

{ russian river valley }



PHOTO: ALAN CAMPBELL PHOTOGRAPHY

# Speedy (Over) Delivery

KNOWN FOR ITS BESTSELLING CHARDONNAY, **RAEBURN WINERY** REVELS IN ITS SUCCESS IN THE RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

by Randy Caparoso

**THE STORY OF** Raeburn Winery, founded in 2013 by proprietor Derek Benham, has essentially been a race to the top: The Raeburn Russian River Valley Chardonnay is now one of the top-selling Chardonnays grown in its namesake region. It's an area that, in many ways, epitomizes what California Chardonnay is all about—if you define it in terms of intensity, an appealing generosity of fruit, and luscious texture, all restrained by a true sense of grace.

Winemaker Joe Tapparo has been with the winery since its inception, when it was established on a fabled Olivet Road site that once housed Cecil DeLoach's Pinot Noir facility; before that, it was home to Merry Edwards' first winery, which old-timers will recall as The Merry Vintners. When asked about the secret behind Raeburn's success, he responded in no uncertain terms: "We overdeliver at the price, which has been at a \$19.99 SRP. It's no surprise when you look at Mr. Benham's history with Purple Wine Company [which he founded in 2001] and, before that, Blackstone [a hugely successful brand Benham started in 1990 and sold in 2001]. The Raeburn brand has grown because he never cuts corners, no matter what."

For Tapparo, Raeburn's Chardonnay offers enormous sensory appeal. "A lot of winemaking love goes into it, and the fruit comes entirely from the Russian River Valley, which is very lavish in terms of intrinsic quality and, of course, cost. There is a lot of new French and Hungarian oak used in the program, which includes

75% barrel fermentation [the rest occurs in stainless steel]. It's labor-intensive—we'll do the stirring every two weeks to achieve the lees-influenced complexity expected in classic Russian River Valley Chardonnay—and from the fruit-sourcing perspective, we've managed to expand our long-term contracts with key growers."

Tapparo is understandably cagey when asked about numbers, but he notes that the wine's current production is "in excess

quality—in our case, the pure, distinctive quality associated with Russian River Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. . . . Don't forget, we are now just as competitive with our Pinot!"

Now in its third vintage, Raeburn's single-varietal Russian River Valley Pinot Noir is aged in French oak (25% new) and sells for \$23. "Typical of the Russian River Valley's cool climate, it has some power and concentration, but it's not overripe,"

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*Raeburn Winery winemaker Joe Tapparo.*

of 100,000 cases." As a \$20 Chardonnay, it's often competing with expressions from less-coveted regions that are produced using shortcuts such as dipping bags of wood chips into giant tanks to replicate oak profiles.

When asked about this, Tapparo has a diplomatic answer: "While I have great respect for what many of my colleagues are doing with oak alternatives these days, it's just not in our company DNA to take these kinds of shortcuts," he says. "We have been successful by delivering high

Tapparo says. "It has that quintessential Russian River fruit profile of red cherry and raspberry, and it combines the delicacy associated with the appellation with that sense of lushness on the palate that everyone loves about Russian River Pinot."

If Raeburn continues on its current trajectory, the producer of America's favorite Russian River Valley Chardonnay may soon become known for crafting the country's favorite Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Given its track record, who would bet against that? ❖

## TASTING NOTES BY PUBLISHER/ EDITOR-IN-CHIEF MERIDITH MAY

**Raeburn 2018 Chardonnay, Russian River Valley** One of the most elegant, mouth-filling Chardonnays from this region—its stellar aromas of lemon verbena and spearmint fascinate. A creamy wash on the entry carries savory herbs and chamomile as key lime saturates the tongue; its citrusy sweetness accents the wine's high-toned acidity. **95**

**Raeburn 2019 Rosé, Russian River Valley** With its ballet slipper-pink hue and inviting perfume of raspberry and stone fruit, this stunning rosé brings a purity and freshness to the palate. A dusting of salty minerality encompasses notes of red berries and tropical fruit as a fragrance of plumeria permeates the finish. **93**

**Raeburn 2018 Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley** A multifaceted personality emerges from this complex red: We're entertained first with clove, briar, wild cherry, and cocoa on the nose, and then with a juicy, delicate, and lean body that's reminiscent more of rose petals and red flowers than forest floor. As the performance concludes, savory notes whisper backstage. **95**