

appellation

February | March 2000

WINE COUNTRY LIVING

wave maker

SALLY OTTOSON OF
PACIFIC STAR WINERY

TEXT THOM ELKJER



JOHN BIRCHARD

A search for the westernmost outpost of California wine country takes you far north of San Francisco. After passing through the well-tended vineland of Sonoma and Mendocino, topping the final coastal ridge, and emerging onto the windswept headlands that line the Pacific Ocean, you still have a way to go. Half an hour north of Mendocino village, when it seems there is hardly room for a road, much less a vineyard, you reach Pacific Star Winery.

The property's rugged location and rough-hewn buildings might lead you to expect a gruff greeting from a crusty, coastal hermit. Instead you're welcomed by the engaging, outgoing Sally Ottoson, who cheerfully introduces you to a dog, some sheep, and the horses grazing alongside her

driveway. "I love it when people stop along the highway to look at the vineyards," she says. "The longer they hesitate, the likelier it is they'll come down and see if this is for real."

It's better than real. The views up and down the coast are spectacular, and the sound and scent of the sea follow you everywhere on the property. Visitors are welcome to picnic on the bluffs, but on many days of the year, whales outnumber human guests. "Some of the whales hang around so long we start to recognize them," Ottoson says. The urge to linger is easy to understand.

Unlike the wealthy, second-career winery owners who have put up so many rural wineries in the last decade, Ottoson is a hardworking native who started in the wine business more than 25 years ago. Born and raised in

the nearby town of Fort Bragg, she headed off to college at 18. Her plans changed in 1973 when she got a part-time job in St. Helena at a wine bar called The Wine Garden. The job soon became full time, and she never looked back.

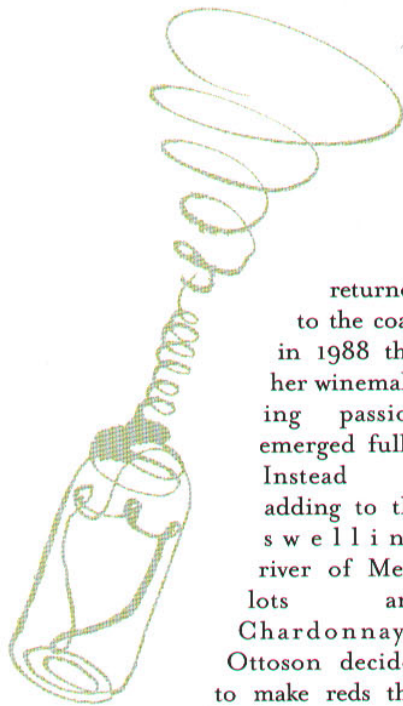
For three years, Ottoson met and poured for the movers and shakers of Napa's burgeoning wine community. "It was an amazing time," she recalls. "The winemakers would come in after work, taste each other's wine, and talk about what they were doing. Everyone was still figuring things out. There was tremendous enthusiasm, but not a lot of technical understanding. So people were experimenting, learning from each other, and following their noses."

This approach appealed to the independent-minded Ottoson, who made her first vintage, a Sauvignon Blanc, in 1979. She bought the grapes from Cyril Saviez, an independent farmer along the Silverado Trail. "Twenty years later, I'm still getting my grapes from old growers," Ottoson reports. "I've learned so many things from these guys that no book can ever tell you."

During the early 1980s she earned her winemaker stripes making Pinot Noir at Star Hill Winery in Napa County, developing the business from a vanity operation into a bonded commercial winery producing 2,500 cases annually. But it was when she



MIXED CASE



returned to the coast in 1988 that her winemaking passion emerged fully. Instead of adding to the swelling river of Merlots and Chardonnays, Ottoson decided to make reds that showcase nearby Mendocino winegrowers and their vineyards.

"Sally's a passionate person who wants to make it on her own terms," says Patrick Pickett, a Sonoma County-based winemaker for Kendall-Jackson. "Running a small winery on the north coast of California is hard enough, but she's bucking the trends by making lesser-known varieties. My hat's off to her."

Pacific Star's first vintage, in 1989, included two offbeat wines: Petite Sirah, which was rapidly declining in popularity, and Charbono, which had already sunk out of sight. Brought to California by Italian immigrants in the 1800s, Charbono survived on a few dozen acres, primarily as a blending grape. But Ottoson knew what the wine could do. "At The Wine Garden I had tasted wonderful Inglenook Charbonos from the 1940s," she says. "But hardly anyone else was making it in 1989, so I just worked with it until I figured it out."

By 1994 Pacific Star was producing dark, earthy Charbonos with Dolcetto-like flavors, silky tannins, and abundant acidity. Charbono grape

prices began shooting up soon afterward, as other wineries decided to try their hand at it. (Parducci, Ca'del Solo, Topolos, and other wineries now sell varietal Charbono, and the grape also figures prominently in highly rated blends from Fife and Viansa.) Still, the 1996 Pacific Star Venturi Vineyard Reserve Charbono stands out for its site-specific qualities.

"Sally gets out into the vineyards and works closely with the growers," says Van Williamson, winemaker at Edmeades in Mendocino's Anderson Valley. "I think you can taste that in the wine."

Some people in the business wonder how a small, out-of-the-way winery like Pacific Star manages to get first-rate fruit, especially from sought-after old vines. Ottoson, in typical fashion, sees it the other way. "Being small means I can do things big wineries can't," she says. "I'll take small lots of a couple of tons of grapes, which giant companies would laugh at. I'll go pick up grapes myself. I'll help with the harvest if I have to. I'll do whatever it takes to get good grapes, and my growers know I'll put their names on my labels."

This kind of loyalty appears to come naturally to Ottoson. As a child, she watched her father, Fred Ottoson, take a glass of red wine every day, a prescription given by his doctors. When his daughter founded Pacific Star, the elder Ottoson started working alongside her to help her realize her dream. In 1996, she decided to make a wine that would honor his contribution. The result is an Italian-style blend known as "Dad's Daily Red." She priced the wine at \$10 — surprisingly low for a premium California red, not to mention one made from old vines. "All the vines in that wine are over 75 years old," she muses. "About as old as my dad."

Ottoson may lack an enology degree, but she hardly lacks confidence. "I learned to make wine by doing it," she declares, adding that she has taken some classes along the way. "People may knock my wines for this or that, or say I don't have a degree in winemaking. But one thing I know for sure is that

my wine lasts a long time in the bottle." Both her 1991 Petite Sirah and 1992 Charbono display an elegant handling of tannins. Charbono in particular is known for its harsh, astringent tannins, which makes Ottoson's accomplishment all the more remarkable.

She herself credits an unusual ally: her oceanfront environment. The incessant waves, she says, vibrate the soft rock beneath the cellar. This naturally settles the lees (yeast sediments that are a by-product of fermentation) in the winery's oak barrels, so that the wine comes out clear, with no need for artificial filtration. The wine also comes out with concentrated flavors, she maintains, because the sea air deposits a fine layer of salt on the barrels, which in turn accelerates the osmosis of water through the wood.

Pacific Star Winery's gorgeous location helps Ottoson find help during the crush. "I always ask winery visitors if they will come back and help," she explains. "So we have this kind of tribal atmosphere in September, working all day and having dinner parties at night. Everyone who comes in as a stranger leaves as a friend."

Along with her newfound friends, her animals, and the occasional whale, Ottoson shares Pacific Star with her son, Jonah, and her husband, Robert Zimmer of Stevenswood Lodge. Marc Dym, the talented chef at Stevenswood, has created a special dish featuring Pacific Star Charbono, and Pacific Star wines are available in retail outlets along the north coast. The wine can also be found through local retailers or on the Internet. The winery's current capacity, 5,000 cases annually, will grow to 7,500 within two years. Ottoson also plans to build a tasting room, so that visitors can savor her wine while taking in the views.

"This is the kind of place that makes you agree with native peoples who say we don't own the land," Ottoson says, walking along the bluffs and letting her hair stream in the wind. "In truth, we can only take care of it. And whenever we can, we should share it."