

The World of Wine

Consistency and Dependability



An Interview with Erik Olsen, Winemaker, Clos du Bois

EDITORS' NOTE Erik Olsen's technical training in winemaking began at U.C. Davis, where he graduated with a B.S. in Enology and Viticulture. He went on to earn an M.S. in Food Science from Cornell University and an M.B.A. from the University of Washington, combining a rare background of both technical and business training with the intuition and creativity of a born winemaker. For more than two decades, Erik has crafted balanced, flavorful, and award-winning wine at some of California and Washington State's most prestigious wineries. Since joining Sonoma, California winery Clos du Bois in 2003, Olsen's hands-on approach has been instrumental in ensuring quality at all levels.



Erik Olsen

COMPANY BRIEF Clos du Bois produced its first vintage in 1974 from 520 acres of grapes in Sonoma County's Alexander Valley. Since that time, Clos du Bois (www.closdubois.com) has become one of the region's most renowned wineries, famous for elegant, soft, and approachable wines. The name reportedly originates from the plan of founder Frank Woods to name the new winery "Woods Vineyard." His children, who were studying French at the time, suggested the more romantic Clos du Bois instead, which loosely translates to "enclosure in the woods."

Can you give a brief overview of the range of products that you offer?

Clos du Bois is one of the most recognized wine brands in America today. Ninety-five percent of our production falls under our popular Classics tier, a collection of varietal wines perfect for everyday drinking and celebrating. Our North Coast Chardonnay is the most well-known wine in this tier, followed by our cabernet and merlot. With the Classics, we are focused on making wines that are refined yet approachable, vibrant in terms of fruit character, and soft when it comes to tannin structure. We are also looking for outstanding value and consistent quality with the Classics. These are wines that people have come to enjoy and rely on over the years, and our number-one focus is to continue that tradition of outstanding quality, value, and accessibility.

Above the Classics is our newest tier, the Sonoma Reserve series. Representing a much more limited share of our total production, we have the opportunity to cherry-pick the very best

vineyards in the very best appellations of Sonoma County for these wines. Carefully matching grape to place to showcase each of Sonoma's unique growing regions, the sourcing for each of the varietals in the Sonoma Reserve tier is strategically chosen to express the unique characteristics of that specific terroir – cabernet and merlot from the Alexander Valley, pinot noir from Sonoma Coast, and chardonnay from Russian River Valley.

The final and top tier of the Clos du Bois product line is our Proprietary Series, which represents only one percent of our total production. This is the cream of the crop, and includes three proprietary-named wines: Marlstone, Briarcrest, and Calcaire.

Marlstone was the first Bordeaux blend ever made in Sonoma County. Sourced from Alexander Valley, this blend includes cabernet sauvignon, merlot, malbec, and cabernet franc. The goal with the Marlstone is to craft a wine each year that showcases the very best of what that vintage has to offer. It's the style we're known for, which is full tannins, nice ripe flavors, and real approachability, as well as complexity and elegance.

Briarcrest is 100 percent cabernet sauvignon. Filled with black fruit character and licorice notes, this wine is a blending of the best cabernet lots from top vineyard sites across Alexander Valley. After personally inspecting the grapes for flavor and character during harvest, only the top one percent makes the cut. Beyond the vineyard, each lot of grapes is hand-harvested, hand-sorted, and vinified separately so the ultimate expression can be nurtured and tracked. Our goal with the final blend is to really showcase the quality and personality of Alexander Valley cabernet sauvignon.

For the Calcaire, which is 100 percent chardonnay, we look at the elite growers and very best sites within the Russian River Valley to get a wine that is extremely elegant and refined, almost restrained in a way, and that is designed for cellaring so you can enjoy the benefits of aging. Calcaire has the nice citrus notes and bright apple characteristics of the Russian River Valley but it also has a little bit of that minerality, which takes you back to the inspiration of the white Burgundies.

How have you been so successful in providing consistent quality?

Consistency and dependability are both extremely important to our winery. We've got the best

viticulture and grower relations teams in the business. We are perpetually working with our growers to assure that all the things that need to be done in the vineyard are done well to give us the flavors that we look forward to each year.

The other component is doing things in a controlled way. I'm a fanatic about efficiency and having people very clear on what their roles are in the winery. We're very particular about how the grapes are pressed, how we do our fermentation, everything on up to blending.

How important is sustainable agriculture and environmental responsibility to you?

Environmental responsibility has always been a part of the culture at Clos du Bois. Since 2001, we've been certified as a Green Business Level II and, in 2003, we received the Fish Friendly Farming Outstanding Land Steward award for our sustainability practices in the vineyard.

Well over 90 percent of solid waste produced at the winery, including grape-processing waste, is composted and mixed into the soil that feeds the vines on our estate. Our energy efficiency initiatives, including motion-censored lights throughout the winery, save a tremendous amount of electricity, while our drip irrigation used throughout the vineyards drastically reduces our water usage. It's all about being cognizant of how important the environment is to us when making our wine both today and in the future.

What are you most focused on in 2010 to maintain the brand's leadership position?

The number one thing is to stay true to what the brand is recognized for: being very consistent and having an approachable style. We do that by paying close attention to the vineyards and making sure the grapes are grown in the right way to give us the flavors we are looking for.

We also want to maintain our leadership in chardonnay. We're the number-one super premium chardonnay on the market today, and we have continued to keep up our quality through a hands-on ethic in the winery. Even though chardonnay is our largest production varietal, there is still a tremendous amount of small-lot winemaking techniques taking place that ultimately reflect a superior quality wine. From hand-stirring of the lees to barrel fermentation and aging, maintaining these small winery practices are critical to maintaining the style and popularity of not only our chardonnays, but our entire portfolio of wine. ●

A selection of Clos du Bois wines