



LANCASTER ESTATE

Exceptional Alexander Valley Wines

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Cabernet sauvignon, malbec, merlot, petite verdot, and cabernet franc are all grown at Lancaster Estate. These “noble” Bordeaux varietals thrive in rich soils while basking in California’s Alexander Valley sunshine. Apart from Samantha’s Sauvignon Blanc, a white Bordeaux varietal, the wines at Lancaster are big reds. Today, Bill Foley and his wife Carol own Lancaster Estate. Bill is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Foley Family Wines & Spirits (FFWS), a portfolio of wineries and distilleries.

HISTORY

Ted and Nicole Simpkins first came to California in 1983. Ted was adopted, but as an adult, he did some research and discovered that his fraternal father’s name was Lancaster. After seeing the family crest, he decided to use it and his father’s name for his vineyard. Ted and Nicole had twin daughters named Samantha and Sophia. The crown jewel of the Lancaster wines is named Nicole and is made from the first and best handpicked estate-grown grapes. The estate sits on 70 acres with 53 acres planted. The current winery opened in 1995, and in 2012, Bill Foley purchased Lancaster Estate.

THE VINEYARDS

The property boasts three types of soil: volcanic, river, and clay. Each soil type expresses itself differently. The hillsides feature north, east, and south-facing slopes, each receiving differing amounts of sun and rain. Where the superior grapes grow each year is a constant surprise. Blocks at the vineyard are named after a family member or a pet.

Lancaster staff practice spur pruning on the red varietal vines. When utilizing this technique, the previous year’s shoot is cut back to a spur, a short section of one-year-old wood with a few buds. The spurs are spaced on a cordon, the horizontal extension of the trunk that’s two years or older. This type of vine pruning has the classic “T” shape. The sauvignon blanc vines are cane pruned, a meth-

od of pruning that involves cutting the vine down to one or more canes that will later produce new shoots. This technique leaves the vine with a trunk and its remaining canes. Winemakers typically choose the pruning style. The choice of pruning style is made with conscious thoughts about canopy management, varietal, and personal preference. Lancaster is not organic, but it is everything but that. The winery is certified Sonoma sustainable, and the staff practices composting and recycling. Lancaster uses well water, and the solar panels on the property produce more solar power than is used.

MAKING WINE AT LANCASTER

David Drake is the current winemaker at Lancaster. He began as an intern at Lancaster and has moved up to the master winemaker position. David believes he is the shepherd of the estate, and he tries to capture what the vineyard has to offer. David and other vineyard personnel thin out shoots and fruit throughout the year, but the final hand sorting and selection occurs before the grapes are crushed just outside of the wine caves. Vineyard blocks are vinified individually, separating grapes by varietal, maturity, and richness of character. At this point, only the best fruit is de-stemmed and crushed for Lancaster wines.

Next, the grapes are cold-soaked in temperature-controlled, stainless steel tanks for several days prior to fermentation. This process extracts





the gorgeous, rich colors, tasty flavors, and tannins from the skins without letting the juice ferment. After the maceration process, the fruit is left alone, and the native wild yeasts and local air ferment the wines. Each lot of finished wine is kept separate and is then pumped into French oak barrels and aged in the wine caves for 18 to 26 months before blending and bottling.

MY VISIT TO LANCASTER

My Reserve Cave Tasting began in the lobby of the winery with a pour of Samantha's Sauvignon Blanc, an acidic palate cleanser meant to prepare me for the upcoming voluptuous reds. This wine boasted layers of flavors, including white nectarine, mango, honeysuckle, and grapefruit, which was the most prominent flavor to me. The sauvignon blanc is not only aged in oak barrels but in a concrete egg,

which adds to its smoothness. After a tour of the caves, I sat down in the "library" to enjoy a vertical tasting of four of the reserve cellar-aged cabernet wines, a platter of artisanal cheeses and charcuterie, and a splash of one of the wine club wines.

All Lancaster wines are stored in the cave at about 60 degrees, and approximately 2/3rds of the space is used for wine, and 1/3 is saved for hospitality.

The first wine in the library was the 2021 Sophia's Hillside Cuvée. This delicious blend was fruit-forward and offered aromas of dark plum, black pepper, and clove. Next was the 2019 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon with rich flavors of black cherry, sage, and dark stone fruit. This vintage did not have any petit verdot in the blend.

The third wine was the 2018 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. This wine boasted concentrated

flavors of dark black cherry, plum, and tobacco and left me with the essence of blueberry puree.

My unique extra taste was of a 2018 Block 13 Malbec Reserve. It is 100% Malbec from the estate. This wine is made exclusively for the wine club. It was delicious and dry. My final taste was the 2017 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. After a bit more aging, this wine had a long, luscious finish. I noticed notes of blackberry and dark stone fruit.

The wines at Lancaster Estate are decadent and delicious, and the cave is a spectacular place to taste these excellent wines. However, another tasting option is the Estate Tasting, which features a flight of four current vintage Estate wines. This tasting is available inside the comfort of the winery or outdoors with fantastic views of the hillside vineyards. ❖