

A Passion for Pinot Noir

An Interview with Zach Rasmuson, Vice President, Winemaker, and General Manager of the Goldeneye brand, Duckhorn Wine Company

EDITORS' NOTE Zach Rasmuson assumed his current post after a decade spent learning from some of the most respected wine producers in the industry. Rasmuson joined the Goldeneye team as Winemaker in August 2003. In May 2000, he was hired as the Winemaker for Husch Vineyards in the Anderson Valley. In 1998, Rasmuson took the opportunity to be Assistant Winemaker at Robert Sinskey Vineyards. His first job out of college was working in the cellar at Warren Winiarski's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. Rasmuson studied the history of science and philosophy at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland.

COMPANY BRIEF Duckhorn Wine Company (www.duckhorn.com) is a collection of small winery estates focused on site-specific wines of distinction from the Napa and Anderson Valleys and includes Duckhorn Vineyards, Paraduxx, and Goldeneye. Grapes are carefully selected from more than 10 estate vineyards within the Napa Valley and Anderson Valley appellations, and the company implements innovative winemaking techniques and a premium barrel-aging program. Limited quantities of all of the wines are available directly from the winery, throughout the United States, and in the international community.

Goldeneye began making premium-quality, cool-climate pinot noir from its estate winery in the Anderson Valley in 1997. The winery also produces a sister pinot noir called Migration.

Can you give a brief overview of Duckhorn Wine Company and the range of products it is providing to the market?

Duckhorn Wine Company has always been dedicated to crafting world-class wines. It began with Duckhorn Vineyards, which Dan and Margaret Duckhorn founded in 1976, with a focus on crafting Bordeaux varietal wines. In addition to helping to pioneer merlot in North America, Duckhorn Vineyards also established itself as a leader for Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc. In the early '90s, Duckhorn Vineyards began exploring the possibility of creating a proprietary blend. Though inspired by the world's great blends, the goal was to create something distinctly Californian. This innovative and unprecedented blend became Paraduxx, which is based on a core pairing of California's native zinfandel varietal and cabernet sauvignon. Paraduxx now has its own stand-alone facility in the Napa Valley. All of our brands were born out of Dan and Margaret's

passion for wine, and that is certainly true of Goldeneye. They became passionate about pinot noir, and began searching the north and south coasts for the ideal area to grow it. They selected the Anderson Valley in 1996. Like each of our winery estates, Goldeneye has its own unique identity.

You often hear of Russian River and Sonoma when discussing pinot noir. Can you highlight the benefits Anderson Valley provides?

When I first came here, the Anderson Valley was a viticultural diamond in the rough, transitioning from apples to wine grapes. We all saw that there was amazing potential, and over the past 10 years, we have worked to plant the right clones and the right rootstocks. The climate here is perfect for pinot noir, and the aspect of the valley is in line with the onshore winds, so we get a reliable foggy influence. As a result, the Anderson Valley has quickly emerged as a world-class pinot region. Geographically and stylistically, I think we combine many of the best aspects of Sonoma, Russian River, and Oregon pinot noirs.

Have you brought your wine from 2006 to market yet?

We live and breathe Goldeneye, and we want it to always be our best effort. As part of that, we age it for 18 months in barrel and a full year in bottle, which is almost unheard of for pinot noir. So while many wineries are releasing their 2006 wines, we are just bottling our 2006 Goldeneye. This said, we have just released our 2006 Migration, which is Goldeneye's sister label. Migration has its own style that is more approachable in its youth. Crafting Migration also allows us greater flexibility during the blending process, giving us a home for great lots of wine that may not fit the Goldeneye style. Our 2006 Goldeneye will be in the market next March.

When the 2006 wines are released, are they ready to drink, or do people need to hold them a year or two to get the full feel and flavor?

At Goldeneye, I think we strive for the best of both worlds. After all, not everyone wants to cellar their wines. Sometimes you just want to open a bottle and start enjoying it. With this in mind, we age our wines longer, so that they will be extremely satisfying upon release. On the other hand, because of their balance and structure – and our focus on selecting only the



ideal lots for the blend – they also have excellent aging potential.

Can you recommend things people can do to learn about pinot noir?

First, I always like to express to people how much California pinot noir quality has improved over the past 10 years. Part of this has been finding our own identity. For a long time, we were trying to make wine, pinot noir specifically, that resembled the wines of Burgundy. I think many of us have moved in a different direction that recognizes our unique strengths, and that has made for better wines. We certainly haven't lost our reverence for the wines of Burgundy, but we're trying to embrace what California and Oregon – and each of our distinctive microclimates – does best. In my mind, the true effect of the movie *Sideways* is that it inspired people to try pinot noir. When they tried it, people discovered how much they liked it and how well it goes with all sorts of foods. It's a lovely grape that isn't overbearing on the palate. It also beautifully reflects *terroir*, or a sense of place. So I think the best way to learn about pinot is simply to drink and enjoy it.

What made you feel it was the right move to join Duckhorn and work with Goldeneye? Has it been what you expected?

While I was in Napa Valley, working with the Bordeaux varietals, I really found my palate evolving toward pinot. As a Winemaker, you can fall under the spell of pinot noir, and I did. I also believed in the potential of the Anderson Valley. So I moved here and made wine for a small local winery for three years. Back then, the area was so off the beaten wine path that it felt like I was leaving the industry and, at times, I wondered if I had made the right decision. When the opportunity to work at Goldeneye made itself available, it felt like such a natural fit. Dan and Margaret Duckhorn shared my view of the potential here, and they brought with them a real legacy of excellence that I think has helped to elevate the region. Joining Goldeneye has absolutely been the best thing that has happened to me, in terms of fulfilling my passion for making great pinot noir. ●

Zach Rasmuson among his kegs