

{ new wine on the block }

Message in the Bottles

ENJOYING THE NEW
PREMIUM FLAVORS OF
GEHRICKE WINES

by Chris Sawyer
photos by Alexander Rubin

AS A FOURTH-GENERATION VINTNER in Sonoma's iconic Sebastiani family, August Sebastiani has already done an admirable job of preserving his family's lofty reputation. Since establishing 3 Badge Beverage Corporation in 2014, Sebastiani has created an expressive series of successful premium spirits brands and fun, playful wines that have, until now, featured ingredients primarily sourced outside of Sonoma County.

*August Sebastiani,
fourth-generation
vintner at Gehricke
Wines, with
Winemaker Alex
Beloz in Sonoma, CA.*



That trend has started to shift with the recent development of the Gehricke brand: the company's first line of premium wines made exclusively with world-class grapes grown closer to home. According to Sebastiani, it's an evolution with purpose. "We are actively pursuing a transition of our portfolio and a pivot to our mission. I say that on a grand scale, especially when you talk about my family and where we've been with wine," he tells *The SOMM Journal*. "Over time it's been a multi-generation shift from agriculture, to branded jug wines that were specifically bottom-shelf retail, to my dad and his generation trading up to bottled wine and branding wine that was more premium in that regard as well."

After several successful years spent testing the brand in the market, Sebastiani hired gifted winemaker Alex Beloz—who has worked with high-quality grapes from Sonoma County for nearly two decades—to take the label to the next level in 2015.

The fruit for the Pinot Noir program comes from three properties located in the northwestern section of the Los Carneros AVA in southern Sonoma County. First is Martin Ranch, which is generally warm during the day but cools down rapidly in the mid-afternoon due to strong winds blowing in from the Petaluma Gap. Across the road is the Kiser Vine-



The Gehricke 2014 Pinot Noir from Los Carneros.



The Gehricke 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon from the Knights Valley AVA in Sonoma County.



The Gehricke 2016 Chardonnay from the Russian River Valley.

yard, another premium site owned and farmed by Michael and Steve Sangiacomo of Sangiacomo Family Vineyards. Newer to the fold is Rodgers Creek Vineyard, a high-elevation site that rests on the cusp of where the Petaluma Gap, Sonoma Coast, and Sonoma Mountain appellations intersect off of Highway 116 between Sonoma and Petaluma.

While each of these sites contribute fruit from special Pinot Noir clones planted in clay-based soils, the grapes are influenced by slight variations of wind currents based on their location and row orientations, as well as the age of the vines. As a result, the Gehricke team keeps a close watch on each block to maximize the flavors at harvest, especially if there are any threats of heat spikes in the forecast. "To me, it's that 'bing' moment when I feel the fruit is ready to go," Beloz explains. "For that reason, there is a very small window of opportunity because I don't want the grapes to be underripe or suddenly overripe."

Once picked, the fruit is initially tank-fermented. While Beloz likes to keep a small portion of the whole cluster intact, especially with the pristine Pommard clone fruit from the Kiser Vineyard, he also makes sure the impact isn't overly dominant in the finished blend. "While I like what it does, I still need to make sure the whole-cluster portion doesn't overpower the



August Sebastiani, a proud Sonoma native.

flavors," he explains. "It's like using a tool from a spice box, except realizing a little can go a long way."

The end result is a more sophisticated Pinot Noir style with layers of deep fruit flavors, bright acidity, and a gracious finish. "I like the fact that it has more of my thumbprint on it," says Beloz. "The finished wine is so much cleaner and has more focused extraction, complex flavors, and balance."

This focus on working with fruit from high-quality sites carries over to the other segments of the Gehricke red wine program. The Zinfandel, for instance, is made with fruit from gnarly, head-trained old vines grown in the Russian River Valley's Ponzio Vineyard, which Beloz jokingly describes as a "weed patch."

To add more depth, flavor, and color, Beloz typically blends in 8–10 percent from equally gnarly Petite Sirah grown at the vineyard. "You almost have to cover your

eyes when you look at the clusters," says Beloz. "One part is ripe and the other part is raisin-y, and that's just one cluster. But anyone who works with Zinfandel has a stomach for it. In the end, it's really good fruit, so if you have a great site and farm it right, it's bulletproof."

Getting from Grape to Bottle

By contrast, the Gehricke Cabernet Sauvignon sources fruit from the Bavarian Lion Vineyard in Knights Valley. As a sub-appellation of Sonoma County located east of Healdsburg, this area features gravelly soils; they benefit from the hot days and cool nights, allowing flavors to develop slowly.

To fill out the mid-palate, Beloz adds a small portion of Malbec from Arrowhead Mountain Vineyard in Sonoma Valley to produce an elegant wine with distinctive notes of blackberry jam, ripe blueberry, mulberry, fresh mint, and baking spices.

Finally, the fruit for the Chardonnay program comes from the Chalk Ridge Vineyard in the eastern segment of the Russian River Valley. Hand-picked, pressed cold, fermented in barrel, and kept on the lees until the finished blend is made, the end result is a sophisticated white wine with class and style. "It's classic California winemaking, but with more of a light touch and not too much new oak," Beloz says. "For these reasons, the emphasis is put on preserving the freshness of flavors and making sure there is plenty of firm acidity to keep the wine lively and not an over-oaked-style Chardonnay."

In the end, as Sebastiani tells it, 3 Badge's recent evolution in the winemaking sphere has been "about building the narrative and sending messages through [its] wines that [the brand] is committed to producing premium wines from this point forward."

"As a negotiator, you do everything to get from grape to bottle. In some cases, it's about buying in bulk or buying shiners," he adds. "But thanks to the help of Alex, this brand is more about getting our fingers purple and looking three to five vintages ahead. Equally important is the fact that it's not just about the Pinot program either: It's about spreading the world-class quality across all the wines in the portfolio."

Yet, as a fourth-generation member of a family wine business, Sebastiani is well aware that his brands' legacy extends far beyond the reception to Gehricke's latest vintages.



August Sebastiani and Alex Beloz have a bit of fun between shots.

"It's also providing an opportunity for our next generation to step in and start telling stories about the brands that we started and to fill the sizable shoes from the generations before me through my dad, his dad, and his dad as well," he says. **SJ**