

first light dawns at roessler cellars



It's five am, "first light," and Roger Roessler, best known to New Mexicans as owner of Albuquerque's Seasons restaurant and Taos' Ogelvie's, sifts earth through his fingers and squints appraisingly at approaching clouds in a Sonoma County Vineyard, making the final decisions that will determine the character of his next Roessler Cellars wine. With the help of master winemaker Wells Guthrie, Roessler is out this September morning tasting grapes and testing sugars, now, before the heat of the day changes the grapes' character. In his third year of winemaking, Roessler is beginning to get the knack of the viticulturist's balance between intuition and science, art and chemistry. For it is this that will determine whether his wine will be balanced, complex, tannic, fruity, and possess that infinite variety of subtle undertones characteristic of fine California wines.

Says Roessler, "During the growing season it's so exciting to go out in the field with Wells, because he knows so much. He can talk about spurs, positions, root stock...." Guthrie's knowledge comes from years of working for and learning from famous winemakers in California and France. When in the field, Roessler, though now the owner of his own winery, apprentices himself to Wells and other experts who share his vision and taste. He is making a transition from restaurateur to winemaker that is about so much more than a career change.

As restaurant owner, Roessler led a hectic schedule of travel between his restaurants in Albuquerque, Taos, Grand Junction, Durango and Scottsdale, in a business where transitions happen as frequently as vegetables go out of season. As winemaker, Roessler still travels to regions as diverse as New York and Hawaii to market his wines, and still maintains a hectic schedule during the September/October harvest season. But now, says Roessler, "The focus is definitely on sitting on the porch watching the grapes grow, rather than on making sure all 200 diners in a restaurant are delighted with their meal."

Says Roessler of this transition, "I have always been in the restaurant business, and along the way I fell into the wine thing. I had been looking at

buying a restaurant in Sonoma on four acres, and thought it would be great to plant some grapes. Well, after six or eight months spent on the project, it didn't work out, but it had turned the light on about making wine....Friends suggested I just buy some grapes." From old friends and vineyard owners, the San Giacomo family, he bought some surplus grapes at harvest time in 2000, before ever imagining himself stepping out on a vineyard at sunrise to test the subtle chemistry of grapes on the vine. "At that point," chuckles Roessler, "All I knew about wine was how to open the bottle and enjoy it!" Then he discovered master winemaker Wells Guthrie, whose vision for wine meshed well with his own. The result was a 2000 Pinot Noir released to great acclaim last fall. Since that first 225 case batch, Roessler has learned much, especially about the importance of being out in the field with the farmers, letting them know exactly what you are looking for.

While the dream began as just a few acres of vines, it grew to much more. These last couple of years of making wine has been a great start, but Roger and co-owner, his brother, Richard Roessler, dreamt of their own vineyard. Finally, that vineyard is in the works. Says Roger, "We were so fortunate to find this land in Annapolis. It's in a remote location on the Sonoma coast, where a few small wineries are popping up...more and more, it seems that people looking for that special bottle are finding it comes from the Sonoma coast." The area has been a successful one, especially for Pinot Noir. Its grapes tend to yield the structure Mendocino County is known for, with flavors associated with the nearby Russian River. Roessler's 40-acre parcel is now undergoing the clearing, soil analysis, and use conversion—from timber harvesting to agriculture—necessary before planting Pinot Noir, Rhone varietals and Chardonnays.

Winemakers, much like chefs, have their own personal style. A wine brings out the maker's personality and his passion for the business, just as a chef reveals himself through his food. Roessler, like many small scale winemakers, maintains a never-ending hunt for excellent California grapes, as well as for highly qualified experts in the field who can both create a fine wine and in-



crease his knowledge of the business. This approach allows him to create small lots of single vineyard wines and have the pleasure of comparing the different regions and the differences that climate and soil can produce in a grape. His success as a winemaker is not surprising, since it emerges from the same theory he employed as a restaurant owner. He saw his job as that of creating a framework within which a chef's personal style could really shine.

Roessler plans to stay involved with the restaurant business, visiting his locations every 6 to 8 weeks, but is able to turn over the day to day running of them to an excellent and dedicated staff, and now views his involvement from a different perspective: That of mentor.

A new project in Napa with renowned chef James McDevot is taking on this character. Says Roessler, "Now I'm using my 30 years of experience in the restaurant business to have a more directional involvement. I'm helping certain people—who are clearly dedicated to the business—to get a new project off the ground." The restaurant business is tough. It takes optimism, stamina, and serious cash flow to survive through the first few years. Roessler will tell you from experience that few would-be restaurant owners have what it takes to make it. But, with Roessler's knack for finding dedicated, driven collaborators—like nephew Keith Roessler, who runs Seasons in Albuquerque—he is managing to nurture the next generation of restaurateur, passing on his 30 years of fine dining experience, even as he transitions to a new focus.

Roessler grew up in a small farming community in Southern Illinois, where the growing and preparation of food was an important part of life. As a teenager, all he ever wanted to do was work in the restaurant industry. No farmer, he! Now it seems that drive has taken him full circle: from farming, to food, to wine, back to farming. They say you always return to your roots, and although time will tell, those roots should produce their first Roessler Vineyards harvest in 2006.

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