

Consistent Quality

An Interview with Merry Edwards,
Merry Edwards Wines, Meredith Vineyard Estate, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Before opening her own winery, Merry Edwards practiced her craft at Laurier Winery, Merry Vintners, Matanzas Creek Winery, and Mount Eden. Prior to those posts, Edwards studied pinot noir clones at the University of Beaune in France, and in 1985, presented the first clonal seminar at the University of California, Davis. For more than 20 years, she consulted for wineries throughout California and Oregon. She earned her BS in physiology from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master's degree in food science, with an emphasis in enology, from the University of California, Davis.



Merry Edwards

COMPANY BRIEF In 1997, Merry Edwards co-founded a business venture, allowing her to produce Merry Edwards Wines (www.merryedwards.com) from select pinot noir grapes in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma Coast, including her own vineyards: Meredith Estate, Coopersmith, Cresta d'Oro, and Georganne. The family of vineyard designate wines now includes Klopp Ranch, Olivet Lane, and Tobias Glen. Edwards began making a Russian River Valley sauvignon blanc under her label in 2001.

Can you give a brief overview today of where the Merry Edwards brand stands?

I started off with a 24-acre piece of land, and 10 years later, we control 46 acres. We have a brand new facility, and we've expanded from making two pinots the first year – Russian River and Olivet Lane – to making two regional blends – Russian River and Sonoma Coast – and six different vineyard designates: Olivet Lane, Klopp Ranch, Tobias Glen, Coopersmith, Meredith Estate, and Flax. We've also added a sauvignon blanc to our portfolio, which has been very successful. We were very fortunate that, when we started, American pinot noir was just beginning to get recognition. Also, we finally have complete control of our winemaking, because for 10 years, we were making our wine in other facilities. It feels really good.

What makes Merry Edwards Wines unique in a crowded marketplace?

We have a very specific style. Our brand is aimed toward consumer recognition of dependable quality. From our labels and bottles, to the well-written prose describing the wines,

to the individual logos for each of our vineyard designates, the presentation reflects the quality of the wine in the bottle. We have shown people that we know how to be consistent. We very rarely send out samples when a new vintage comes around. People just order, because they know each wine will be consistently profiled, as it was the year before. Even growers understand that, when their name goes on a label, it is a commitment to the future, because that wine has to be there every year.

To whom do you market your wines?

We do a lot of business with restaurants. We don't sell the wine in any stores, except for at our winery, online, and through our mailing list. We offer a range of styles and prices, and people become fans of a particular wine or several wines. Our target customer loves pinot noir, and people can try a half bottle of Russian River in a restaurant for a very reasonable price and get to know us that way.

Will your distribution remain relatively consistent?

For a small winery to be profitable, it has to do as much self-distribution as possible. If you're selling your wine to a distributor for 50 percent off retail, and paying a broker 15 percent, you don't have much profit left to work with. So we cater to the private market by doing exclusive one-on-one tastings for customers. We don't have brokers or distributors in California – we do everything direct. Busy wine buyers at a restaurant like the fact that we don't bother them in person. They order the wine and know it will be there two days later. We deal with 500-plus restaurants in California, and they like the direct contact. People get a good feeling about being close to the core of the winery; it keeps people connected.

How can people best familiarize themselves with pinot noir?

Reading about wines in a book is not the same as tasting them. Get together with friends and share bottles. I'm convinced that Russian River is the best place in the world to make pinot noir, but also try Oregon, other regions in California, and different producers.

Are your new vintages ready to drink right away?



We are releasing our wines early – the market demands that we do. They taste good when they are released, but they age well and taste even better five, seven, or 10 years later.

Does technology impact the practice of winemaking?

Winemaking has always been a combination of art and science. We have some good tools, but they have to be used in conjunction with handcrafting. When grapes come in, I can send them to a private lab to learn about the potential color and tannins that I want to extract from that particular pinot, for instance. But that doesn't replace the need for me to go out in the vineyard, taste the grapes, and look at the vines. It's a combination of the technical and the sensory.

How has your role changed as the business has grown?

Now that we're in our own facility, I have more control, because I have all of my own people. But at some point, I will need to step back and trust them to carry through with what I'm teaching them. So we taste together all the time, and I'm trying to teach them how I think. There are a lot of things you can delegate without giving up control. I still do all my own field-testing, which is critical. So I understand where I need to be and what I can let go of.

Do you drink a glass of wine every night?

Almost every night. Wine is healthy. It's relaxing. It's part of my day. We travel so much for business that, when we're home, we like to cook, sit on our patio, have a glass of wine, and luxuriate in living where we live, which is incredibly gorgeous.

Can you ever really get away from the business?

My husband is my partner and works in the business, so it's hard to shut it off. I'm always thinking about our employees, because we're a big family here. Most business owners are swept up in their business. You have to love it, or else you shouldn't be doing it. I'm fortunate that I've been doing what I love for 35 years. ●

A selection of Merry Edwards wines