



ASSEMBLING THE DREAM TEAM

- Winemaker, Vanessa Wong

I've never been much of a sports fan, although a family of sports nuts surrounds me. Growing up, my eldest sister, Marcella was a huge 49ers fan, even before the golden era of Joe Montana, Jerry Rice, and Dwight Clark of "The Catch." She slogged it through with our hometown team, even during the back-to-back 2-14 seasons with Steve DeBerg and O.J.

Simpson, who was famous at the time for his swiftness and jukes on the field (and at Hertz) before he became infamous for his evasive maneuvers at slow speed in a white Bronco. My sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins are all San Francisco Giants, Golden State Warriors, and 49ers fans, often attending the home games and always following the weekend games on tv. I get a flurry of pings on the family group chat whenever there is a close match with everyone cheering or biting their nails.

The nuclear family circle of my three boys has both practitioners and avid followers of ice hockey, soccer, and basketball, so the talk around the dinner table is filled with stats on shots, goals, and fouls whether we're talking about youth sports or the NHL, NBA, or Premier League. I never have much to add to these conversations as I do not have very much knowledge of the play of the game or of any of the players. But, I do take it all in by proximal osmosis and learn a few things. For example, I could tell you that Victor Wembanyama and Connor were both first draft picks for their respective sports. Or, that I know Alex Ovechkin topped Wayne Gretzky in career goals and how many triple-doubles Nickola Jokić has gotten this season in pursuit of Russell Westbrook's record. Or, that I learned that Luka Dončić's trade to the Lakers for a bunch of players and a far in the future first round pick was weird and unexpected. Likewise, for Quinn Hughes in a similar trade for much more than a bag of pucks, as they say. However, when asked who our favorite teams are, it dawns on me that my boys do not ever root for any one team, in particular. People always assume that our loyalties lie with the local squad, but my sons and Nick are much more interested in the characteristics and merits of individual players no matter what team they are on. The attention to the minutiae my boys have to player details and stats is incredible. It always baffles me that my son will know exactly how many seasons Trevor Zegras played with the Ducks before he was traded and yet not have a clue about where his jacket can be found after school.

I get way out of my depth when it comes time for the NHL playoffs when Nick makes each of us fill out the brackets to the finals. I simply cannot remember enough about all the players to fill out the brackets astutely, but I just can't leave myself to fill it out willy-nilly,

either. So, I study the stats of the various teams to get a feel for how they would do in a probable match-up to help guide me. My youngest son views this methodology with profound derision and scoffs at my lack of expertise in the matter. I think he's still sore from when I successfully predicted the Stanley Cup champions two years ago. What can I say? I like to use information and observation to make decisions. Which brings me to...



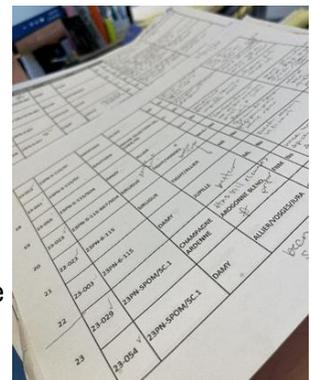
People often ask me what barrels I use in my winemaking and, occasionally, they ask how I choose the barrels that I do. I have been told that I have a “judicious use of oak in my wine élevage program.” I am quoting one of our barrel salespeople here—ironically, the compliment is not conducive to increasing barrel sales. It is true, I don't use a lot of new oak in our wine at Peay Vineyards so that makes what barrel choices we do make even more important. Along with farming practices, it is what we have learned to fine tune the most in our 28 years of farming grapes and making wine. My philosophy with new oak barrels is that on a basic level the oak character should not stick out and be the foremost impression when someone tastes the wine. It should enhance the wine's innate character, not be a character in and of itself. Then, more granularly, the oak character of the barrel should match with the character of the wine that is in it and, furthermore, the different barrels should work well together in the cuvée or blend as a whole.

The variation in oak used to make wine is as myriad as there are winemakers. A couple of decades ago, I read an article in a trade publication titled, “The Art of Using Way Too Many Barrels.” It profiled a winemaker who loved experimenting with different types of barrels so much that he had more than 40 different cooperages resulting in hundreds of barrels that he worked with and delighted in adding to and changing the types of barrels each vintage with seemingly infinite number of combinations. His philosophy was to experiment and try everything because he said, “nothing can be gained without trying.” Although, with his carefree personality, in general, he took experimentation to an extreme with this scattershot approach. I am personally acquainted with this winemaker and thus know his exuberant enthusiasm for all things. So, when I recently ran into him at a cooperage tasting event, I chuckled with him that after 20 years of experimenting, he was still on the hunt for new barrels to check out. Then, I realized that after more than 24 years of making wines for Peay Vineyards, we, too, are still trying out new barrels albeit in a far more restrained and circumscribed manner. In the pursuit of finding the barrels that bring out the best in each of the wines, we meticulously observe and track how the wines show with that barrel's influence on the nose and palate. And with each vintage we continue to fine tune.

Although it would be fascinating to try every barrel under the sun, this scattershot methodology does not serve us in homing in on which barrels match well with our wines. There are many factors that go into the crafting of a barrel that affect how it can impact the smell, taste, and texture of a wine: forest of origin, grain tightness, wood aging/seasoning conditions and time, stave bending method and toasting level which is dictated by source and degree of heat, time and depth of the toasting. While there are nearly an infinite number of variables, we do streamline by keeping only with barrels that are: made with oak (sometimes other woods like acacia or chestnut are used); originating from only French forests (as opposed to American or Eastern European); handcrafted with split staves (as opposed to machine sawn) that are exclusively air-dried instead of kiln-dried. So, what we focus on is each cooperage's crafting of their barrels with respect to forest selection and their toasting technique and how that shows through in our wines.



You would think that there might be uniformity or standardization among the cooperages when they categorize a toast level as Medium but nothing can be further from the truth! Each cooperage seems to have its own idea of what “Medium” toast means to them and it is across a wide flavor spectrum. Sometimes the cooperage won't even use any meaningful designation choosing a proprietary fanciful name like “Elegant” or “Aphrodite” that doesn't signify anything qualitative in name alone. So, to contend with this lack of descriptive consistency we taste through all the new barrels each vintage side by side and form our own internal calibration of the barrel's impact to the wine itself and, in comparison, to each other. In these tastings, we compare different barrels to one another on the same wine lot or compare how the same or similar barrel performs on different wines. We taste, discuss, and take notes every year for all of our wines whether they are estate farmed grapes or from grapes we purchase, and for each variety that has new oak in the blends: Pinot noir, Chardonnay, or Syrah. Then, all these notes for individual barrels are compiled into one big document so we can track and compare the barrels with the different lots of wine year after year. This helps me observe the nuances and study the trends when we make incremental changes with the choice of cooperage, oak type, and toast for each wine. We observe which barrels bring out the spice notes in our wine and which bring out the floral character. We can better understand the interaction of the oak with a certain kind of vintage and the interplay between different barrels on the footprint of the wine. From this, I can tell the cooperage what customized tweak I would like them to make for my barrels the next



vintage and we can steer the barrel selections to an ever more balanced and compelling match between wine and barrel. What if we were to take our favorite barrel and use only that kind for all our wine? Wouldn't that simplify things and make my work a whole lot easier? Some wineries do this. Many Bordeaux châteaux use not only a single kind of barrel, but they also use that new barrel in 100% of their wine. And there is a well-known Sonoma County Pinot producer that uses the same barrel for all its wines made from vineyards sourced throughout northern California—its imprint on their wines is so recognizable that I can identify the producer in a blind tasting nearly every time (though rarely the AVA!) Don't get me wrong, it is a genuinely nice barrel, and it can match with the majority of their wines but it does make them all taste similar to one another no matter where the grapes are from and, thus, rather monochromatic and predictable.

Do we have favorite barrels? Sure, but what is ultimately most important is how well the one barrel complements other barrels and wines in the final blend. Since we use only a few new barrels per cuvée—anywhere between 10-30%--it is crucial that the new barrels work well together. That is why not having all of the same character is good. A balance of slightly different but equally instrumental characteristics makes for a more interesting and well put together composite. In our years of trying, tasting, and tracking our different barrels through the vintages, do we find clunkers that we drop? Most certainly. Sometimes there are barrels that show too strongly of an off-putting or not quite pleasing character or are too inconsistent from year to year even within their own parameters let alone being consistent with others. Those are not right for Peay wines. But at times there may be a barrel who has a character that is singular or even a bit of an outlier and yet it is interesting enough to keep if it can be successfully melded into the larger blend. I usually shy away from barrels that present a lot of smoke or charred character, for example, but we have a couple of coopers whose barrels have more than a one-dimensional carbonized note and instead present a deeply complex smoked tone like a good kielbasa sausage or a meaty note like prosciutto. These barrels, although not something we would like to use a lot of since on their own their profiles are too much of a particular character, add something special in very discreet doses. So, we keep on with a couple of those types every year to contribute to the blends at large.

Last basketball season, my elder son and his uncle, Andy, got into a hilarious back and forth text debate on the merits versus the faults of various NBA players but mainly of Warriors forward Draymond Green. Although a skillful and stellar player, he is fiery, outspoken, aggressive and often criticized for being a "dirty" player. Andy is a big fan, but his nephew countered his praise of Green with a laundry list of on-court altercations involving him shoving, hitting, choking, kicking, stomping on other players and even punching his own teammate in the face. When pointed out that Green has almost the most

ejections from the game in the league because of unsportsmanlike conduct, Andy conceded that the star player was a bit of a hot head. Despite his strong character, Draymond is no doubt a playmaker and makes a seriously lethal duo with his teammate Steph Curry. So, even the “baddies” can be part of the essential synergy of a team like barrels can in a blend in the right measure. Finding those barrels is a big part of bringing out the terroir of our estate wines without overpowering them. In a way, I like to think of myself as a draft scout but for barrels--finding the right merits in the right mix.

With the Olympics coming up and given my penchant for making observations and gathering data, I muse that perhaps I should try my hand at assembling a theoretical Dream Team to rival the USA’s 1980 Miracle on Ice hockey team. But since I don’t play hockey or even really understand the rules or how to play the game, I would probably not be good at putting together an all-star team. Certainly, my son would think that notion is utterly laughable. So, it is best to stay in my lane, have myself a glass of Pinot noir, sit back and enjoy a game and ask, “Who is the team in orange?”

