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Through the Grapevine: Winemaker lands at Raymond Vineyards

Owner Boisset admired Putnam for her chardonnay.

Jennifer McInnis

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Winemaker Stephanie Putnam has landed at her benchmark winery at Raymond Vineyards, which she calls a sleeper.

Raymond Vineyards has a rich Napa history. Roy Raymond Sr. arrived in the Napa Valley in 1933 at the end of Prohibition and started working with the Beringer family. He married Martha Jane Beringer in 1936, and continued to learn the ins and outs of the winery. In 1970, the Raymond family set off on its own and purchased Rutherford Estate Vineyard and planted vines; their first harvest was in 1974. The family continued to produce predominantly cabernet for five generations.

Jean-Charles Boisset purchased the vineyard in 2009. Rooted in Burgundy, France, the Boisset Family Estates collection includes premier wines in Burgundy, Beaujolais, the Rhone Valley, the South of France and French sparkling wines. It also includes DeLoach Vineyards and Lyeth Estate in California.

Last February, Boisset brought in Putnam, whom he admired for her chardonnay. Putnam was at Far Niente for eight years and previously worked on the winemaking team at Hess Collection. Putnam was recently on a Texas tour and stopped in town to host a winemaker dinner at Las Ramblas at Hotel Contessa.

“When I started in the industry, Raymond Vineyards was my benchmark,” she says. “In the early to mid-'90s, Raymond was getting a lot of accolades. And then all the cult wineries came about and the wineries that had been established were forgotten. ... I think we've been a sleeper all along,” she says.

Raymond Vineyards is known for its cabernet, but it also produces sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and merlot. Chardonnay and sauvignon blanc are grown in the Jameson Canyon Estate Vineyard in southern Napa County, near Carneros. Putnam describes it as extreme Carneros because it's windier, foggier and balances the warm days and cool afternoons, creating the ideal conditions for those varietals.

“(The canyon) acts almost like a tunnel affect, so all the wind and the fog travels into the canyon to the Central Valley. And also the heat helps pull things in too, so it's windier and foggier,” Putnam says. “It grows a grape with a lot of structure to it.”

Raymond Vineyards on Zinfandel Lane, between Rutherford and St. Helena appellations in California where mostly cabernet, but also merlot and petite sirah, are grown at the two estate vineyards.

In 2007, the vineyard launched the R Collection, including Lot No. 7 Field Blend ($12.99) — No. 7 for the number of varietals: cabernet, merlot, petite syrah, syrah and zinfandel that dominate the smaller percentages of petite verdot and cabernet franc.

“I always try to cap the cab at 25 or 30 percent,” Putnam says. “To me, the concept of a field blend is to be a fun wine and not to be a cab-based wine. I really like to highlight the spiciness of the zinfandel that works really well in this wine,” she says. “I think people are finally feeling comfortable and saying, ‘I know cab, I know merlot, I can branch out now. I'm more willing to try other things.'”

That sounds a little funny coming from a self-professed cab lover.

“I love cab, I know it's boring,” Putnam says with a laugh. “I'm from basically the Bay Area. My parents used to take me up to Napa Valley and go wine tasting. I grew up drinking cab. So, I love cab because it can be a lighter style, it can be a heavier style.”

She gets a little more excited when she talks about the cabernets, calling the 2008 Family Classic Cabernet Sauvignon ($18.99) multi-appellation with a predominantly Napa fruits with Sonoma County and Lake County.

“We just want to give people a taste and a feel for Napa but make it a little more approachable, a little more affordable,” she says.

The wine was created for wine drinkers who are looking for a quality wine that doesn't cost more than $20.

But it really is worth spending a little more for the 2008 Reserve Selection Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon that is reasonably priced at $31.99. To describe the wine, Putnam first gives a little perspective.

“For me, the way to describe the two appellations is St. Helena is very much more of a feminine appellation. It's very soft and silky, sweet tannins, red fruits. And Rutherford is more of a masculine appellation. It's like a brooding cabernet, if you will, a lot of minerality, a lot of dust, more of an earthy clay, firmer tannins. This cab is a nice mix of the masculine and feminine.”

It's also the the cabernet Putnam held as her benchmark early in her career. Raymond Vineyards is still the same place, it just needed a little dusting off, she says. And it has been going through a transformation since Boisset purchased it, including transitioning to organic farming and working toward Biodynamic certification. Other renovations include the Crystal Cellar, which features Baccarat crystal and focuses on wine decanting; and the Theater of Nature, an area outside the tasting room that emphasizes the winery's natural approach to wine growing. Visitors can interact with live animals, such as chickens, goats and sheep.

Putnam says Boisset is demystifying wine, making it fun and family oriented.

It sounds like a really fun place to visit, which the public is invited to do through different tour options.

You can read more about at raymondvineyards.com. The wines can be found in stores at Costco, Gabriel's, H-E-B and Spec's, or at several restaurants around town, including Las Ramblas, Paesanos 1604, Ruth's Chris, Texas de Brazil and The Vineyard.