

Kalin Cellars' timeless take on white wine

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Wente's Semillon vineyards in Livermore. Photo: Preston Gannaway, Special To The Chronicle



The fact that [Terry Leighton](#) is just releasing his 2000 Kalin Cellars Semillon from Livermore Valley - "still a bit young," he points out - should be a clue that he doesn't pursue the obvious.

Livermore is always trying to stamp its identity. But Semillon, the noble but generally underappreciated white grape of Bordeaux, is hardly part of its quick pitch. Neither, for sure, is a wine going on 13 years old.

Yet, Leighton, a microbiologist who works out of a small winery in Marin County, remains one of Livermore's biggest true believers - and one of its best advocates to the world beyond California.

He has achieved that by rejecting the industry's general amnesia when it comes to its past, and making wines that speak with a certain timelessness.

"Some of us haven't ever changed," says Leighton, 68. "A lot of us were dedicated followers of fashion."

Kalin is run by Leighton and his wife Frances, a fellow microbiologist, with no other employees. It produces only about 7,000 cases a year. Yet it has a hallowed place in California wine.

Unexpected strategy

It has not only managed the rare feat of increasing its business steadily for more than three decades, but it has, if anything, gained particular currency with a new generation by doing the unexpected - not the least of which is holding back wines for more than a decade to ensure that they are viewed through the prism of time rather than the perkiness of youth.

It doesn't hurt that the couple work with Semillon, which Leighton calls "the great white hope," a variety that is base material for some of the world's best wines, including La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc. But neither the grape nor the insistence on aging easily fits the easy sell that most wineries seek.

The tale of Kalin - of Leighton's perseverance in defending unlikely grapes from unlikely places (the winery also makes Pinot Noir from Sonoma's Alexander Valley) and above all, of revealing the beauty that Livermore can provide when it grows the right thing in the right spot - is a reminder of just how quickly and willfully California's wine history is rewritten.

No more than a handful of the wineries now plying their trade in Livermore existed when Leighton bottled his first vintage of [Livermore Semillon](#) in 1979 - unfiltered, then as now, a bold decision for any winery not run by two microbiologists.

Today he continues to tap 80-year-old vines on the Wente family's estate property that still thrive in 20 feet of gravel, yielding a solid 2 tons per acre.

That depth of soil, and the time it took to let the vines adapt, helps to explain one of the big questions with Livermore, which is whether and how it can produce truly great wines.

Livermore is most certainly not a cool region as California goes - it's more or less on par with the northern end of Napa - and the proliferation of relatively young plantings of just about everything has confused that discussion. (The debate about what it grows best may be smoldering for the next 30 years.)

When combined with true winemaking talent, the area has shown for more than a century that it can play a vital role. In the late 19th century, San Francisco publications were filled with ads touting wine from Livermore vineyards.

From Leighton's perspective, it's possible that we simply haven't been asking the right questions about the area.

Area's uniqueness

Heat it has, for sure - and it should be noted that one of Semillon's great virtues is the ability to thrive in warm corners of the world, like Australia's Hunter Valley. But other attributes include underground aquifers and the moderate stress of gravel soils in Livermore's best corners. These characteristics only make themselves known with close study. (Leighton also makes a Chardonnay from the Wentes' plantings, a wine released even later than his Semillon.)

"The difference in Livermore really is that the vines there do not live a life that you can see from the surface. They live a life down 20 feet," Leighton says.

"If you're used to growing grapes in the first 4 or 5 feet of soils, you would reach an erroneous conclusion about what's going on in Livermore."

In the 1970s, both Terry and Frances landed at UC Berkeley. They were living in the East Bay, thinking about wine quite a bit - after being inspired by [Julia Child](#) - and advising a group of vintners in Emeryville on wine production.

California's burgeoning wine culture fascinated them, and when they saw a newspaper ad offering free wine grapes to anyone who would help tend the vineyards, they investigated.

Those vines happened to be in Pleasanton, on the old Ruby Hill property, where [John Crellin](#) planted vines in 1883 and built a winery four years later - part of the early boom of Livermore's wine country that also included [Charles Wetmore](#)'s Cresta Blanca and the Wente and Concannon families' early plantings.

In that early era, Zinfandel ruled - a fact that, combined with Livermore's climate, prompts the question why more hasn't endured over time. But the area's real virtue would soon come from its dry white wines made from Semillon and [Sauvignon Blanc](#), including vine material that traces back to Chateau Yquem in Sauternes.

Ruby Hill's changes

Ruby Hill had survived Prohibition, but changed hands over the years, being sold to the [Southern Pacific Railroad](#) in 1970 and leased to brothers Harry and [Leonard Rosingana](#), who made wine under the Stony Ridge label. (Leonard would go on to found vineyards in New Mexico.) It was a freewheeling era, what Leighton calls "the remnants of the '60s," and by the time Leighton showed up, the [Victorian house](#) on the property was effectively housing a commune. Hence the ad for free grapes.

Despite the presence of 100-year-old head-trained vines, no one seemed to want the Semillon.

"People told us, you're absolutely crazy," Leighton says. "This stuff - it's a junk white blending grape."

The Leightons helped prune the vines, and their early days working with the Ruby Hill fruit bore not only Semillon but Zinfandel, planted on the same deep gravel soils. As with the best Zins of Contra Costa, the wines showed a particular finesse and sense of place that, again, provides a clue to what Livermore might offer to California's larger conversation.

"Those Zins are the closest thing I've tasted here to Gigondas and Cornas," he says, referring to two major areas in the Rhone Valley. "The gravel just came straight through."

In 1982, the Ruby Hill property was bought by the retailer Computerland, which brought in bulldozers and uprooted the old plantings to make way for a training facility. The Ruby Hill winery itself burned down in 1989, but has since been rebuilt and some of its land replanted.

Leighton was out of grapes, but [Eric Wente](#) was impressed by his work in Livermore and offered him the fruit from his family's vineyards.

Kalin was back in business - although by then its plan to use the old Heinz ketchup factory in Berkeley had been scuttled when a city inspector came and noted, improbably, that a food product like wine couldn't be stored in wood.

The Leightons departed for Marin, and have been content making the trip east for grapes ever since.

Leighton has remained a fan of the old Semillon plantings at Wente's estate. Even if Livermore has moved on to chase other baubles, it is the only place with the gravel soils that can "contain the dangerous energy of Semillon."

That energy includes a quality that particularly intrigues Leighton about the grape right now: its unusual ability to harmonize with spicy foods, from chile heat to wasabi, flavors that typically destroy wine.

At lunch one day, he orders a plate of peppers - Jimmy Nardellos and red peperoncini - to prove his point.

"The more fire you throw at it," he says, "the more it wakes up." He tries to underscore this point by supplying wine to Livermore spots like Uncle Yu's at the Vineyard.

As for the unusual length of time the Kalin wines sit in their cellar before release - an effective bankruptcy tactic for most wineries - it's simply the benefit of the Leightons having succeeded in the business long enough to hold back their product.

It's also when Semillon, when not treated as what Leighton has dubbed Cashflow White, begins to shine. After five years, a good Semillon shows a laser focus. After 10, it has added textural flesh and figgy flavors, and yet remains tight and fresh.

A touch of history

Kalin's best-drinking vintage right now, he insists, is 1980.

All the Leightons have done, really, is roll back the focus on Livermore by a century or so - remember that the Wentes' much-touted importation of Chardonnay didn't happen until 1912 - to an era when the area's glory was derived from the white grapes of Bordeaux. The wines of the era gained magnitude with time. Leighton just wants to shine a warm light on Livermore by forcing people to see the virtues of the past through Semillon-colored glasses.

"That's why we decided," he says, "to stop people from committing infanticide, and started aging it ourselves."

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