work of literature?

TH: I've always enjoyed the poems of John Keats. One of my favorite poems in college was "Ode on Melancholy". This is a snippet from one of his writings. I love how he talks about the ethereal experience as opposed to "assaulting the cerebral apartments." This is how I feel about drinking a beautiful glass of wine:

"How I like claret!... It fills one's mouth with a gushing freshness, then goes down cool and feverless; then, you do not feel it quarreling with one's liver. No; 'tis rather a peace-maker, and lies as quiet as it did in the grape. Then it is as fragrant as the Queen Bee, and the more

ethereal part mounts into the brain, not assaulting the cerebral apartments, like a bully looking for his trull, and hurrying from door to door, bouncing against the wainscott, but rather walks like Aladdin about his enchanted palace, so gently that you do not feel his step.”