

THE ART OF FINE WINE LIVING
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The small Sonoma winery with Asian ambitions

By Robin Lynam on May 20, 2015



Akiko Freeman hopes to win Japanese and Hong Kong hearts with her Pinot Noir
Photo by: LE PAN

Akiko Freeman and her team at the Freeman Vineyard and Winery in Sonoma County's Russian River Valley AVA, make less than 5,000 cases per year of their widely acclaimed Burgundy style Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

They could easily sell every bottle locally, but she and her husband Ken – who runs an investment firm in San Francisco – lived in Hong Kong during the 1990s, and are keen to have their wines appreciated in a city they grew to love.

Those wines are a labor of love. Akiko became enamored of wine – and of Burgundy in particular- while growing up in Japan.

Her grandfather, a professor at Tokyo University, was passionate about French wine, and because Japan has a serious gift-giving culture, routinely received very good bottles as gifts from graduating students.

“He was a Bordeaux drinker, so all the great Burgundies went to my father, who always shared them with me. I learned to love Pinot Noir,” she recalls.



Freeman followed her future husband, Ken, to San Francisco where they began devoting much of their spare time to learning about California wine country. Photo by: Nader Khouri

Wine pairing

It was another love affair that took her to California. Her father had sent her to New York to study for a year, and early on in her stay she met her future husband.

“While I was finishing school in New York, Ken moved to San Francisco, so after graduation I followed him. I couldn’t tell my father back in Japan why I wanted to go there, so I applied to all the schools in the area and got in to Stanford, so I could continue my studies and stay in the United States,” she explains.

The young couple devoted much of their leisure time to visiting Californian wine country, and decided that at some point in the future they wanted to own a winery.

“Ken was surfing on the net one day in 2001, and found a property for sale in the town of Sebastopol, an hour north from San Francisco, with a small winery attached to it,” Akiko says.

“It had been started in 1978, but the original owner couldn’t afford to keep it up, so they closed it in 1981, and the winery was there for 20 years unused. The building had a permit from Sonoma County to make wine – and those are getting harder and harder to come by – and the price was right.”

No vineyards were attached to the property, and the Freemans had no winemaking experience. They bought fruit, and engaged a well-regarded young winemaker called Ed Kurtzman.

Akiko had planned to take a formal wine-making course, but instead apprenticed herself to Kurtzman after he pointed out that since she wasn't applying for a job anywhere else, she didn't need qualifications, and he could give her on the job training.

She finally took over the winemaking herself in 2010. He continues with the winery as a consultant.



The Freemans make about 4,000 cases of Pinot Noir and 1,000 cases of Chardonnay each year.

Photo by: Nader Khouri

Sideways boost

Luck seems to have been with them from the outset.

“We made our first 500 cases of Pinot Noir in 2002 from purchased grapes, and released our expensive hobby project wine in 2004. Two months later the movie *Sideways* [which is set in Californian wine country and talks up Pinot Noir] came out. The timing couldn't have been better. US Pinot Noir sales went through the roof, and we sold out,” she says.

The Freemans had always wanted an estate winery, and went on to buy one vineyard adjacent to their property, then another on the Sonoma Coast. The wines – always Burgundian in style – are now made with a high percentage of their own fruit.

“In California, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay tend to be made in a bigger bolder style, but since Ken and I loved Burgundy wines, we thought we should be able to make a more elegant style Pinot and Chardonnay using California fruit,” she explains.

“The Green Valley, which is the coolest most south western part of Russian River, is ideal for Pinot Noir. It’s quite foggy in the mornings. The Sonoma Coast vineyard is at a high elevation, very close to the ocean, which means a very foggy cold climate.

“We make about 4,000 cases of Pinot Noir, and a little less than 1,000 cases of Chardonnay, and we do everything by hand. We hand pick, hand punch down – I do all that myself with a few other helpers. You can only do what we do on a very small scale.”



The Freeman philosophy? To grow the best fruit and bring out the best of it, says Akiko.

Photo by: Nader Khouri

Global flow

To Akiko’s gratification the wines have been well received in Hong Kong and Japan as well as the United States.

“Since I’m from Asia I like to have Asian people try our wines. Japan and Hong Kong are very important markets for us,” she says.

Although she continues to love the great wines of Burgundy, and is interested in recent developments in wine making in Japan, Akiko Freeman is comfortable in her Sonoma County winemaker’s niche.

“The weather in Japan is not co-operative. The harvest time is always typhoon season. I don’t know how they manage, but I think they are doing a good job.

“French weather has its ups and downs. There are good years and disappointing years. In California there are no ups and downs, so we can always make a good wine, but we work in a very traditional French wine making way.

“We don’t manipulate anything. We just try to grow the best fruit and bring out the best of it. That’s our philosophy.”

Robin Lynam

Robin Lynam is a Hong Kong-based journalist who writes on food, drink, arts and culture for local, regional, and international publications.

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