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Wine notes: Derby Wine Estates

Couple decides to move on from an old brand's bad reputation, start fresh

By Janis Switzer | Special to The Tribune



Shortly after buying Laura's Vineyard off Highway 46 East in 2001, Ray Derby sought his winemaker's opinion of the name of the winery. With historical status in Paso Robles as one of its first vineyards, Derby was reluctant to change it from Laura's (named after original owner Gary Eberle's mother). But with a reputation for inconsistent wines, mostly as the result of changes in ownership, winemaker Tiffinee Vierra thought a new identity was needed to reflect the change in the quality of the wines. She also wanted to acknowledge the other two vineyards the Derbys own, and from which she sources grapes. Finally, after three years of debate, Vierra won.

“Tiffinee, to her credit, sold me on the idea that a name change was in our best interests,” Derby recalled. “We recognized that we’re more than Laura’s Vineyard.”

This year, their new brand, Derby Wine Estates, was released for the first time. Under the Derby name, however, are vineyard designations which include Laura’s, as well as Derbyshire — the Derbys’ 600-acre Cambria property — and Derby Westside, their smaller vineyard west of Paso Robles.

Both Derby and his wife, Pam, were apprehensive about having their name on the label.

“I said Derbys are English,” Pam said. “They don’t do wines!”

But Pam was also realistic about the dilemma they faced.

“If you keep the same name but make better wines, guess what — it doesn’t work. You already have a reputation,” she said.

The couple never dreamed they would be in this position. After selling his auto parts manufacturing business 14 years ago, Ray Derby expected to be fully retired by now. Instead, the couple discovered wine when they moved to Cambria, and shortly thereafter they bought the large coastal property where they now have 60 acres of pinot noir and pinot gris.

When they purchased the 278-acre Laura’s Vineyard property, the Derbys intended only to sell the grapes, not to make wine. But when the tasting room came available in 2005, they hired Vierra and started production at Paso Robles Wine Services. They only make a few thousand cases of wine each year, selling off more than 95 percent of the grapes they grow.

Vierra, a 34-year-old Cal Poly graduate, has gained her winemaking knowledge from jobs at Wild Horse Winery, Edna Valley Vineyard, Tablas Creek and Four Vines. In addition to making the wines, she also manages the tasting room and is integrally involved in all sales and marketing decisions, such as the name and label change.

The next step for the Derbys is to find a winery of their own. After failing to get a permit approved to build their own winery, they have explored purchasing an existing facility.

“I would like to have our own facility and have complete control over what is done and how it’s done,” Derby explained.

In the meantime, Vierra and the Derbys are focused on the tasting room and the brand.

“We’re getting about 95 percent of our business from referrals,” Vierra said.

“That says a lot about the community and how they look at our wines and our staff and the experience people have here.”