

Winemaker Sandy Rodgers: After the Crush is Over

M A R L O W D E V I L L E

Sandy Rodgers spent her day off last week picking cabernet grapes in the rain. But it was all in the line of duty. As assistant winemaker for Roudon-Smith Winery for the past three years, Rodgers' life is pretty much steeped in the fruit of the vine. As a fermentation science graduate from UC Davis' aggressive oenology program Rodgers (along with husband Tim, who is also a UC Davis graduate in viticulture) is part of the new wave of Davis-trained winemakers currently coming through the ranks of the booming California winemaking industry.

"Navy brat" Rodgers grew up all over the country and eventually studied chemistry at UC San Diego until she made the pivotal decision to transfer into Davis' wine chemistry program in 1979. "I could see that most of my fellow classmates in chemistry at San Diego were going to all end up with the same highly competitive skills, skills that would either land them one of a handful of research jobs or stuck with a useless degree. I heard about the Davis program and liked the idea of working in an applied science with an interesting field of application. And about the same time, I began to get interested in wines.

"Traditionally, women in the wine business worked mostly in labs," she explains. "Today — especially after several pioneer women in the Davis program during the '70s helped erase some stereotypes — women are more involved in positions of day-to-day wine production. I was aware that not many women — there were only about 30 women out of 150 Davis students — went into winemaking. But that isn't why I decided to pursue it," she laughs.

Coincidence and knowing the right people played a role in Rodgers' eventual appointment at Rou-

don-Smith. Keeping track of the man who would become her husband ("we followed each other around the country"), Rodgers checked listings in the *Wine Institute Bulletin* and kept her ear to the grapevine when job hunting. "You can't just look through the *Mercury* want ads for a winemaking job," she chuckles. But Rodgers' former Davis roommate just happened to be married to Roudon-Smith's assistant winemaker and he brought Rodgers to Santa Cruz to help with the summer of 1981 crush.

"That year the crush came early and there was lots of pressing to be done. I did a lot of cellar work — emptying, washing and filling barrels — plus a lot of bottling. That first year or so allowed me to see all phases of the winemaking operation," she recalls. "I got practical, hands-on experience, plus a lot of the lab work I'd been trained for. All the time I learned a lot from Bob [Roudon]. He's a very easy-going person and he showed me all his techniques along the way. And, in 1983 when the previous assistant left, I became the assistant winemaker.

"The smaller the winery, the more diversified your duties. I've done everything from scraping barrels to pouring wines for tastings. People are always surprised when I tell them I make wines. But it doesn't strike me as that unusual," she says with characteristic modesty. "The women I met at school are all working in wineries.

"I can't say it's a thrill to wash 30 barrels in a row, but it would be boring to do just one thing. Because we're a small winery, I get to do a lot of different tasks. And I get to keep in very close contact with the wine itself — constantly tasting, constantly checking the development. In a big winery, the winemaker never gets dirty. Part of the fun is after watching grapes from the

same vineyard year after year, you can notice not only the similarities but also the minute differences. You can see if it's picking up too much oak to fast and might want to move it out of the barrels sooner, or even bottle it sooner. The wine basically makes itself, but you have to guide it along. In fact, a lot of what I do is detecting how to help the wine along," she explains.

"We essentially make the wines in September, but people always want to know what, then, do we do the rest of the year? It's true this is our busiest time. Once all the fruit is in and pressed, essentially the crush is over. But there's still fermentation going on all the time that has to be monitored. You have to press off the reds when they're ready, and fill barrels with the chardonnay juice that has been pressed and is now ready for fermentation. I'll end up following their progress all through the year. Racking [taking the clear liquid off the sediment] is a continual process and may happen three or four times over a wine's lifetime.

"In wineries where everything is put into small barrels, there's lots of barrel work. During the winter there's a lot of labwork, a lot of adjustments in chemistry. I do complete labwork constantly on the juice, as well as the finished product — checking for alcohol, acid, pH and malolactic fermentation."

At this point Rodgers has her hand in enough phases of the overall winemaking process to keep things interesting. "All of the decisions on the wine are made collectively [by her, the Roudons and the Smiths], but I can bring the needs of the wine to their attention."

Currently both Rodgers and her husband work in the wine business. "Tim's working at two vineyards in the development stage. Most vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains



PHOTO: SUZETTE LUCICH

SIGN OF THE WINES. Sandy Rodgers, assistant winemaker at Roudon-Smith Winery, is among a growing number of UC Davis-trained women helping to make the great wines of California.

are still in development," she says. "There's a lot of basic work to be done — preparing the soil, setting up irrigation, setting up wire and fences."

And while the Rodgers' keep track of their Davis schoolmates at other wineries, they have no immediate plans for a winery of their own. "Eventually we would like to get a piece of property and build a home on it. But we're not up to vineyard owning," she admits. "Property here is very expensive and so is the cost of developing a vineyard. It would be quite a challenge to run a winery, but I'm very happy right here and I'm still learning a lot from Bob. I think many people make a mistake in this regard. A lot of Davis graduates don't stay in one place long enough. They want to jump right up the ladder. Even now I'm just seeing the first wines I helped make finally in the bottle."

After five hard-working years in commercial winemaking, Sandy

Rodgers has some well-honed advice for future vintners. "You have to be a sharp student if you go through a program like the one at Davis. It's very important to start tasting wines early in order to develop a memory for wines. If you can't remember what you taste, you'll never be able to learn. People have got to put aside any thoughts of glamor. You have to be willing to work hard and acquire grassroots skills. Don't expect to make a lot of money," she chuckles. "Winemakers have to be willing to make some sacrifices and be willing to learn."

But Rodgers believes that the business has its pluses. "I like talking to non-professionals about how the wines are made. I like the feedback they give. And if I don't agree with what they say, I just ignore them. Most people actually seem to be fascinated by talking to winemakers. It's nice to remember that when you're washing barrels all afternoon."