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Great Taste: Freeman Vineyard and Winery

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By Karen Hart
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Freeman Vineyard & Winery
300 Montgomery Road
Sebastopol, Calif. 95472

(707) 823-6937

freemanwinery.com

Hours: Monday-Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Tasting Fee: \$30/per person

Wines Offered: 2016 Ryo-fu Chardonnay, 2016 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 2015 Keefer Ranch Pinot Noir, 2016 Gloria Estate Pinot Noir, 2016 Yu-ki Estate Pinot Noir (Selections may vary.)

Reservations: Required

Picnics: Yes

Pets: Well-behaved dogs welcome, though not In the cave

Did You Know? Ed Kurtzman, one of the most highly sought-after winemakers in California, who specializes in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, was the founding winemaker at Freeman Vineyard & Winery. Proprietor Akiko Freeman worked alongside Kurtzman for seven years. Today, he serves as the consulting winemaker, helping the Freemans preserve and perfect the visionary style he helped them pioneer.

[Photos courtesy of Freeman Vineyard & Winery]



Nestled along a quiet, country road west of Sebastopol and surrounded by Redwood trees, you'll find Freeman Vineyard & Winery, known for its critically-acclaimed wines. To the left of the winery's cellar is the Gloria Estate Vineyard and above the wine cellar doors, surrounded in

stone is a small, modest sign that reads: "Freeman 9-28-85." These two elements are part of the winery's charm and a nod to its owners, Ken and Akiko Freeman, and their serendipitous encounter more than 30 years ago.

The Freemans' story began on September 28, 1985, during Hurricane Gloria, along the Atlantic coast. Ken had just graduated from college and was working on Martha's Vineyard. Akiko Wakimura was a young international student from Japan. They met at a hurricane party that evening. "It was a keg party," Ken recalls. "She thought it was like a ball in Japan and showed up in a formal gown." At the time, Akiko had no plans to stay in the U.S. permanently, but she caught the eye of young Ken, and it marked an auspicious moment in time that would change the course of their lives.



The Freemans married five years later, and though neither had planned careers in the winemaking business, they shared a passion for wine. Akiko's grandfather was a leading academic in Japan, who loved the enigmatic beauty of great Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Ken was captivated by the mystery of winemaking since childhood.

In 2001, they established a winery and set out to acquire two properties. The first nine-acre parcel was at the cool western edge of the Russian River Valley AVA. "If you believe in divine intervention, we bought an orchard from a woman named Gloria," says Ken with a smile. The hillside property, now adjacent to the winery, is named Gloria Estate. The second parcel of land is now the 14-acre Yu-ki Estate, situated just five miles from the Pacific coast, above the town of Occidental at an elevation of 1,000 feet.



Today, Freeman is a boutique winery, producing about 6,000 cases per year. Ken helms the proprietary details of the winery, and Akiko serves as the winemaker, guiding every vintage. Their winemaking philosophy is centered around the idea that great wines capture the soul of great vineyards, and they focus exclusively on two varietals—Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. “We love our size,” says Ken. “We’re just large enough to offer variation. And part of the key of our humble success is focus. With a Japanese wife, it’s always about focus.”

We begin with the 2016 Ryo-fu Chardonnay. “Ryo-fu” means “cool breeze” in Japanese, and this is not your typical Chardonnay. This is an exquisite wine with delicate notes of stone fruit, lemon and cream. In 2015, a Ryo-fu Chardonnay was served at The White House during the Obama administration when the prime minister of Japan was visiting.

Next, we taste the 2016 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. Sourced with fruit from the Sonoma Coast vineyard, this wine is distinctive with dark fruit, spicy notes and a silky texture. Akiko’s approach to winemaking is to be as minimalist as possible. “Our grapes are like a beautiful woman,” she says. “There is no need for a lot of makeup—just a small amount of oak, and let our beautiful grapes shine.”

The Freeman-style of winemaking goes against convention. Rather than pushing the limits of ripeness, they prefer to pick early during harvest. “The earlier you pick, the less sugar, which gives the wine more acidity,” says Ken. The bright acidity makes Freeman wines ideal to pair with food. In the early days, the winery built its reputation by the wine lists in notable restaurants such as French Laundry in Napa, and Boulevard in San Francisco.



We follow that with the 2015 Keefer Ranch Pinot Noir, made with fruit sourced from a single vineyard, planted 45 years ago. “This is a Swiss clone with peppery notes,” says Ken. This is a distinctive wine with a unique taste profile. Next, we try the 2016 Gloria Estate Pinot Noir, which features a Japanese symbol for “glory,” another nod to Akiko’s rich heritage, which spans 21 generations. This has lovely aromas of sweet cherries and brambles, and it’s fruit forward on the palette.

Finally, we taste the 2016 Yu-Ki Estate Pinot Noir. On the nose, it offers deep-berry flavors with a hint of Sonoma Coast spice. The fruit is sourced from Yu-ki Vineyard, named for their nephew in Tokyo. Here, the yields are low—only one or two tons per acre—and the berries are small, which allow for intense flavors. This is a wine you can purchase now and keep on hand. It’s expected to be at its best through 2024.

Freeman wines are elegant, balanced and feminine, and the Pinot Noirs offer a beautiful layer of complexity. Next time you’re heading to the coast, stop at Freeman to experience the wines that have been written about by Robert Parker and reviewed in Forbes, USA Today and Bloomberg Business Week.