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A CONVERSATION WITH

Juan Jose Verdina

The Chilean-born winemaker discusses keggering, mobile bottling and closures

By Laurie Daniel

A native of Chile, winemaker Juan Jose Verdina grew up around farming. His grandparents grew vegetables and other crops, fostering Verdina's love for agriculture. He studied agricultural engineering in Santiago, Chile's capital city, and got an internship at the region's largest wine producer, Concha y Toro, piquing his interest in grapes.

Verdina was also interested in traveling and thought he could travel the world by working two harvests a year. In 2002 he took an internship at Hahn Estates in Monterey County, Calif., then returned to Chile to finish his studies.

When Hahn's then-president, Bill Leigon, offered Verdina a long-term job, he knew it would mean putting those travel plans on hold, but he accepted the job and eventually was promoted to assistant winemaker, working with the Rex Goliath brand. (Rex Goliath was sold to Constellation Brands in 2005.) Verdina returned to Chile in 2008 as winemaker for Copa Del Rey, a joint venture between Hahn and a Panamanian family in Chile's Rapel Valley. Then it was back to Hahn in 2010 as



winemaker for the Cycles Gladiator brand.

Leigon, meanwhile, became president of Jamieson Ranch Vineyards in California's Napa Valley in 2013, and he hired Verdina as winemaker the following year. This September, Leigon bought the Jamieson Ranch brand and inventory. Verdina is responsible for wines produced under the Jamieson Ranch, Reata, Light Horse and Whiplash labels.

Q You spoke at the Wines & Vines Packaging Conference about your work with Free Flow Wines to package some of your wines in kegs. What is your procedure? Are your parameters for things like filtration and sulfur dioxide different for keggered wines than for bottled wines?

Juan Jose Verdina: Our procedure for keggering does not vary too much from bottled wines. We create all parameters the same, whether we are bottling or keggering the wines (CO₂, DO, FSO₂, etc.). We adjust all wines in the Jamieson Ranch Vineyards cellar before we ship to the keggering facility.

Once at the keggering facility, they filter the wines through a traditional 0.45-micron sterile filter and make final adjustments according to our protocol.

Free Flow is in the Napa Valley Corporate Park, just a few minutes from the winery. Since keggering volumes are generally much smaller than bottling volumes, we normally ship the wine to Free Flow in stainless steel porta-tanks on a flatbed truck. We do this rather than shipping in a tanker truck in order to minimize oxygen headspace in the vessel. We always gas the headspace heavily with nitrogen or argon for the best protection against oxygen and to keep the wine as fresh as possible.

There are pros and cons to keggering a wine vs. bottling it. One of the pros is certainly the cost. To put a wine in keg costs roughly \$5.23 a gallon, whereas bottling the same wine can cost up to \$8.15 a gallon. The cost differential is a result of the packaging associated with bottling—glass, corks, capsules, labels—all of which are not part of keggering. On the flip side, a con of keggering would be that a customer cannot purchase a bottle to take home with them and share with family and friends who may purchase another JRV wine in the future. One other big advantage of having wine in keg is to accommodate consumers who may not be able to pay a premium price for high-quality wines in a restaurant, so they have the option to purchase a single glass and enjoy the same wine. Currently our wines being offered in keg are Double Lariat Napa Cabernet, Reata Three County Pinot Noir, Reata Carneros Chardonnay and Silver Spur Napa Sauvignon Blanc.

Q After the wines are keggered, do you find any differences between those wines and bottled wines, either in the chemistry or the sensory qualities?

Verdina: We have found that there are only minor differences between keggered wines and wines from a bottle, primarily in aroma. We believe wines in keg are more expressive up front on the nose, and this expression may change depending on the temperature the kegs are poured at. Here in our tasting room, we have found that reds on tap that are poured below 60° F tend to move further away from the bottled wine's profile, so we recommend pouring reds at or above 60° to ensure that the expression and sensory characteristics more closely match that of the same wine in a bottle. If you chilled a bottled wine down to the same temperature as the keg, it would have a more consistent profile with the keg. However, each bottle varies in terms of CO₂ levels and micro-oxygenation, so there is more consistency overall with kegs.

EARLY EXPERIENCE WITH FLASH EXTRACTION

While he was working at Hahn Estate in Monterey County, Calif., winemaker Juan Jose Verdina gained experience with a number of new technologies, including Flash Detente.

The first commercial flash unit in the United States was installed in 2009 at Monterey Wine Co. in King City, Calif. Because all of the Hahn brands were growing, Verdina says, the company decided to purchase a second flash unit in 2010 “as a way of creating high-quality wines at an affordable price.” The unit was installed about three hours northeast, in Lodi, Calif.

“I was introduced to all of the versatile ways the machine can be applied in winemaking,” Verdina says. “With Hahn, the machine is applied more to larger production wines. You can process several hundred tons through the machine and create large-scale blends.”

When Verdina moved to Jamieson Ranch, he learned how to apply the technology to small-production wines.

“The machine allows us to create different tools for our blending toolbox; we have the ability to use different fermentation styles to create unique components.” For example, Verdina sometimes co-ferments red grapes with the must from flashed red grapes and thinks the process improves structure and color.

These days he uses the small Flash Detente unit at Carneros Vintners in Sonoma, Calif. “We are able at JRV to use flash to create blends as small as 300 cases,” Verdina says.



Juan Jose Verdina uses flash extraction to create large-scale wine blends.

White wines do not show as many sensory differences, although kegged white wines are guaranteed to always be at a consistent temperature because the kegs are stored in refrigerators with temperature controls.

We have not found any noticeable changes in chemistry between kegged wines and bottled wines.

Q Jamieson Ranch used to have its own bottling line, but now you’ve switched to mobile bottling. Why? How do you make sure that everything is done to your specifications?

Verdina: Our goal at the winery is to put all of our attention into the winemaking, blends and cellar operations. For this reason, we believe that hiring a service for mobile bottling ensures that we do not lose focus of the wines and allows us to maintain quality control during bottling rather than shifting our focus to operational maintenance. AT Mobile Bottling in Napa has a top-quality staff and standards that are consistently met with each bottling. We have been using this service for about one year and three bottling runs, all of which have gone very smoothly. During bottling onsite, we have a quality-control team that monitors all parameters such as dissolved oxygen, bottle vacuum, fill height, packaging consistency and overall quality. Every 20-30 minutes, someone from the JRV quality-control team will enter the truck and make sure all parameters are being

met. In addition, we have QC forms that are filled out during each check and are logged in the system and approved by the winemaker.

Q Research has shown that the same wine bottled on the same bottling line can have big variations in total package oxygen (TPO). What procedures do you have in place to minimize this?

Verdina: Our procedure to offset these variations starts in the bottling tank. Once the blend is completed and all adjustments are made, we adjust dissolved oxygen well below our bottling parameter so that once the wine enters the bowl it will remain within our limits even with a slight increase. Our parameters for DO (dissolved oxygen) are always between 0.75 and 0.95 ppm for all wines. During bottling, we routinely pull a random bottle off the line and check DO. If it exceeds our parameters, we immediately shut the line down and readjust to below our parameters.

Q Most of your wines are under cork, but you do use screwcaps in some cases. Have you adjusted your sulfur levels or other bottling parameters?

Verdina: Knowing that a screwcap minimizes oxygen exchange, we do actually adjust our free SO₂ levels to be lower than normal. With a cork, there is more oxygen exchange, so we bump the FSO₂ levels slightly to make sure that even with slight oxygen exposure, the wine is

still protected against micro-oxygenation that can cause browning and shorten the aging potential. In general, we set our parameters for cork-finished wines at 35-40 ppm FSO₂ and screwcap at 28-33 ppm FSO₂. We are currently using Stelvin screwcaps with a Saranex liner, and we have found this product respects the aging process and delivers uncompromised flavors and aromas to the finished product—not to mention it is guaranteed TCA-free and with no leakage.

We primarily use screwcaps for white wines where micro-oxygenation is detrimental, but we continue to use natural cork on our red wines, where a minimal amount of micro-oxygenation is required for bottle aging. We use both Ganau natural corks and Lafitte natural corks. We have found that having two suppliers is beneficial because it allows us the opportunity for flexibility when making orders (for example, meeting a short deadline). Screwcaps are perfect for wines that are not meant to age more than two to three years, including reds.

Q While you were at Hahn in Monterey County, you worked with Rex Goliath and Cycles Gladiator, two brands that experienced tremendous growth. What challenges did you face in working with brands that grew so quickly?

Verdina: The biggest challenge was to maintain the quality and style of the blends year to year or blend to blend. We were bottling 6,500 gallons per day, five days per week, so the winemaking team was constantly bottling, blending, adjusting and looking for wines on the market. Keeping up with the pace of these accelerated brands was challenging, because we had to constantly adapt to what the market was asking for and what the market was providing.

One time we had all of the wines ready for bottling, and suddenly the bottling line shut down; the filler bowl was clogged. So we had to troubleshoot on site and try to finish the bottling that day in order to fulfill our orders. Our entire crew had to stay overtime until the problem was solved, and we finally finished the run by 10 p.m. This type of problem is more serious for a growing brand because the orders are not flexible, and you risk losing shelf placement if you cannot provide the product on time.

Now, at Jamieson Ranch, I have the knowledge to keep up with growing brands but also have the luxury of time to be able to create higher quality wines with more attention to detail from grapes to bottle. Working with these brands gave me the experience and tools to be prepared for the expected growth of JRV brands in the near future. 🍷

A resident of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Laurie Daniel has been a journalist for more than 35 years. She has been writing about wine for publications for more than 21 years and has been a *Wines & Vines* contributor since 2000.