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Standing on Its Own Merits: Domaine Anderson

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I approached the tasting with all the enthusiasm of a woman going for a root canal. Twenty-four California Chardonnays were lined up on the tasting table in our offices. I know what some of our staff were thinking: Let's do these fast and move on to the Pinots.

And I couldn't blame them. There had been such a sameness—such a predictability—to the California Chardonnays we'd been tasting recently, that the whole idea of tasting yet more Chardonnay seemed like enological penance.

We started in. Oak. Butter. Sweet. Oak. Butter. Sweet. And so it went.

Until wine number ten. I wrote: Beautiful rich aroma. . . not fruity exactly, more complex than that. A page out of Burgundy. Pure and fresh-like rain. Yet also just the merest hint of creaminess. Elegant and integrated with a vividness to the flavor that's captivating.

There was no waiting until the end to find out what this was. I ripped off the paper bag that had been blinding the wine: a 2012 Domaine Anderson Chardonnay. I'd never tasted it (or even heard about it) before. And in fact, it's just come onto the market. Here is its story.

The Big Gamble

Domaine Anderson is the American still wine estate of Louis Roederer Champagne. Its sister—sparkling wine house Roederer Estate—produces what is considered by many sommeliers to be one of the top sparkling wines in the U.S. Indeed, after learning of this connection, I wasn't so surprised, for the Domaine Anderson Chardonnay had the kind of finesse that Roederer Estate's



Domaine Anderson is Roederer's latest investment in Mendocino. PHOTO: AUBRIE PICK



prestige cuvée, L'Ermitage, possesses. The winery makes not only a Chardonnay but also a light-bodied Pinot Noir that's all earth, tea and cola-as far away from a fruit bomb Pinot as you could get. For both of these wines, Burgundian winemaker Jeremy Seysses of Domaine Dujac is a consultant (more on which in a moment).

But for as much as I've admired Roederer Estate over the years, sparkling wine in Anderson Valley is one thing. Still wine (Seysses notwithstanding) is quite another.

I, for one, am not sure Anderson Valley ever really stepped out onto the court. To be sure, some good still wines have come from the appellation (and who could ever forget the early Navarro Rieslings and Gewürztraminers?). But when I think about great Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the first appellation that comes to mind is not Anderson Valley. It has always seemed to me like a place on the verge. But it's been on that verge for 25 years.

I remember in 1981 when Jean Claude Rouzaud, Chairman of Louis Roederer, announced he had chosen Anderson Valley in Mendocino County as the location for its new California outpost, Roederer Estate. The decision was, if nothing else, a huge risk. But on the sparkling score, Rouzaud had been prescient. Domaine Anderson, it seems, is Roederer's next big gamble.

At Home in Anderson Valley

The 11-mile long, five-mile wide Anderson Valley is about a three-hour drive north of San Francisco. It slants like a pants pocket inland from the cold Pacific Ocean in the northwest, south to the town of Philo. The part nearest the ocean—the part that Domaine Anderson winemaker Jerry Murray calls the "deep end"—is one of the chilliest grape-growing areas in California.

Domaine Anderson's 50 acres of estate vineyards are found in several pockets, all of which are in the warmer (a relative term) southeastern part of the valley. Some of the pockets were bought with the founding of Roederer Estate in the early 1980s, but those warmer vineyards were never used for the company's sparkling wine. Then there are vineyards around the winery—the so-called Dach Ranch vineyards, named for a long-ago owner. From these vineyards combined, Domaine Anderson will eventually make about 1,800 cases of Chardonnay and 3,000 cases of Pinot Noir.



**Outstanding in their fields at Domaine Anderson: Gonzalo Barragan, Vineyard Manager; Bob Gibson, Director of Vineyard Operations and Salvador "Nato" Guerrero, Vineyard Supervisor.
PHOTO: AUBRIE PICK**



Pinot grapes from Domaine Anderson's Dach Vineyard.

As Gregory Balogh, President of U.S. Operations for Roederer, tells it, the company had been thinking about making still wines for more than a decade. But the meteor-like success of Roederer Estate had kept the team completely occupied. Finally, in early 2010, right when they were ready to get really serious about still wine, a beautifully planted, brand new vineyard across the street from Goldeneye went into foreclosure. The sale offer landed on Balogh's desk. "The vines were in their third leaf and based on perfect clones. It was a miracle of an opportunity," says Balogh. "We jumped at it."

"The fact that there isn't a single, established Anderson Valley style is a huge opportunity for us," continues Balogh. "These days, most wineries put their heavy signature on grapes like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. But the whole Roederer approach—in everything—is minimalist. So for us, this is a chance to see what Anderson Valley actually tastes like."

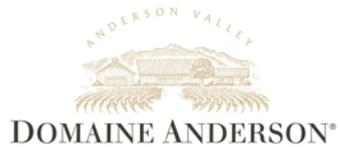
Walking the Line



Domaine Anderson Dach Vineyard Pinot Noir.
PHOTO: MACELL PUSZAR

Domaine Anderson's winemaker Jerry Murray describes himself as a Pinot Noir lover who learned winemaking rather than a winemaker who later fell in love with Pinot Noir. Before coming on board in June 2013, Murray was winemaker at Van Duzer in Oregon's Willamette Valley, and before that, at top estates in New Zealand and Germany. "Oregon teaches you about urgency," he says. "There, vineyards are more at the mercy of Mother Nature, who is less forgiving than she is in California. You have to learn to be very disciplined about your work in the vineyard, and a little crafty."

Asked about the kind of wines coming from Domaine Anderson in the next few years, Murray says, "On the palate, we like length over width. We want purity, class, grace and agility. Though we don't know our vineyards extremely well yet, these ideas are ingrained in our thinking because they are Roederer characteristics."



And finally there's Jeremy Seysses, a highly accomplished winemaker in Burgundy who had never consulted before he agreed to do so for Domaine Anderson. Seysses's close friend Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, Chef des Cave of Louis Roederer Champagne and now also Executive Vice President of all Roederer properties, pressed him to lend his palate and technical expertise.

"I've had people ask me to consult before," says Seysses. "But I have never agreed because it always seemed to me that they just wanted a Burgundy endorsement . . . they wanted to be known as a New World Dujac. Roederer is different. They understand that France is France and the U.S. is the U.S. With Domaine Anderson, they wanted to build something on its own merits, and that was attractive to me.



"On the palate, we like length over width. We want purity, class, grace and agility." Jerry Murray, Winemaker, Domaine Anderson.

PHOTO: MARCELL PUSZAR

*At Domaine Anderson, I think we can make wines that have fruit and generosity but that are weightless and restrained.
—consulting winemaker Jeremy Seysses*

"In so much of the world, better means bigger," he continues. "And now there's also the contemporary reaction to that, which is making wines that are so high in acidity that they're shrill. At Domaine Anderson, I think we can make wines that walk the line between the two. I think we can make wines that have fruit and generosity but that are weightless and restrained. It's the one aesthetic I can completely relate to."