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Wine & Business

**Local winemaker profile:
Charlie Johnston of Helena View Johnston Vineyard and Winery**

From root beer to rootstock

Calistoga winemaker has turned his love of chemistry and art into 'highly extracted' red wines

by **Scott Ferguson**

In the tiny tasting room a tiny heater chases the chill away while Charlie Johnston proudly splashes wine into an awaiting glass. As he tells the story about what he calls a "great experiment," his passion for wine is easy to detect. He's only interrupted for a quick moment to chase Arthur the cat off the counter.

For many visitors to Napa Valley, this is what it's all about, an artisan winemaker far removed from the industrial side of the wine business. Johnston has slowly built his dream on weekends and any spare time that came his way; it was also done on a shoestring budget.

Today, Helena View Johnston Vineyard and Winery is tucked away on Highway 128, just north of Calistoga with Mt. St. Helena towering in the background. This small winery hand-crafts between 1,500 to 2,000 cases of wine per year, depending on the quality of the available fruit.

"It's a team effort," said Johnston, "Sarah Marie does most of the public relations and husband Tom Gray, is our winery chef, and the youngest Tanya, a college freshman at Sonoma State hopes to become more involved."

Motivated more by passion than the pursuit of profits, this Calistoga winemaker has turned his love of chemistry and art into what he describes as highly extracted red wines.

Walking among the barrels of fermenting wine, Johnston explained how his wines attain such complexity: "The wine remains on skins for up to four months prior to pressing out, increasing the complexity of wine. It's unique to small wineries. It's something larger wineries just can't do."

There are no white wines from this winery, only big Bordeaux-style reds. Helena View has become known for its rich cabernet franc. They also produce a cabernet sauvignon and merlot, as well as a Bordeaux



"When (winemaking) gets in your blood, it's all over," said Johnston, above.

blend.

In Harmony with Nature

Johnston built a 1,500 square-foot winery on a six-acre parcel already planted with vineyards. It was a parcel his father had owned and in 1988 Johnston finally saw a chance to make his dream come true. Today, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc is organically grown there. "We try to farm our vineyards in harmony with nature," he said.

He admits to having a passion for wine at a young age. With an interest in chemistry, Johnston's childhood projects were making homemade root beer, an experiment that ultimately turned to wine.

"While everybody else was making stink bombs, I was making wine," said Johnston. When his family moved to a small farm in what was then a more rural Saratoga, he found that they had moved across the street from an outfit called Novitiate Winery.

He recalled the sights, smells and the sounds of the old winery, which further galvanized his love for the wine business. "When it gets in your blood, it's all over," Johnston said.

As a 19-year-old college student at Arizona State University, the drinking age was 19. Rather than the mass quantities of beer most college students yammer for, Johnston searched out wine – good wine.

While working for soft drink giant Sunkist, where he was educated in sensory taste components, and traveling the world as its marketing director, he found himself with many gourmands – an experience that further stoked his passion for wine and food.

Johnston finally found himself in Napa Valley in 1982, not yet in the wine industry but as a financial advisor for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter.

In the meantime, Johnston converted his garage into a winery, where his "great experiment" continued and he made five barrels of merlot.

"Just this year we used seven different strains of yeast, seven," Johnston pointed out.

Handcrafted One-By-One

Today, Johnston his fully equipped with an operating winery and wine caves, where hand-written notes hang from each barrel. "This is all a learning experience for me, and this winery is like one huge laboratory. We're always experimenting and having new ideas," Johnston said.

"When Bob Mondavi tasted our '92 cab franc, he asked what yeast we use, and what compliment. For me, that said, 'Wow, how did you get those flavor notes. What are you doing that we're not,'" Johnston said. "And I told him it wasn't luck that we found this certain yeast, it was through experimentation."

The Helena View wines have won several awards. They have taken gold medals in the New World wine competition. Their wines have scored 90-plus scores in The Wine Enthusiast, and its 1992 Cabernet Sauvignon was listed as a Best Buy in the Wine Spectator.

Johnson stressed that no release is more than a 300-case production, as he tries to hand-craft each wine.

The Cabernet Sauvignon is medium to heavy bodied, concentrated with lingering finishes of American and French oak. The current 1996 vintage sells for \$42.

The estate 1996 Cabernet Franc is very approachable, with identifiable cabernet franc notes, and a long lingering finish. The wines are grown from Johnston's Organic Certified vineyard. It retails for \$39

The 1993 Merlot has lots of fruit extraction, a lot of varietal characteristics, and is readily indentifiable as

merlot. It retails for \$25.

Helena View Johnston Winery is open by appointment only on the weekend. Email helenaview@aol.com or call 707 942 4956.

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