

(on the vine)

# STERLING VALUES IRON HORSE

**Lisa Granik MW** describes how one family's passion and vision have taken its wines from Green Valley to the White House and beyond

It seems almost a cliché now: the successful American lawyer, banker, or dentist traveling in Europe, suddenly bewitched by the idea of buying a vineyard back home. But this scenario wasn't nearly so common in the mid-1970s. Nor were Barry Sterling and his family on vacation.

They had been living in Europe for almost a decade as Barry led the expansion of his law firm's European practice. In the meantime, he and his consummately urbane wife Audrey expanded the family's cultural horizons by traveling throughout France and beyond exploring the fine arts—broadly conceived to include its gustatory delicacies, both solid and liquid. Their young children, Joy and Laurence, accompanied their parents on their travels. In the course of this education the entire family developed a refined appreciation of food and wine. "I know it sounds arrogant to say now, but I grew up drinking Burgundy," Laurence notes pointedly and only somewhat apologetically.

## Original vision

Talented lawyers are marked by focus, precision, and vision—characteristics that flow throughout the Iron Horse story. A vision of producing elegant Pinot Noir and Chardonnay led Barry and his family to search for their own vineyard, first in France but to no avail. On returning home to California in 1974, they continued to look, but it took a few years before they found the Iron Horse vineyard. It was a wet and miserable February day as they made their way up to the winery, winding along the long single lane through the cypress, apple, and oak trees once they turned off Ross Station Road. There they saw what others had overlooked: Nestled within the orchards, overgrown blackberry bushes, and forest were 110 mangy acres (45ha) of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay planted in the coolest, foggiest part of Sonoma County. Forrest Tancer had planted the vineyards in 1971 while working for Rodney Strong, but the latter's financial difficulties left the vineyards neglected and the buildings on the verge of collapse. Two weeks later, having tasted the fruits of an earlier vintage, the Sterlings bought the property. Audrey directed the renovation of the 1876 redwood Victorian home, as well as the construction of what is arguably the most beautiful stepped garden in all Sonoma County. Dining here, in this setting, one could be sufficiently entranced by the glorious



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surroundings to be stung by a bee and not notice. (Notice did come later, but that's another story.)

It is a close family operation, with all of the Sterlings living on the property. Both parents have retired, as has Forrest Tancer, who had been a partner with the Sterlings until 2005. Joy abandoned a career in journalism in 1985 and is now the CEO of Iron Horse. Laurence shucked his legal practice to succeed Tancer as vineyard and operations manager. Laurence's wife Terry, herself a practicing lawyer, designed the labels and the website. Blending decisions are determined by consensus, as Iron Horse's winemaker David Munksgard well knows, having originally been hired more than a decade ago to assist Tancer. Trial blends are presented *en famille*. "We demand unanimity," Joy notes. "If all of us tasting aren't happy and in full agreement, we send David back to tweak the blends." They are committed to staying small, producing wines with an understated elegance. The harmony within the family extends to their small team; the loyalty of their employees—the longevity of their tenure—testifies to the family's character.

"It's funny to look back sometimes, because what now seems so ordinary are things that, when we started to do them—like cold soaking the Pinot Noir—people thought we were crazy!" Joy reflects. "When my parents bought the property, this area was the most westerly planted vineyard in Sonoma County. Everyone, including the advisers from UC Davis, told us it was simply too cold to grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay: We should look east and play nice!" The conventional wisdom was that they would never get full ripeness or the yields necessary to make the venture economically viable. Further complicating the process, the area remains frost prone until June 1: Even 2008 had 23 nights of frost through late April. "But my parents had lived in France long enough to realize that the cool, foggy climate of the Green Valley was perfectly suited for the kinds of wines they wanted to make."

The first crush in the green, rolling hills was in 1978, producing a Chardonnay, a Pinot Noir, and a *vin gris*. "It sounds strange to think of it now," Laurence remarks, but in those days there just wasn't a big market for Pinot Noir, particularly California Pinot Noir." But the next summer, friends visiting from France sat in the gardens around the renovated Victorian house, relaxing with that *vin de soif*, and told the Sterlings it reminded them of the *vins clairs* they sampled in Champagne. Thus Barry and Tancer decided to experiment with producing a *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine.

At the beginning, Laurence said, their learning curve had its hilarious moments. They had the chief riddler from Champagne Louis Roederer, a Monsieur Menu, come to show what amounted to the "rites of riddling." (All Iron Horse sparkling wines are still riddled by hand.) "We didn't have air conditioning in the winery, so we rigged up a makeshift fan system to pull in the cooler night air, which we'd then have to switch around to push out the warmer air." But the yeast wouldn't settle. "It took us some time to realize it was that air flow that somehow impeded the settling process."

### Toward the summit

Joy now sees those first 15 years as setting the foundation of the Iron Horse story. (The name and logo came from an old

weathervane they found on the property.) In 1983 the Green Valley became an AVA, largely due to her parents' efforts. There is no lack of pride when she declares that only recently has the scientific evidence validated her parents' vision of the uniqueness of the Green Valley. Joy Sterling (an apronym if there ever was one) is perhaps the most passionate advocate of the region, leading tastings, food and wine pairings, and symposia to demonstrate its uniqueness. Sometimes neighboring wine growers join her; other times she is generous enough to show their wines, alongside hers, by herself. "The competition is so steep, sometimes I feel like a warrior princess for my family," she chortles, though her ever-present smile and ready laugh reveal the family's philosophy: "We feel very strongly about the highest quality in the most relaxed and friendly circumstances—and I have to admit, we're hedonists, too!"

Hedonists, perhaps, but this territory is also for the hardy. The hilly Green Valley is the coolest part of the Russian River Valley due to its proximity to the Petaluma Wind Gap in the coastal mountains where the fog originates. Although there are other passages where the marine influence enters Sonoma County, the Petaluma Gap, because of its low elevation and breadth, is the most important passage. Green Valley is the first place the fog appears and the last place it burns off, maintaining cooler morning temperatures for a longer period of time than other areas of the Russian River Valley. (The AVA was changed to "Green Valley of the Russian River Valley" in 2007 to distinguish itself from another Green Valley, closer to Sacramento.) The Green Valley also has more consistent temperature patterns, without the heat spikes that can afflict other cooler regions such as Carneros.<sup>1</sup>

The first milestone came in 1985, by which time Joy launched a second career publicizing the wines, and the White House selected an Iron Horse wine to be served during the Reagan–Gorbachev summit meetings. (Now immortalized as the Russian Cuvée, the blend is typically about 70% Pinot Noir and 30% Chardonnay, with a *dosage* at the higher end of Brut.) With this honor, the Sterlings realized they were destined to make their sparkling wine a bigger focus than before; the family takes extraordinary pride in the wine's place in the White House for four consecutive administrations. They ultimately aborted a venture to produce a sparkling wine jointly with Laurent-Perrier, but not before acquiring and planting the neighboring Thomas Road blocks, located just to the west of the home ranch and at a higher elevation. The plantings of UCD Clone 4 Chardonnay there were designed for a Blanc de Blancs, but as Laurence and Munksgard began to notice variability within the blocks, they started harvesting a certain portion a little later for use in the unoaked Chardonnay. Here the canopy holds up a little longer allowing the grapes to acquire a touch more sugar and flavor ripeness. With no malolactic fermentation or barrel aging, this is indeed a "naked" wine and the quintessential expression of Green Valley Chardonnay at its purest, with a firm structure, vibrant flavors of Gravenstein apples, and citrus fruits from lime to grapefruit integrated with a crystalline minerality.

Joy regards the 1990s as another chapter, both for sparkling wine and for Pinot Noir. "We became more confident in our own flavor profile, so we aimed to achieve the finesse and elegance of Champagne with the unique flavor profile of



Previous page: Green Valley in Russian River Valley, the coolest, foggiest area of Sonoma County; this page: nature and nurture, both parts of precision viticulture

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California.” The passage of time was critical not just to style definition. By the end of the decade their cellar reserves were sufficient to allow the wines extended time *sur lie*: more than three years for the Classic Vintage Brut and Wedding Cuvée; more than four years for the Russian Cuvée; and the Blanc de Blancs minimally five. (Iron Horse bottles to meet market demand, stretching time on lees as much as possible.) Longer time on the lees produces the small, more delicate bead and persistent mousse of the Iron Horse cuvée, because the decomposing lees emit fatty acids that lightly coat the bubbles, maintaining their integrity. As for Pinot, a superb 1994 vintage dovetailed with a resolve among Green Valley producers that they were not going to take the sudden success of Oregon Pinot Noir lying down. “We said, ‘Hey, wait a minute here!’ It was a big wake-up call,” she laughs. Round about then they found Munksgard, who’d made sparkling wine in New York’s Finger Lakes, and hired him to assist Tancer in the winemaking. Munksgard began a series of meticulous experiments to further refine the elegant Iron Horse wines.

### Estate-bottling, green-farming

By 2006, Joy and Laurence had committed their heart and soul to the estate, and with full responsibility on their shoulders, each realized that to raise the bar higher, they must apply this meticulous and analytical approach to the vineyards. Together they are leading a full-scale revolution at Iron Horse. They decided to focus exclusively on Green Valley estate-bottled fruit, strictly Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, both still and sparkling. Earlier cuvées, mostly of Bordeaux varieties from the T-Bar-T Ranch in the Alexander Valley, are being phased out. Back at the estate, they relied heavily on Dr Daniel Roberts, Sonoma County’s leading specialist in soil science and plant nutrition, as consultant for their vineyard redevelopment plans. Roberts helped them implement a regime of precision viticulture, taking advantage of the many advances in viticulture since the family started 30 years ago.

Roughly 162 acres of the 300-acre estate (66 of 121ha) are planted, almost evenly between Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Vine age, disease, and a phylloxera infestation prompted much of the replanting. Laurence listens to Roberts, and luckily for Munksgard, to him, too, and they all listen to the land, trying to understand variability among and within blocks. They can better identify microclimates, having installed a weather station near the winery at the center of the estate, and five “hobos” that record the temperature at strategic locations on the property every 15 minutes. They’ve used GIS/GPS (Geographic Information System/Global Positioning System) mapping and computer models, examining soil type, aspect, and elevation, to identify smaller and more tightly delineated vineyard blocks. What had been regarded as one vineyard block may turn out to be five, with pruning, canopy-management, irrigation, cover-crop, frost-protection, and harvesting decisions all made on a block-by-block, even vine-by-vine, basis. For example, in the eastern portion block P6, they noticed the maturity level was different 33 rows down from the top; neither clone nor rootstock could explain the difference. Once it dawned on them that there was just enough change in hill shape to afford the lower portion less sunlight, they decided

harvest this section for sparkling. Vine-to-vine decisions may, for example, have to do with berry size: Smaller berries, with a smaller juice-to-skin ratio, will be designated for the still cuvées. Suspicious of the elastic use of buzzwords, the self-deprecating, jocular Laurence jokes that this is “precision harvesting”—but this belies the seriousness of his approach.

Indeed, all the fruit is hand-harvested, not just for the sparkling. There is no sorting table; the pickers are told exactly the kind of fruit that Sterling and Munksgard do not want. They pick during the day because it is cool enough to do so and also because it enables them to do the field blending they’ve come to believe in (not to mention the immense carbon footprint left by night harvesting, Laurence points out). “‘Estate Bottling’ has to mean something, not just be another buzzword,” Laurence avers. “Among the things it means is, we can pay extraordinary attention to detail. It’s not just ‘do you drop fruit?’ but ‘do you drop the right fruit?’ Our guys know exactly what we want and what we don’t want in terms of canopy management and harvesting. We’re small enough so that vineyard work—from pruning through harvesting—is organized not like a postal route but according to the opportune moment for quality [...]. We can’t afford to cut corners. One of our mottos is ‘No mistakes’—we don’t have room for them.” Indeed, most of their cuvées are small, with the Vintage Brut and the Blanc de Blancs topping out at only 3,500 cases and 1,500 cases respectively.

The soil throughout the property, typical of the Green Valley, is Goldridge—a fine sandy loam over a subsoil of golden-yellow sandy loam and fractured sandstone that provides excellent drainage and low soil fertility, controlling vine vigor. With the replanting, they’ve tightened the spacing. Roberts advised the Sterlings to plant the Chardonnay 60 degrees from due north, so that at the height of the season, when the sun is at its hottest, it will be directly above the vine, with the canopy preventing sunburn. Pinot Noir, in contrast, requires even morning and evening sun and shows more nuance in rocky soils. Thus they’ve selected the rockier vineyards, where the hills run north to south, for Pinot Noir. The cooler spots within these vineyards are designated for the sparkling cuvées.

Laurence selected the Pinot clones for the new plantings by tasting the fruit and wines of many of his neighbors in the Russian River. (“Really tough job, I know,” he chuckles.) He recently fell in love with and planted more than 7 acres (3ha) of Clone 828, a Dijon clone that’s very complex and doesn’t have the intense fruitiness he sees as afflicting too many California bottlings. “I don’t think Pinot Noir should taste like a combination of cough drop and oak; I don’t think that works—at least, it doesn’t for me.”

Other recent plantings include a Calera clone from Josh Jensen and a limited amount of Pommard 5, which does produce a jammier fruit but is too intense, he says, for the sparkling wine. He really wanted a Swan clone, but nobody’s been able to get a virus-free Swan to date. With the low-vigor rootstocks they’re using now, there’s no room for error.

Laurence is happily a bit of a contrarian, especially as he notes that right now, at least, his goal is less to make the greatest Pinot Noir than it is to make a truly great Chardonnay. “I love Chardonnay; too many people take it for granted. When you really pay attention, it’s really rewarding.” Indeed, one can see the

greater attention given to the Iron Horse Chardonnays. Typically, the grapes will be whole-cluster pressed, with a portion of the grapes having a short period (as little as one hour) of skin contact after pressing to enhance aromatic expression. This also improves mouthfeel and brings the acidity into balance, obviating the need for the malolactic fermentation. (Munksgard thinks MLF often “bulks up” California Chardonnays while also obscuring varietal definition and the distinctive Gravenstein apple flavor of Green Valley Chardonnay.)

Reductive winemaking remains the norm, though there’s no formula winemaking as there had been years back, with now perhaps a greater intent on achieving an elegant mouthfeel. Without the influence of barrels or lees stirring, the UnOaked Chardonnay will receive more skin contact than the other cuvées. (Munksgard thinks it’s critical for mouthfeel and depth of flavor.) Laurence finds too many Chardonnays overoaked not in terms of flavor but in terms of mouthfeel, with the barrels imparting a harsh overlay from the additional acidity and tannin the wine may absorb. Thus, for lots that go into barrel, they’ll suppress the malolactic, preserving the purity of the Chardonnay fruit, but leave the wine longer on the lees for mouthfeel. Because the lees act as a buffer, they prevent the wine from absorbing too much from the wood. The effect on the Estate Chardonnay is a seamless integration of lees, minerality, subtle vanilla, and fruit character, with a delicate, soft texture punctuated by a natural crispness.

Of the five Chardonnays he produces, it is the Rued Clone Cuvée that gets Laurence particularly excited, if a bit wistful. The Iron Horse estate has one original block planted with a clone—or, more precisely, a field blend of clones sourced from the Rued Vineyard in Russian River Valley. The wine exudes an exuberant, exotic Muscat-like aroma of ripe tropical fruits. But the rootstock in that 5.2-acre (2.1ha) block is AXR1 and the phylloxera infestation is taking its toll, so they must replant.

Disease issues, however, prevent them from replanting with their own budwood. He brightens a bit when discussing his hopes for his recent plantings of the Z clone, developed by the Kendall-Jackson nursery. Derived from one of the Rued clones, it possesses the Rued’s marmalade and exotic-fruit character—though without the other elements of his old field blend to balance it out, he cautions, the problem could become Rued on steroids. Still, he remains optimistic: “The vineyards will be among the greatest Pinot Noir and Chardonnay ever planted [...]. All I can do is do the best possible. That’s the only way we can operate here [...]. When people start cutting corners, they make bad decisions that lower wine quality.”

They also are committed to their community, recognizing that the Green Valley did not become green, and will not remain so, without attention to the broader environment. Joy, who has climbed Kilimanjaro, run the white waters of Chile, and trekked through Asia, is specially active in environmental causes, organizing eco events at the estate to benefit various nonprofit organizations. For his part, Laurence evaluates the environmental impact of all farming decisions: “Working with, rather than against, nature is always the preferred course.”

In his self-deprecating way, Laurence laughs that he has no philosophy; on the contrary, the meticulous approach in the vineyard and in the cellar allow the true nature of the Green Valley to be revealed, expressing an understated quality and purity. Focused, precise, well-knit, and elegant, with a complexity that sneaks up on you, these are wines that engage the palate without shouting for attention. But don’t be too precious about it; the Sterlings would be disappointed if you weren’t having fun. ■

#### Note

1. D Roberts, “Green Valley AVA Climatic Features,” Green Valley Symposium, November 9, 2004.

#### An idiosyncratic selection of Iron Horse wines



**2005 Rued Clone Chardonnay** Light yellow; intense, floral nose with notes of ripe lime, toast, and spice. On the palate, creamy and broad on the attack, bursting with tropical fruits. A leesy, subtly mineral texture and girth, giving way to a crisp, juicy fruit finish. Quite dynamic.

**2002 Classic Vintage Brut** Pale straw; subtly ripe, yeasty nose; fine, persistent, delicate mousse. Complete across the palate with considerable mid-palate concentration. Ripe flavors of green apple, raw almond, and citrus blend with biscuity notes and a fine, minerally scrim that segues into a refined finish.

**2002 Blanc de Blancs** Very pale; vibrant, focused nose of sourdough bread, apples, grapefruit, and tangerine. At once the most delicate, tensile, and nervy of all the Iron Horse sparkling cuvées, crystalline citrus intermingling with crisp apples and pear. Subtle, mineral finish.

**2005 Estate Pinot Noir** Medium ruby; vibrant nose with dark cherry, raspberry, and herbal aromas joined by earth, smoke, and licorice. Soft and delicate on the palate; understated, with dark, sweet-berried fruit and tobacco notes. Satiny tannins and a lingering finish of minerals with hints of smoke.

**2006 Estate Pinot Noir** Medium ruby; fresh nose of cherry, raspberry preserves, notes of earth, vanilla, and subtle spice. Full-bodied on the palate; crisp and still youthful; even across the palate with spicy notes woven through flavors of raspberry and cherry fruits, vanilla, dirt, and tobacco. Gently supportive tannins. Has a vibrancy and digestibility lacking in many overextracted, “smooth” California Pinot Noirs. Spicy, refreshing finish.

**2005 Thomas Road Pinot Noir** Medium ruby; concentrated dark cherry and raspberry nose, with notes of spice, tobacco, mocha, and wet leaves. Firm and structured but elegant on the palate, with well-balanced, crisp acidity and succulent flavors of ripe wild berries and cherries, sweet spices, and an undertone of vanilla, black licorice, and smoke.