

DEPARTURES

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Vines & Spirits

California's Kalin Cellars is almost out-of-step with the modern wine world. Therein lies its greatness. BY RICHARD NALLEY

California's Stealth Winery

Kalin Cellars makes some of the finest red, white and sparkling wines in America - but very, very quietly. By Richard Nalley

Just contacting Kalin Cellars³/₄ the greatest California winery you've probably never heard of³/₄ can take a bit of doing. Pick up a pre-1998 edition of the *Wine Spectator's Wine Country Guide to California*, which lists hundreds of wineries, great and humble, from the redwood forests north of Mendocino down to the sun parched slopes of Temecula near San Diego: Kalin's not in it. Call directory information for any California wine region you can think of: Napa, Sonoma, Livermore. No Kalin. Should you manage to obtain the number which connects you to, of all places, Novato, in suburban Marin County, you will get an answering machine. Leave a message and expect to hear back 24 hours to a couple of weeks later.

The proprietors of Kalin, husband and wife Terry and Frances Leighton, aren't on a power trip, they're just very busy. Among other things, they are Kalin Cellars' sole full-time employees³/₄ "the only two people between the grape and the bottle," as they put it in a piece of promotional literature. And if there is one thing that marks Kalin, it is that the Leightons are going to do things at their own pace. This is the winery, after all, that only got around to releasing its still very young-tasting 1990 Cabernet Sauvignon while its peers were selling their 1994s, and that was still cellaring its 1988 vintage sparkling wine when even Dom Perignon had a 1990 on the market. Kalin was also probably the only winery to release most of its '92 Chardonnays *before* the slow-evolving '91s, since, says Leighton, "We aren't hung up on maintaining any kind of vintage sequence; we release what tastes good."

What tastes good from Kalin Cellars' eye-dropper-size annual production (7,000 cases) can be astonishingly fine. This mom and-pop operation has made the best New World sparkling wine (the 1986), the best Semillon (the 1980), and one of the two or three best dessert wines (the 1990 Cuvee d'Or) I've ever tasted. Year-in, year-out Kalin's wines rank among the handful of top American Sauvignon Blancs, and among the elite in Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Kalin's Pinot Noir, which typically sells out within days of release, is quite possibly the most truly Burgundian-style Pinot produced in California. These are, as wine critic Robert M. Parker Jr. put it back in the late 1980s, "the wines of a genius." that genius being Terry Leighton.

I meet up with Terry and Frances Leighton on one of those crisp, calm autumn days in the Bay Area that I'd describe as Indian summer. Leighton is white-haired, 50-something, and wears a trace of the 1960s in the razor-cut line of white whiskers that follows his jawline, then flows into a Fu Manchu mustache. He could be picked out of a casting call for exactly what he is: a Berkeley professor and research scientist.

As we hit the freeway north to Marin in his BMW station wagon, the hyper-articulate Leighton is explaining his "two world" theory of winemaking. One world, that of Kalin Cellars, being personal-scale and artisanal, the other world, industrial. "The goal of Industrial winemaking," Leighton says, "is to minimize the human effect, the vineyard effect, any variation at all. And look what's happened: A lot of the technology developed for huge wineries has now been scaled down for 50,000-case wineries. In the past people didn't even know *how* to make bad wine this way. In America we've not only invented fast food, we've invented fast wine."

Kalin Cellars' entire enterprise can be viewed as a subversive, uncompromising protest against "fast wine" or, for that matter, the entire technological and economic mainstream of 1990s winemaking. Kalin's approach is risk-intensive, labor-intensive, expertise-intensive and³/₄ given that its slow-maturing wines are held back from the market for years after competitors have cashed in, fright-intensive to most commercial lenders.

But the Leightons have no partners or shareholders to placate, no money owed to the bank, and a loyal connoisseur following that appreciates what they're up to. They are free not just to march to a different drummer, but to retune the orchestra.

"We are trying to put the same level of quality and personal attention into our wines as Domaine de la Romanee-Conti," says Terry as we pull off the freeway and into an anonymous-looking industrial park of low cream-colored buildings, "but instead of charging \$200 a bottle, we charge \$40. Well, obviously, something's got to give." He plays out about five seconds' worth of dramatic pause, and then, as we turn into one of the park's more humble asphalt cul-de-sacs: "It's the *ambiance*!"

Yes, here, as he had promised, is the "magnificence and splendor" of Kalin Cellars¾ not a cellar at all, but a cluster of poured concrete warehouse bays with corrugated steel sliding doors. A couple of college kids in shorts and rubber boots are outside hosing barrels, but otherwise all that distinguishes the place from the car leasing company, roofing contractor, and cabinetmaker that share the cul-de-sac is that here and there stray grape seeds have taken root: an infant Chardonnay vine creeps up the hard, blank wall by the front door, another has twined itself into a tree on the traffic island behind the dumpster.

The inside of the Kalin operation is no more impressive. There are no gleaming banks of temperature dials or computer control readouts, nothing more technologically sophisticated than fluorescent lights. There is no stainless steel¾ that staple material of the modern winery¾ anywhere. Instead, on the September day I visit, there are three open-top wooden vats ("about Marin-party hot-tub size," Leighton says) filled with fermenting Pinot Noir. The grape skins and solids have floated to the top, giving the vats the look of giant bowls crammed with purple Rice Krispies.

Up on the wooden scaffold that gives access to the vats, Randy, one of Kalin's volunteers, is preparing to break up the grape skin "cap" with a wooden plunger. It seems perfectly in keeping that the plunger is jury-rigged¾ a barrel lid glued to a broom stick. In the era before closed concrete or steel tanks and hoses to pump the juice over the cap became commonplace, all red wine had to be punched down by hand. It's easy to see why most wineries have given it up.

Randy shows a sly smile as I ask him for the plunger, a smile that begins to spread as I rear back and whack down on the cap¾ without making a dent. Five or six whacks later I'm wondering how soon I can quit and still retain a shred of dignity. "The romance vanishes pretty quickly," Terry observes over my shoulder.

This kind of build-your-calluses winemaking typifies Kalin. Incoming grapes arrive in small 50-pound picking boxes and are hand-sorted for quality out on the asphalt turnaround. This makes a modest difference in a healthy crop, a huge difference in a year like 1997, when many of the early grapes arrived with touches of rot, courtesy of August showers.

Kalin's red grapes go through a small basket press¾ a loose-slatted wooden barrel with a hand-cranked hydraulic grape masher. It is essentially the same technology as the wooden screw presses you see in medieval and Renaissance tapestries. Like the wooden plunger, the hand-cranked press is a pain in the neck to use, able to process only small batches at a time. Yet it does exactly what the Leightons want: crushes the grapes without generating enough pressure to break up seeds or skin cells, which would express bitter oils.

Kalin's white grapes are pressed else where, then brought to Novato, and are put through a similarly anachronistic regime: The grape juice is put into small oak barrels until ready for bottling. The wine will ferment (and go through a secondary, malolactic fermentation to improve feel and complexity) entirely in the barrel¾ a technique both difficult and risky¾ rather than be shuttled from steel tank to cask to steel tank as it would be in many wineries. That's an industrial method, one Leighton calls "drive-by barrel fermentation."

What emerges from Kalin's artisanal handling are wines that seem somehow time shifted backward. Reds and whites from the mid-1980s are only now coming around, opening up to reveal their full nuance. The lovely copper/salmon-colored 1986 Cuvee Rose sparkling wine is fresh, creamy, and concentrated, with just a lick of aged oxidative character, which adds complexity. The 1987 Sauvignon Blanc Reserve, Potter Valley, still has a lively, juicy, ripe pear quality amid its subtler flavor characteristics. The super-complex 1987 Cuvee W Chardonnay is an intense yet still delicate wine, with a powerful young-wine finish. Almost as remarkable as the wines themselves is their striking familial resemblance down through the years.

The Leightons, both microbiologists by profession, "fell into winemaking" in the '70s after some friends in their wine-tasting club asked for scientific advice on some port they were making. The next year they decided to buy some grapes and give it a go themselves. They called the winery Kalin (KAY-len), the local Indian word for ocean, because "it was the only local Indian word we could pronounce." Their first wines, a Zinfandel and a Pinot Noir, were put on the market in 1978.

"Only a few people were making classical, traditional European-style wines back then," Terry says. "Martin Ray, Lee Stewart at the old Souverain, Stony Hill, and Chalone, which was just getting started.

"We knew we could do things that weren't really being done back then: barrel-fermenting Chardonnay, bottling red wines without fining or filtering, using a minimalist approach, and selecting exactly the right strains of yeast to bring out the

specific character of any given vineyard. That's the thing about being microbiologists, we were just never terrified about trying these things because we understand the scientific basis that makes them work."

The bigger question is whether wine drinkers understand how Kalin works. Not filtering a wine, for instance, preserves its full range of flavors, but also means that the bottle may contain deposits of sediment. We were having lunch at the Left Bank restaurant in Larkspur when Frances told me that she believes drinkers in the 1990s are sophisticated enough to value depth and complexity over cosmetic clarity. Five minutes later our waiter, while pouring a glass of Kalin Semillon, recoiled. "I'm very sorry," he said, looking acutely embarrassed, "There's something in this bottle." Frances smiled sweetly: "If it doesn't have crud in the bottle, it isn't Kalin."

It may also not be Kalin if there isn't some mysterious letter code on the label (Cuvee DD, Cuvee LR). Kalin Cellars owns no vineyards itself, but its bottlings are nearly all produced from single vineyards, scouted out around the state over the past 20 years. The Leightons have assigned letter names to several of their steadiest vineyard sources (see The Kalin Alphabet). However obliquely it's communicated to the wine shopper, these vineyards, their histories, and the families who own them figure largely in Kalin Cellars' lore.

There was, for example, the guy driving around northern California one fall day in the early 1980s with a truckload of scary-looking, botrytis-rot-affected grapes and followed by a Biblical swarm of flies. He was like the Man Without a Country: No winery would let him offload his grapes, much less offer to buy them, and even a filling station he pulled into made him park around back. The Leightons, however, saw past the flies to the gold underneath and made their first Cuvee d'Or dessert wine from the grapes. ("The juice was like mud!" says Terry enthusiastically.) The vineyard was sold in 1990; thus Kalin made its last Cuvee d'Or that year.

Then there was the very short supply of 1990 Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon that came from Mark Pasternak's red-earth vineyard perched on a 30-degree grade, 1,500 feet above Dry Creek Valley. Ranch hands overloaded one of the two trucks bound for Kalin and then abandoned ship when a front axle broke, sending the picking boxes over a cliff. "Terry," said Pasternak, calling from his cell phone, "I'm looking 800 feet down into a ravine where eight wild boars are enjoying your Cabernet."

There was also the day I drove with the Leightons to Jack Long's place in Dry Creek in northern Sonoma County. Built up from the walls of an 1830s adobe fort, the house sits in a shaded grove of rose bushes and giant fruit trees, with vineyards on three sides. Here was Frances Leighton, a dignified, at times rather serious-minded woman, galloping off into the vine rows like a girl playing horse, slapping her thighs and whooping with Wendy, the Longs' Border collie. Inside, Terry was soaking up the latest harvest gossip from Jack, an animated man in his eighties who's out in his vineyard every day and doesn't miss much: how Winery X got locked into buying some rotten grapes from so and so; what the truckers are saying about the vineyards closer to the coast.

Set in front of us was a tasting of Kalin Cuvee L Chardonnays going back to 1981. The vineyard itself is just outside beyond the tool shed, which is filled with pipe fittings, pump parts, and bales of wire, all the stuff of fanning. The vineyard the Leightons called L for Long, and later LR (for Long River), was hung heavily once again with grapes, vivid-green against the backdrop of brown hills and the glittering leaves of the cottonwoods and alders along Dry Creek.

"The Longs are not win-a-lifestyle type people," Terry had told me on the way up. "They are connected to this land in a serious way." As we sipped these Kalin Chardonnays^¾ '81, '82, '83, '84^¾ rich, textured, layered with flavors and all different but clearly the product of the same soil and the same winemaking hand, I came to understand how the Leightons, too, are connected to the land.

The kind of winemaking they do demands superior grapes and a close partnership with the grower, because the process will expose flaws just as relentlessly as it magnifies pleasing nuances. It is a high-risk, high-reward style of winemaking that Kalin Cellars, with its same plain-jane labels and lack of hoopla, has probably been practicing longer than anybody in America. Says Leighton, "When you've been working with a special vineyard for ten, fifteen, twenty years, you begin to see how far you can push the edge."

RICHARD NALLEY, A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR, IS DEPARTURES WINE CRITIC.

The Kalin Lineup

Kalin Cellars has no mailing list or direct retail sales, so getting its wine will require talking your local wine shop into reserving some bottles. The best way to find which distributors or stores in your area carry the wine is through Kalin Cellars' Web site:

<http://www.kalincellars.com>

WHITE WINES

Semillon, Livermore Valley (\$24) One of Kalin's biggest surprises. This Semillon is made from century-old vines^¾ the original cuttings were

brought over from Chateau d'Yquem¾ planted in deep, gravelly soils. The 1990 Semillon is a sophisticated, rich, complex wine with the texture and weight of a trophy Bordeaux white. It should age like a dream.

Sauvignon Blanc Reserve, Potter Valley (\$24) Kalin makes this wine in a Margaux/Pavillon Blanc style, meaning an emphasis on floral qualities rather than herbal characteristics. These wines, as in the 1986 and 1987, typically have a remarkable concentration and aromatic complexity combined with a kind of delicacy; the 1990 is more about the vintage itself¾ showing that year's off-the-chart super-richness and power.

Chardonnay Cuvee W, Livermore Valley (\$35) From Wente Vineyards' 60-year-old vines in Livermore Valley, these wines have the texture, feel, and layered flavors of big-league white Burgundy, you would be hard-pressed to pick them out of a blind tasting as Californian. The soft, multiflavored, intense 1987 is one of the greatest California Chardonnays I have ever tasted, the 1988 has the same essential character but actually tastes older. The delicious 1991 Chardonnay is still a baby and hard to judge.

Chardonnay Cuvee L/LR, Sonoma County (\$30) Since Jack Long has replanted this vineyard along Dry Creek over to Merlot, this series is ending with a special 1991 "Fin de Siecle" bottling (\$40), for which Terry Leighton says he's "pulled out all the stops." Still, it steadfastly maintains the style that extends back to 1981: a rich, pillowy feel in the mouth, a ripe, low-acid texture that is nonetheless not flabby, and a sometimes flamboyant exotic fruit and citrus quality.

Chardonnay Cuvee LD, Sonoma County (\$30) From another Long family vineyard in the West Dry Creek area of Sonoma County. These Chardonnays tend to have more subtle, less immediately obvious aromatic qualities and a mouthfilling intensity of flavor. The 1992 is super-exotic, with notes of licorice and muscat; the 1991 Chardonnay looks set to evolve more in line with its yellow apple and-pear-fruited older siblings, including the silky, superb 1987.

RED AND ROSE WINES

Pinot Noir Cuvee DD, Sonoma County (\$40) Lovers of the big, super-rich, fruit-forward style of California Pinot should look elsewhere. This wine is a ringer for a fine Cote de Beaune¾ concentrated and mouthfilling but most notable for its refinement and lovely translation of ripe fruit. The 1992 is actually the most recognizably Californian of the line, a juicy, fruity wine that lacks¾ at this stage, anyway, the 1990's amazing perfumed complexity. The 1988, with notes of leather, oak, and a snootful of wild berry aroma, is drinking wonderfully well now.

Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Sonoma County (\$40) From a very low-yielding, dry farmed hillside vineyard, this is the slowest evolving of all of Kalin's notably backward wines. The 1991, with its lovely, crushed black-plum character, tastes like a barrel sample; the leaner 1989 is just starting to blossom; the 1986 is luscious, tongue-coating, and dense and at least five years from maturity. These are remarkable wines, with the medium-rich weight and feel of fine Bordeaux, but a fruitiness that is unmistakably New World.

Cuvee Rose Reserve (\$40) The grapes for this sparkling wine are from the steep, cool, coastal hills of western Marin County. They are typically harvested in October, several months later than those for most California sparklers. This allows them to ripen slowly, yet retain their natural, palate-refreshing acidity. The base wines, 60 percent Pinot Noir, the rest Chardonnay, are barrel-fermented, aged *sur lie* for a year, and bottled for secondary fermentation unfiltered. Given the sweet maturity of the fruit, the wine carries no dosage. The copper/salmon-colored 1986 is a stunner: creamy, mildly oxidized, and exuding an essence of young dark berry fruit. The 1987 is darker and richer, but also crisper, with a kind of cola and red berry quality. It is memorably delicious and distinctive; the 1986 is a monument.

RICHARD NALLEY

The Kalin Alphabet

Kalin Cellars owns no vineyards but buys its grapes from various suppliers, who are identified on the label by a letter code.

Here's the Key:

CUVEE BL B JL Vineyards in Potter Valley.

CUVEE DD David Demostene's vineyard in Alexander Valley.

CUVEE LD Jack Long's hillside vineyard off the Dry Creek Road in Sonoma County.

CUVEE LR Jack Long's vineyard on the Dry Creek River, formerly Cuvee L. CUVEE LV Jack Long's vineyard on the Dry Creek Road.

CUVEE W Wente Vineyards in Livermore Valley.

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