



## **PEDIGREED PALATE**

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### **Is a great palate hereditary?**

Is it something that can be passed on from generation to generation, like unruly red hair in some Irish families?

Preposterous. We all know that a great palate is made up of more than DNA, but you can't help suspect that there's a genetic link of sorts when it comes to Margi Williams-Wierenga and her father, Burt Williams, both known for their pinot noir palate.

Williams-Wierenga, 40, is the co-owner and winemaker of Brogan Cellars, while Williams, 62, is the former co-owner and winemaker of Williams Selyem, both in Healdsburg.

Williams is known for producing boutique pinot noir and had a following as devoted as fans of cult cabs. As Williams-Wierenga puts it: "He'll always be king of pinot noir to me ... he has a vast knowledge of wine. His mind is like a library."

But it wasn't just Williams' winemaking skills Williams-Wierenga was inspired by. It was the fact that he turned a low-frills operation out of his basement into a sought-after winery.

It's here that you begin to debate nature vs. nurture, wondering which had more impact on Williams-Wierenga, an easygoing woman with a spirited laugh. As a teen-ager, she helped her father make wine in the basement of their family home and later followed suit. She set up her own low-frills, mom and pop winemaking operation in a carport and renovated garage five years ago.

Like many small winemakers who don't have a million dollars at their disposal, she began her startup with a lean \$75,000 budget, relying on \$10,000 from a credit card, cashed out 401Ks, friends' donations and her palate.

"Margi was born and raised around wine," Williams says. "She knows all about it. What it's supposed to look like and taste like and feel like. I think she's well qualified to make wine."

The judges of last year's Sonoma County Harvest Fair wine competition agree. They gave Brogan Cellars, 2001 Russian River Pinot Noir top honors as the sweepstakes red.

"You can make a professionally clean wine if you have a degree in enology, but it doesn't mean it's going to be an exceptional wine that gets everybody excited," Williams says. "To make a great wine takes dedication and intuitiveness ... it's not something that everyone can do."

## **A precise palate**

“My palate is what I rely on for my winemaking skills,” Williams-Wierenga says. “I have a good idea of what I want and my palate helps me achieve it.”

She says once she realized her palate's precision, trusting it was easy. “In blind tastings I would guess vintages of William Selyem wines. I could distinguish Burgundy from pinot noir and I could pinpoint vineyards.”

Williams-Wierenga doesn't have a degree in enology, but rather took some courses at the Santa Rosa Junior College and weekend courses at UC Davis. Her father, who relied on books, doesn't have a degree in enology either.

But the lack of a degree didn't intimidate either from producing pinot noir, widely known as the finicky grape.

“Pinot noir is a hard wine to make in California and a lot of people don't think it can rival Burgundy because there were a lot of bad examples in early '80s,” says Williams-Wierenga. “But it all changed in 1985 and 1986 when people realized you can make a good pinot.”

She says the temperamental grape just needs plenty of pampering. “It's a wine that needs hands-on, gentle manipulation,” she says. “You don't want to rough it up.” Of course, Williams-Wierenga says she babies all of her wine, particularly in a difficult vintage like 1998. “I was really in a quandary that year,” she says. “I didn't have a heating unit so I wrapped some of my barrels in electric blankets. I also rolled some out into the sun to warm up.”

Husband and co-owner Mike Wierenga, a contractor, makes what Williams-Wierenga calls “Fred Flintstone equipment” for their operation. For example, he rigged up old dairy vats for fermenters. “State-of-the-art equipment doesn't mean you'll make better wine. It just means you'll be more efficient and you won't hurt your back.”

## **On her own**

Williams-Wierenga worked with her father at Williams Selyem for more than a decade, and she decided to strike out on her own after her father and his partner decided to sell the winery, which changed hands in March of 1998.

While she knows her father would serve as a consultant, “When you're out on your own, you get stubborn. You want to do this on your own.”

As Williams puts it: “She doesn't need to come to me. She already knows everything. She doesn't want to make wine exactly like I did. She wants the end product to be a little different.”

While pinot is Williams-Wierenga's forte, she's branching out to explore other varietals like zinfandel, sauvignon blanc and semillon, among others.

Her brother, Fred Williams, a former winemaker at Seven Lions, is also known as much for making zinfandel as for making pinot noir, and he has a new winemaking venture in the works.

Both have fond memories of their childhood and their modest beginnings: making the first William Selyem wines in their basement bathtub.

When Brogan Cellars won top honors at the Harvest Fair last year, Phyllis Zouzounis, winemaker of Mazzocco, wasn't surprised. “Stranger things have happened. When everything comes together and it's right, it doesn't take 20 years of experience to make good wine. It takes a lot of hard work and heart.”

And, perhaps, an intuitive palate. “People say: ‘How do you do it?’” Williams-Wierenga says. “There's no recipe. It's intuition.”

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