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# ABUELITA'S GARNACHA

## The Viña Castellano Estate Winery

STORY BY DAREN CLIFF, PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIÑA CASTELLANO

Viña Castellano, the “vineyard of the Castilian man,” lies in the foothills above Auburn, California, and produces rich, distinctive wines that have more than a sense of place; they also have a sense of heritage. Owner and winemaker Teena Wilkins oversees the Viña Castellano Estate Winery at her family’s sixty-acre property. This includes a new eight-acre estate vineyard and modern winemaking facility. However, this winery’s story is much older and began in the cities of Burgos and Salamanca in Castile y Leon, Spain.

Teena’s grandmother, Mercedes Mendez, grew up in Burgos. Abuelita—“little grandmother”—as Teena calls her, began the heritage of this artisan winery. Every year she would make 200 gallons of wine from local indigenous grapes for family and friends in Burgos and nearby Salamanca. Every Sunday the homemade wine was served at the family dinner table, a tradition that Teena’s father, Gabe, continued while she was growing up. “We grew up drinking wine on Sunday, even as kids. It was in a very convivial and communal fashion,” recalls Teena. “The notion that wine is for drinking with food is so often missed in American culture.”

Teena’s father landed in the construction business. He was eventually contracted to build a Napa wine cave in the late 70s, and it was then that he recalled the family value of gathering around food and wine, which Abuelita instilled in him, and a pesky vision of someday having his own vines was formed. This dream pestered him for another 20 years before his daughter came to him with the idea of a small estate grown winery on his property, and in 1999, Viña Castellano broke ground on their vineyard.

After completion of enology coursework at UC Davis, Teena immersed herself in the startup winery with conviction and Abuelita’s influence was discernable right away: Teena planted three popular Spanish varietals, Tempranillo, Garnacha (Gr-



*Mercedes Mendez pressing grapes.*

enache), and Monastrell (Mouvedre). While studying at UC Davis she grew very fond of Syrah from the Sierra Foothills. “Our original goal was Tempranillo, and we have a Spanish focus, but we would be remiss to not plant Syrah.” There is also a small amount of Cabernet Franc that was planted by accident. When Teena was unable to get Graciano cuttings from Spain, the vineyard consultant suggested that a small amount of Cabernet Franc be planted in its place. Recently they have begun to graft the Cabernet Franc to Monastrell.

Currently Viña Castellano produces Syrah, Tempranillo, Syrah Rose, and Cabernet Franc wines. The Monastrell and Garnacha are used for blending, but as the new vines come into their fourth

leaf, a varietal bottling of each is very likely. Teena’s wines all have a commonality, a link to the convivial purpose of wine in everyday life that Abuelita imbedded in the Mendez family. “Our challenge is to make wine that people want to drink with food. We make texturally round wines, not big, bombastic wines,” says Teena. The term “fruit forward” is lost on her. She believes that it is a catchy phrase for wines that are not crafted to go with food. “First of all, people just like to say ‘fruit forward.’ Call them what they are —cocktail wines!”

Teena makes “food wines.” She picks grapes by flavor and not by numbers. Abuelita never concerned herself with degrees brix or total acidity when making her 200 gallons each year. “I learned a lot from Abuelita, and she would never have even spent the money on equipment she did not trust anyway.” Teena checks the lab numbers throughout vinification, but she will never use them in the vineyard as formula for harvest. The grapes at the Viña Castellano estate are farmed sustainably. She does not like using *químicos*, as Abuelita would say.

The wines from Viña Castellano are indeed a family affair and the label was designed by Teena’s older sister Cindy. Their father,

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Gabe, has an affinity for the classic “Toro,” the red bull that signifies Spain, and it shows up in the watercolor of the Garnacha block of vines used for the label. The future of Viña Castellano lies in the hands of the next generation of the family, but Teena is content to stay at the current size until her children are older and begin to take interest. They have recently broken ground on a cave for barrel storage, a project that Gabe Mendez has some experience building. Teena would like to make an icon wine from the property in the next vintage, a blend true to her Spanish roots.

It’s ironic that Viña Castellano, in honoring its heritage, is also on the cusp of a renaissance that now marks American wine culture. After a decade or so of wines becoming more intense, sweet, and alcoholic, we find that the new buzz is wines that go with food. Winemakers, winery owners, and marketing folks are extolling the virtues of balanced wines made to accompany food. This laudable trend, albeit retro, is a fresh reprieve from its high octane, insipidly cloying predecessors. In an industry marked by trends, occasionally you find winemakers like Tenna who make wines the way that her grandmother did. Viña Castellano wines celebrate Abuelita’s values, bringing food and conviviality together, just like they did at the Sunday night dinner table, long ago in Burgos, Castile y Leon, Spain.

*Viña Castellano is open by appointment only.*  
[www.vinacastellano.com](http://www.vinacastellano.com)  
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