

The World of Wine

Producing Distinct Wines

An Interview with Melissa Stackhouse,
Winemaker, La Crema Winery

EDITORS' NOTE *Melissa Stackhouse joined La Crema Winery in 2001 and brought with her a passion for Burgundian-style pinot noirs and chardonnays. She developed her interest and expertise in pinot noir while working at several esteemed wineries in Sonoma County and Australia. She earned a degree in viticulture and enology from the University of California at Davis.*



COMPANY BRIEF *La Crema Winery (www.lacrema.com) was founded in 1979 and has established itself as an expert in intensely flavored chardonnay and pinot noir from the coastal regions of California. La Crema pursues the ultimate expression of the Russian River Valley, Carneros, and Anderson Valley by handcrafting wines of distinct flavor. Although La Crema Winery is not open to the public, those interested can visit the tasting room located in Healdsburg, California, or make an appointment to see the production winery in Windsor, California. La Crema is a member of the following winery organizations: Russian River Wine Road, Russian River Valley Winegrowers, Sonoma County Vintners, Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers Alliance, and Family Winemakers of California.*

Can you give a brief overview of the La Crema brand and the portfolio of wines that you're producing?

La Crema is a chardonnay and pinot noir producer in the heart of the Russian River Valley in California. We produce wines from Los Carneros, Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast, and Anderson Valley. We have a series of wines called Nine Barrel, which are the best nine barrels of Russian River chardonnay and Russian River pinot noir. La Crema Winery, known for producing cool-climate chardonnay and pinot noir, has introduced two new wines from the Monterey appellation.

How have you been able to keep the wines affordable, but offer consistency and quality?

Our focus is to make better wine each year. As the winery has grown, we've maintained consistency in both fruit sourcing and winemaking. While the winery has become very successful, we have had the same group of people making the wine for a very long time.



There is little personnel turnover at La Crema. We meet the consumer's expectations of a certain level of quality, consistency, and value with the wine. This requires a lot of attention to detail and commitment to the product. We really want people to embrace La Crema and enjoy the wines. We feel that we have the skills as a grape-growing and winemaking team to put something impressive yet approachable in the bottle.

Does the amount of wine you produce vary, and do you plan a specific number of cases for each of the vintages?

In general, yes. For example, with the Los Carneros Chardonnay, we might go in with the idea to make 3,000 cases, and as we're going through the blending process, we might put a couple of trial blends together at 3,000 cases, at 2,000 cases, and at 1,000 cases. We'll do a blind taste and see if there's any variation in the level of quality among those case amounts. The loose idea is the smaller your case amount, the better your wine will be, but that's not always the case. That's the strange thing about blending: when you're blending a wine, it's not always the best lot that makes the best blend. Sometimes if you throw something funky in there, you bring a whole level of complexity to the wine once it's blended in with some other lots.

Over the past few years, there has been a major focus on pinot noir. Does that surprise you, and did you believe it would develop this type of following?

When I graduated in 1998 from UC Davis, the tasting groups were all pinot noir tasting groups. I wasn't all that wooed by it back then – I was definitely a cabernet girl. I was going to go straight to Napa Valley to make cabernet and merlot. It seems between that time and now, pinot noirs in general have gotten so much better in this country. It took us a long time to discover where to grow pinot noir, how to produce it, and what clones work where. As far as the attention moving to pinot noir, it could not have happened at a better time, because people who are exploring wine varieties might pick up a pinot noir that will be good. There are a lot of excellent pinot noirs out there.

Is your product ready to drink right away?

The Sonoma Coast wines are drinkable, once they're in the market. They're ever changing and will become different wines, but they're very fruit-forward wines, so they are drinkable young. That said, they're very well-made wines, so they can still age for about five to eight years. The appellation wines are usually a little tight upon entry in the consumer market, but they evolve as time goes on. With those wines, it's best to try them and see where they're at and wait a few months and try them again. As a living and breathing thing, wine changes all the time, but there always seems to be a sweet spot when it tastes really great.

In the winemaking process, do you know relatively early on if a wine is going to work, or do you only know what type of wine you're going to end up with later on?

The challenging thing about harvest is that it unfolds as you're going through it. As you're going through a harvest, you have a sense of what sort of vintage it's going to be. We start tasting the wines while they're aging, and we'll get a sense of other things, such as how concentrated the pinot noirs and chardonnays are, and how fresh they are. Then we'll start putting those trial blends together, the wines will be bottled, and we'll get a sense of what we have then. Upon release, the wines will be tasted again. This is always the most interesting time, when you taste something you put in a bottle half a year ago and find out if you've hit the mark.

What is it about La Crema that has made it a place you've wanted to be for eight years?

I have a great team of people. I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of this collaboration in a family-owned winery. I also work for a winery that has a commitment to maintaining quality and trying new things. I have a lot of creative freedom in this position, and every year is different here. We're always bringing new wines on, so there are always challenges. Making wine from such dynamic areas and working for a winery that has such a huge commitment and presence in the industry makes me feel like I have one of the best winemaking positions in California. ●

La Crema vineyards in the Russian River Valley