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THE FRENCH CONNECTION

CELEBRATING 30 VINTAGES AT DOMINUS ESTATE WITH CHRISTIAN MOUTEIX

At the Dominus Estate in Yountville, French proprietor Christian Moueix stands in the open-air area overlooking the historic Napanook Vineyard.
Frenchman
IN THE NEW WORLD

The story of how Christian Moueix got to Napa Valley starts in 1937, nine years before he was born. That was the year that his father, Jean-Pierre Moueix, started the family’s wine merchant business on the Right Bank of Bordeaux. By the time Christian was a young boy in the 1950s, Jean-Pierre had already acquired a grouping of prestigious châteaux, including La Fleur-Pétrus, Magdelaine, Trotanoy and Lagrange. And when the family purchased Château Pétrus in 1964, Christian was making his transition from teenage life to college.

After finishing his agricultural engineering studies in Paris, Moueix’s growing interest in learning about Californian wines led him to the graduate program at the University of California, Davis in 1968. In addition to taking classes focused on grapes, winemaking techniques and innovative technology, he further developed his palate while taking sensory evaluation classes taught by Maynard A. Amerine.

“At the time, sensory analysis was something completely unknown in France,” recalls Moueix. “In addition to analyzing wine profiles, we were also taking on comparative with fruit juices and small cubes of meat. It was really quite an experience.”

Before earning his degrees in viticulture and enology studies in 1969, Moueix also honed his winemaking skills while working the 1968 harvest with Napa Valley legend André Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyards.

In 1970, called by his father to return to France, Moueix started his full-time job at Etablissements Jean-Pierre Moueix managing the family vineyards, including Château Pétrus. Over the next decade, he traveled back to California on numerous occasions for business and to catch up with friends he met along the way. It was during those exciting years that he watched the landscape start to change in Napa Valley with the emergence of world-class wines being made by BV, Inglenook and Freemark Abbey and the rise of hot new brands like Robert Mondavi, Griggs Hills, Cass, Col du Val and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars. As a result, he began to look for vineyard land in the late 1970s.

At Dominus Estate, Moueix was able to test his viticultural ideas with complete control and, needless to say, he developed the Dominus brand was a meticulous process from the ground up.
CAPTURING Terroir

Located at the base of the Mayacamas Mountains, west of downtown Yountville, Napanook Vineyard has a climate highlighted by warm days and cool evenings controlled by late afternoon breezes from the nearby San Pablo Bay. Running along a gentle slope from the hillsides towards the middle of the valley, the estate vineyard is planted on an alluvial fan composed of gravel, clay loam and volcanic matter that runs between six and ten feet deep, including a portion that sits on top of an ancient river bed that is 20 feet wide.

The property’s history dates back to 1838, when George Yount—the namesake of Yountville—planted some of the first vines in Napa Valley. After changing hands a couple of times over the next century, the property was eventually purchased by Inglenook proprietor John Daniel, who used the estate grapes to make some of the most memorable wines of the 1940s and 1950s.

When Moueix began redeveloping the vineyard, the 11 grape varieties planted on the property were sold to Robert Mondavi and other wineries in the valley. So in the 1980s, the parcels of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Napa Gamay were replanted with large-scale plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, which have since thrived in the optimum growing conditions at the estate.

While growing up in Pommerol, Moueix was used to working with Merlot. But as he quickly discovered, the noble grape variety did not flourish in the extreme heat of Napa Valley. As a result, the last block was pulled out in 2010. In its place, he added newer plantings of Cabernets Franc and Petit Verdot, which became important parts of the blending programs created by Moueix and Boyna, who stayed on as General Manager at Dominus Estate in the 1980s.

In addition to working with new clones and rootstocks, another big change was the wet-spraying conversion from the old-fashioned trellises to more advanced “Hydror” or “Wishbone” systems that allow the team more freedom to pick fruit from the summer and more shaded sides of the vines at different intervals during harvest.

The other major transition was spacing. “When I arrived, it was 12x10, cross cultivation. We moved to 12x8, 12x10, 11x6, and today they are 9x4,” says Moueix. “That is double the amount of vines from before,” explains Moueix. “We need competition; if they don’t have competition, your vines don’t produce same quality.”

Most importantly, Moueix is an ardent believer in dry farming. Young vines receive some water the first year or two and then develop deep root systems allowing them to express the “terroir” of the vineyard.
THE Dominus Estate STYLE

Over the past three decades, the estate concept has become more fine-tuned. So while it's easy to separate Dominus and Napanook by price, both are extremely well made wines in their own way.

As a general rule, Napanook is vibrant, complex and approachable when young. It is a wine that immediately captures your attention with layers of deep flavors, silky texture and spicy nuances generated by the use of fine French oak barrels. This is especially true in the 2013 vintage, a seamless wine with notes of ripe red berries, blue fruits, cocoa, chewy tannins and a burst of bright acidity that is candid, not hidden. It was even more impressive when we went back and tasted the original 1996 vintage of Napanook, which is holding up extremely well with layers of elegance, finesse and complex flavors of raspberry, cherry, dried herbs and spice.

Moueix agreed, "We should not say Napanook is a second-tier wine. Instead, it's a wine that exemplifies the quality of the fruit from separate parts of the estate vineyard that is treated with the same respect as the clusters used for the higher-priced selections."

On the other hand, the Dominus Estate wines are deep, elegant, richer, more ethereal and typically need more time to breathe. The newest example is the 2013 vintage, a dense wine with deep flavors of dark cherry, blackberry, fine tannins, structure and a long elegant finish.

"For me, it's truly a miraculous vintage," says Mosso, who harvested the grapes in early September, which is quite rare. "The berries showed a dimension that I've never come across in wines before. Because the fruit was perfectly ripe with the presence of significant tannins, we had to limit the extraction. The result is a wine that has a natural freshness and lift, while grounded and waiting to reveal more as it opens up."

The other advantage of the Dominus Estate program is how well the wines age in the cellars. For example, the 1991 vintage—Bordeaux-style blend made with 95% Cabernet Franc, the highest amount on record—still resonates with layers of deep flavors of red fruits, earthy truffles, balanced tannins and a long elegant finish. In essence, there are no signs that it is fading. In contrast, the younger offering from the 2010 vintage is more concentrated, with complex flavors of black raspberry, blue fruits, bay leaf and spice, silky texture and secondary layers that continued to open up with more time in the glass.

In looking back over the past three decades, Moueix, 69, says he's proud of

Maximizing QUALITY

Today, the Dominus property features 103 planted acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Thanks to the natural balance of fresh springs on the mountain, rain and well-drained soils, the estate has been dry-farmed since Moueix took over the program.

To provide an extra burst of energy to clusters before harvest, leaves and clusters on each vine are gently raked to remove dirt, dust and other debris that can block sun exposure and disrupt the natural process of photosynthesis. Then, once harvest begins, the clusters are picked with scissors instead of knives.

The main focus of Winemaker Todd Musso and the team is to make a Cabernet the way he would want to drink it. "From planting each block and pruning every vine to determining the precise date of harvest, we are present in the vineyard to further the understanding of our environment and make appropriate technical decisions."

The inside team at Dominus Estate: Executive Vice President Julia Levine; Director of Winemaking Todd Mussos; Charles H. Moles; and co-founder Christian Moueix.