

Wine & Spirits Quality Winemaking



An Interview with
Janet Pagano, Managing Partner, Ovid Napa Valley

Ovid Hexameter red wine (left); a westward view from Ovid Winery (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Janet Pagano assumed her current post as an equity partner in 2008 and she has been with Ovid since its inception. Previous to her position at Ovid Napa Valley, Pagano enjoyed success at several outstanding Napa Valley properties, including as General Manager and Winemaker at Codorniu Napa/Artesa Winery, General Manager at Stonestreet, and President of Mt. Veeder Winery, among others.



Janet Pagano

COMPANY BRIEF Ovid Napa Valley (ovidwinery.com) was established in 2000 by husband and wife team Mark Nelson and Dana Johnson with a singular goal: the creation, nurturing, and production of limited-quantity wines of unique quality and character. Crafting small amounts of estate wines, Ovid Napa Valley is committed to the ongoing exploration of viticultural and winemaking methods that together with sustainable farming will ensure the full potential of this unique vineyard. The first release of Ovid Napa Valley, the 2005 vintage, was in the summer of 2008.

Would you provide an overview of the history and heritage of Ovid Napa Valley and how the brand has evolved?

Founders Mark Nelson and Dana Johnson were lucky enough to find a beautiful and unspoiled property on Pritchard Hill. Although they didn't intend to become vintners themselves, they lucked into a piece of land that seemed well suited for growing grapes.

At the encouragement of others, they decided to consult David Abreu, a vineyard manager of some esteemed properties nearby. He was so impressed by the potential of this site that it convinced them to plant a vineyard under his direction and supervision.

The vineyard was planted in 2000. There are 15 acres under vine with multiple clones and rootstock combinations. Each acre is farmed individually – we have eight acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, five acres of Cabernet Franc, one acre of Petit Verdot, one acre of Merlot, and we planted half an acre of Syrah a bit later for fun.

In the process of developing that vineyard, we pulled out 50,000 cubic yards of rock in order to create even growing conditions for those vines. We decided to stay small at that point and

focus on making the very best wine we could from our 15-acre block of vineyards.

I had gotten to know Mark and Dana socially and had been involved in some other winery start-up and construction projects, so they asked if I would oversee this one as well, which I was thrilled to do.

I came on officially in 2002 to oversee the construction of the home for them, as well as the design and development of the winery.

Is production today still very limited or has it grown?

As the vines have matured, it has grown a bit, but we're still on a small scale and the wines remain scarce.

Will you talk about how distribution works today?

Eighty-five percent of our wine is sold directly to our customers, mostly via our mailing list and to our visitors to the winery. The remaining 15 percent is distributed in a thin layer across major markets in the U.S. and a few export markets as well.

Are there certain characteristics that differentiate the wine?

There are several points of differentiation, and the main one is the vineyard itself. Pritchard Hill is beautifully suited for growing not only Cabernet Sauvignon but also Cabernet Franc at the highest possible level. It's not so often that one finds a site that allows for that.

Cabernet Franc has been featured prominently in our Bordeaux blends, and it makes an especially beautiful wine. We're thrilled to have that, and it adds some layers of interest to our wines.

Also, when we were designing the winery, we were the first to put in concrete tanks in the U.S., so we made an early commitment to fermenting in concrete and continue to do so.

Have advances in technology changed the winemaking process?

It's in some ways a question of scale. Technological advances are probably most utilized by wineries on a much larger scale than Ovid, but that isn't to say we aren't interested in advancing our knowledge of all of the details having to do with grape growing and winemaking.

Our winemaker has worked with a company called Fruition Sciences. We were one of their vineyards they used while doing Ph.D. research at Berkeley to understand vine stress on

a whole other level. We have enjoyed working with them to look at what vine stress means in terms of managing the vineyard for quality.

We use technology when it's appropriate, but at day's end, it really comes down to the winemaker's knowledge.

How important is the environmental focus at Ovid?

We are committed to sustainability because it's something we believe in, but we have never pursued it with any type of commercial advantage in mind.

We have a family living on the property and we want to be good neighbors, so we make sure we minimize any use of chemicals on the property. From the beginning, we have looked for ways to utilize a more natural and holistic approach to our work.

The vineyard itself is certified organic. We also planted a fruit and nut orchard on top of the rocks that were pulled from the vineyard, and that is also certified organic. We have solar panels so we can contribute back to the grid, but we're not completely self-sustaining in terms of our energy use.

How early in the process do you get a feel for the qualities of a specific release?

It varies vintage by vintage. Some vintages of wine reveal themselves early on and we can get a sense of what their character is going to be like, and other vintages are more reticent and it's not clear.

Are there opportunities available for women in the industry today?

In my case, the first jobs were the hardest to get because there weren't many women doing the hands-on work of making wine, nor were there a lot of women in management at that time.

I owe my first job, which was an internship, to the fact that a woman had done that job the previous year and had done such a fantastic job that she paved the way.

Do you enjoy the process and take time during it to stop at certain moments and celebrate some of the wins, or are you always thinking about the next vintage?

During harvest, winemakers will stop at day's end, before they do evening pump overs, and have a glass of wine and sit on the deck for a few minutes to enjoy the sunset. However, we also always view our best wines as our next wines, so that motivates us to always strive to be better. ●