

Pacific Star Winery: Location to a Fault

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Staff Wine Notes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

Pacific Star is the only California winery perched on bluffs above the ocean. Twelve miles north of Fort Bragg, the magnificent location of winemaker Sally's Ottoson's business and home on the Mendocino Coast is worth the trip. Besides its proximity to lapping waves, passing whales, amazing sunsets and variety of "signature blend" wines poured daily, there's another item of interest at Pacific Star.

A recently discovered earthquake fault line subterraneously transverses surf and cliff underneath the stone and redwood winery. Appropriately named in 2006, the Pacific Star fault connects eventually to the more famous San Andreas fault. It's a strike slip moving laterally and horizontally at the same time, says Ottoson. She named a multiple vintage Syrah, Charbono and Carignane "It's My Fault." She quips that this is the perfect wine to "keep under the bed when you want to say I'm sorry."

Pacific Star's founder and winemaker doggedly pursues her craft in the Scandinavian spirit she was born with. She's tall with striking good looks, long wavy locks and a fluorescent smile. She loves to fish as much as she loves to make wine.

"People say I'm a workaholic and I take it as a compliment," she says. She blames the accusation on the stubborn streak from her Finnish heritage. "I believe that working hard every day helps you build and it adds to my sense of community."

Born and raised in Fort Bragg, Ottoson spent 20 years in the Napa Valley wine country before coming back to the coast. In addition to her winery just south of the tiny village of Westport, a place she came as a kid to fish with her family, she opened a tasting room in downtown Fort Bragg.

I joined Ottoson one Friday afternoon on a bench in front of Pacific Star's small jam packed tasting room on Fort Bragg's Main Street. The weekend traffic rumbles by and people stop to say hello. Ottoson begins by reminiscing about being 10 years old and riding her first horse from Pudding Creek Road down to Main Street and then to the Pudding Creek beach every day. "I loved talking to the few tourists who came up here mainly to fish in those days," she says. It was her training for going into a business that would involve talking to a lot of different people.

She and her two sisters were raised among other Finnish families on Pudding Creek. Her mother, Marjorie Ottoson, still sleeps in the bedroom where she was born. "It was unusual for Scandinavians but we always had wine at the table," she says. In 1861, her dad's father came to Comptche with the Oppenlanders and homesteaded in what is now known as Surprise Valley. "Dad took me hunting and fishing and we all made jams and pickles and canned albacore," she says. "Everything was fresh."

When Ottoson was 18 she left the coast and went to Sonoma State. She lived in Rio Nido on the Russian River and started a book and art store. "I've always had an entrepreneurial passion," she says. She also bought dilapidated summer cottages and fixed them up for rentals to her fellow students to make ends meet. She realized she liked real estate and being her own boss. After a few years she sold the bookstore and purchased 40 acres on the ridge along the Sonoma-Napa county line.

Ottoson got a job in Napa Valley at the Wine Garden, now the location of Freemark Abbey tasting room. It was the first wine bar in California and Ottoson soon became its manager. She developed her winetasting skills from the huge well stocked wine cellar full of old French Burgundy and Chardonnay. "It was an incredible opportunity to taste wine that I could never buy, such as a 1959 Echezeaux (now worth \$1,500 a bottle and then sold for \$15)," she recalls.

At the same time Ottoson began making wine at home. "I started selling my wine and when it sold I made some more." Over the years she married and started her first brand, Star Hill, which she had for 15 years. Her son Jonah Goldenberg is now almost 20. He is getting ready to go to music school in New Zealand. "He is an incredible guitarist," she says with pride.

In 1988, on a visit to Fort Bragg to see her parents, Ottoson was ready to come back to the coast. "I melt at 62 degrees and have to put the air conditioner on in my car," she says wryly. When a Realtor showed her the 15-acre parcel just south of Westport, Ottoson envisioned its possibilities.

Over the past 20 years, she built the stone and redwood winery and her home above it. She also put in the traditional sauna from her heritage. She started sourcing her grapes in Mendocino County when she bought Charbono from Eddie Graziano's vineyard in Calpella. "Charbono is the basis of my business," she says. This old world grape planted by the Italian settlers was once one of California's most popular blending grapes. It had almost lost its popularity when Ottoson discovered it.

In the beginning, she had to twist arms to sell Charbono which she says, "represents everything I like about wine. It's not high in acid or tannin. It's not pretentious. It's a sit-down-and-drink-me wine." And she likes it because there are no preconceived notions about it. "Most people don't know what Charbono "should" taste like and it goes with everything." Last spring she was among 16 other producers at a Charbono tasting in New York City.

Now Ottoson makes around 15 wines. All are food wines reminiscent of what she drank growing up. She makes two whites: a Chardonnay from Pamela and Tom Ricetti's vineyards on the old Yokayo Ranch near Mendocino College and a Viognier from a variety of vineyards.

Pacific Star's red varietals include Pinot Noir, Merlot, Barbera, Zinfandel, and Petite Sirah in addition to Charbono. Red signature blends are a one-of-a-kind Charbera, which is half Charbono and half Barbera. In addition to It's My Fault she makes Dad's Daily Red in honor of her father Fred Ottoson, who is 86 years old. This is a blend of another previously popular varietal, Carignane plus Charbono, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel. The wines are affordably priced and ready to drink with a variety of foods.

Ottoson also makes one of the Coro Mendocino wines. Coro Mendocino is a high end red wine blend made by different Mendocino wineries to exacting specifications designed to create a rich and age-worthy wine showcasing the best of the best.

I visited Pacific Star winery on one of those rare warm wind free days when the ocean resembles a big pond. People were sitting at picnic tables or on the Adirondack chairs along the bluffs gazing at the ocean. Inside the tasting room a handcrafted polished slab of redwood serves as a bar straddling atop wine barrels. A half dozen tasters created a lively buzz as they learned about the blends and varietals they were being served.

And there is an eye catching swale of paint on the floor. It was meticulously painted by Robert Minuzzo, an artist from Napa who wanted to paint the fault. He spent a month dumping and swirling paint on the floor to replicate the faultline, which does run under the floor of the building.

"When the fault was discovered, it confirmed my feeling that there was something extremely unique about this place," says Ottoson, adding that she often looked over the edge of the cliffs and noticed some erosion and deep caves and patterns, which now she knows occurred because of the faultline.

At 58, Ottoson is not slowing down and she's pretty happy with what she has created. She keeps both tasting rooms open 11-5 daily and encourages picnickers to come to the winery. She still loves to fish and this little piece of paradise is where she likes to be. "I can walk out through the field and stand on a rock and catch my dinner anytime I want," she says, adding that, "I hate to leave this place and can't wait to get back."

TASTING NOTES: Pacific Star's 2005 Charbono is an inky rich, dusty rose, berry intense mouthful with aging potential. We enjoyed it with grilled turkey legs that were rubbed with a Middle Eastern spice blend, garlic and olive oil.

For more information on Pacific Star Winery contact the Mendocino County Winegrape and Wine Commission at www.truemendocinowine.com or the Mendocino County Promotional Alliance at goMendo.com or pacificstarwinery.com

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