Cadre Wines

2023 "Sea Queen" Albariño





IF I HAD UNLIMITED... "I would be planting the same varieties we are now on some new sites. Basically, I'd be doing the exact same thing we're doing now but to the next level where we own it. It would just be the next level and pushing the limits of this coastline with these varieties, and I would explore some other white varieties as well."

THE ROOTS RUN DEEP at Cadre, where John Niven is continuing a family tradition of grape growing and winemaking in Edna Valley and on the San Luis Obispo Coast. His grandfather did the "heavy lifting" in the 1970s when he planted Paragon Vineyard, and the family later created a portfolio of wineries and brands, which Niven managed for a time.

Back in 1973, his grandfather had planted Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Chenin Blanc in his 542-acre vineyard in what Niven called a "full shotgun approach."

"My family has been experimenting with white wines for over 50 years," Niven said. "Chardonnay is what floated to the top and originally put the region on the map, but all along these other whites were being planted and grown and fruit was sold off to various people."

This, of course, wasn't always the case. Some Cabernet Sauvignon was planted to fill a market need, but when the winery in Napa purchasing that red fruit ended its contract with Paragon Vineyards in the '90s, the family entered a new phase of planting, one full of experimentation with aromatic varieties.

"I'm not sure if it's in my genes, but I've always gravitated to fresh, beautiful, crisp white wines," he said.

Niven convinced his family to plant 45 acres of Viognier, 13 acres of Grüner Veltliner as well as Grenache Blanc, Riesling, Albariño, Pinot Gris and some more Sauvignon Blanc from clones out of the Loire Valley.

Then, in 2020, the older generation of the family business decided to sell the company, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise for Niven. He and his wife, Lucy, decided to take out a second mortgage and start up a brand of their own, Cadre, sourcing only aromatic whites from Edna Valley and the San Luis Obispo Coast.

"I felt like I had unfinished business here in our beautiful valley and I wanted to keep this exploration going. It was natural, and we couldn't be happier with where Cadre has grown to be."

Rather than focus on direct-to-consumer sales like so many other start-ups, Niven knew from past experience that starting in distribution would be the key to making his endeavor work—and had the relationships and longtime friends to help secure that wholesale business. Today, Cadre wines are distributed in more than 40 states.

"Securing distribution in today's marketplace is challenging and daunting, but it helps when you make a portfolio of high acid, crisp white wines," he said. "If we were making Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, I don't think we would be as successful."

His timing could not have been more perfect. Aromatic, high-acid whites are doing the best in the market today, bucking many of the slowing sales trends.

"It's worldwide," Niven said. "If you're feeding this thirst worldwide and there's not a ton of plantings in the ground, you can imagine that this presents a ton of opportunity for Albariños from other regions and I think California has been doing a great job."

It's a promising variety for the state because it keeps so much of its natural acidity and is being planted throughout, from the warm and large Lodi to the very cool and small SLO Coast, providing a range of flavor profiles and price points. "We're fired up to see that growth," Niven said.

He's a huge proponent of the region, which earned its AVA status in 2022. While vineyards have been planted in the area for more than 50 years, so many consumers didn't know it existed or confused the smaller Edna Valley with Australia's Eden Valley.

Its extreme proximity to the coast means that it has a long, slow growing season, perfect for fully ripening flavors and preserving acid; the region gives the term "low and slow" a new meaning. Though budbreak on the Albariño started in mid-February with the 2023 vintage, harvest pushed into early November. With intense wind and short bursts of heat in the early afternoon, it's not the California most people imagine.

That said, it's one of the few places where growers and winemakers could achieve such acidity and ripeness. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are, of course, the more popular varieties, though Niven touts how passionate and full of excitement he and some of the newer winemakers from the region are to buck that trend.

"Man, I want the world to see life beyond Chardonnay here and the wonders of these other whites," he said. "There's going to be a wide swath of these aromatic and alternative whites that are coming from the region, and I hope the world recognizes that because it is a truly special place."

What's next in his white wine exploration? Niven is incredibly passionate about Sauvignon Blanc and wants to continue producing cool-climate expressions of it, though he's also excited about Chenin Blanc and all the other new varieties going into the ground.