



Sarah Vandendriessche
joined Elizabeth Spencer as
winemaker in 2010.

Ever the Optimist

ELIZABETH SPENCER WINEMAKER **SARAH VANDENDRIESSCHE** ON WINE AS BOTH AN “ISOLATION BUSTER” AND AN IMPETUS FOR INTROSPECTION

story by **Kate Newton** / photos by **Alexander Rubin**

As Sarah Vandendriessche recalls, “the stars were aligned” 15 years ago when she joined Napa Valley winery Elizabeth Spencer as winemaker: Meeting with owners Elizabeth Pressler and Spencer Graham “on a cold, rainy December night,” she and fellow Southerner Graham bonded over their restaurant backgrounds, which soon led the couple to realize that Vandendriessche shared the same stylistic vision that had not only defined their portfolio from the outset but set it apart from the “big, voluptuous wines” characteristic of Napa at the time.

“They wanted to have wines that had a sense of place and typicity and were varietally correct, but they also wanted wines that were food-friendly, so balanced, elegant, and restrained,” notes Vandendriessche—and by the time she came on board, they had made a name for themselves doing just that, building a “robust wholesale business” before expanding into direct-to-consumer sales and opening a tasting room in a historic building built in 1872 that formerly housed the Rutherford post office. Vandendriessche embraced the winery’s approach of offering a diverse

lineup of grapes and vineyards, and when the Boisset Collection came calling, purchasing Elizabeth Spencer in 2021, it bolstered the brand’s mission by providing access to its organic and biodynamically farmed estate vineyards while giving Vandendriessche the opportunity to confer with “a global team of really excellent winemakers,” she says. “This new iteration of Elizabeth Spencer has fostered another level of collaboration, which has been just really wonderful to be a part of.” Among her closest collaborators is consulting winemaker and Napa

“rock star” Heidi Peterson Barrett, in Vandendriessche’s words, who simultaneously brings “a razor-sharp focus” and “sense of fun” to shared responsibilities such as blending trials: “She has a confidence that is born out of being a proven winner . . . but she also does something super important, which is constantly ask other people at the table what they think—there’s a dialogue there.”

With full trust in her team, Vandendriessche has been able to venture out more frequently into the market across the U.S. and in Europe, engaging with fellow professionals and consumers whose own passions for wine have proven invigorating. “My husband is also a winemaker—we spend a lot of our time with other winemakers and we forget the magic that people see who aren’t in the business and who don’t live in Napa Valley. For them . . . it holds this brilliance and fun. Sometimes it can feel a little meaningless to say, ‘I make wine, what a hard job,’” she says with a laugh. “But it is really hard work, and you

industry. “Wine is . . . about community, and it’s a real isolation buster,” she adds, noting the value of “getting to know other people again—people who don’t look like you, who don’t think like you,” through her travels. “It’s a gift. . . I’ve gotten so much out of that.”

more vintages of wine you’ll make and [how] what you’ll leave behind isn’t just a bottle of wine, it’s a real footprint on the land,” she says. “The knowledge is out there to make excellent wines from many places, and I don’t know if it’s meaningful to me, at this point in my career, to fight to get from a 97-point



Part of the Boisset Collection, Elizabeth Spencer crafts wines from a wide array of grape varieties and vineyards.

have to remind yourself who you’re doing it for and what that experience is like. It takes me back to the first times I drank wine or had amazing food at a dinner party with wine and great conversation. Meeting consumers outside of Napa Valley has been one of the most valuable resources that being with the Boisset family has given me in these last couple years.” Such encounters have also lent her fresh perspective on wine’s societal role at a time of instability for the

The Elizabeth Spencer tasting room is located in Rutherford, CA, in a historic building built in 1872.

Her work in the winery and vineyards has been imbued with that outward-looking reflection in recent years, heightening what’s already been a longtime passion for environmental stewardship and contemplation of her and her fellow Napers’ professional legacies. “You think about how many

wine to a 100-point wine. I’d rather have a wine that is idiosyncratic . . . and was grown in such a way that my footprint was low and I added back to biodiversity or to typicity, where I was doing something innovative not just for flavor but for expression of place.”

After a 2022 defined by heat waves and the delayed harvest of a cool 2023 vintage collectively served as a harbinger of the unpredictability wrought by climate change, Vandendriessche says she remains “ever the optimist,” heartened not only by the finished products of those touch-and-go years but also the 2024 wines—representing a “classic vintage” for whites in particular—as they start to undergo the bottling process. “We just got started on our North Coast Sauvignon Blanc,” she notes. “I know it’s bad luck to take a bottle home the day it was bottled, but I intend to, because if these are as pretty and bright as they were going through fermentation, we’re going to have a really good crop of 2024 wines.” Fortunately, Vandendriessche is well aware that the luck of stars aligning can only take one so far—the rest is up to you.