

# *The Mariner*

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# A Not-So-Ancient Mariner

*Sonoma's Dry Creek Vineyard launches a new, upper-end red Bordeaux blend.*

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To improve wine quality, winemaker Bill Knuttel has led Dry Creek Vineyard (DCV) efforts over the last four years to refocus its wine portfolio by reducing the number of wine offerings. According to Knuttel, "We did this first with Zinfandel followed by Sauvignon Blanc and finally our new Bordeaux-style blend. In the not-too-distant past, we produced Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, reserve Merlot, single vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon and single vineyard Merlot. Additionally, we produced Endeavour Cabernet Sauvignon and a Meritage Bordeaux blend. We decided to completely retool because we had too many red wines."

DCV eliminated all red reserve and single vineyard wines. This allowed them to retain Endeavour, their big guy Cabernet, at the top of the heap with limited production of only 500 to 1,000 cases. It freed up superior Bordeaux red grape sources and according to Knuttel, "We have selected the best fruit available to create The Mariner, our new Bordeaux blend." Now, Knuttel takes the finest grapes, that formerly went into the reserve and single vineyard programs, to make The Mariner. This enormous effort was accomplished by taking DCV from 140,000-case production to 85,000 cases and gradually working back to 100,000 cases annually.

The Mariner is a blend of all five Bordeaux varieties. Exact composition may change slightly from vintage to vintage in order to produce the best wine possible each year. The Mariner 2004 contains 46 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, which offers structure, spice, black pepper and moderate tannin. Forty percent Merlot fills out the middle and adds notes of red plum, ripe cherry and a touch of burnt orange. The remaining 14 percent includes ripe Cabernet Franc that adds structure; Malbec, which contributes blueberry and dark plum while plumping

the mid-palate without adding tannin or color, and Petit Verdot marked by black cherry aromas along with needed acidity and loads of color and tannin. "We blend all five Bordeaux varieties," Knuttel continues, "to get depth, substance and flavor that is rich and balanced from front to back on the palate. We're not seeking the biggest and browniest wine we can make. Our Endeavour, which is almost 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, offers all of that and more."

Knuttel also realigned the barrel-aging regime for The Mariner. "I've eliminated all American oak because of a dill character that does not complement the wine's flavor profile. The Mariner is aged in 100 percent French oak in order to let the distinctive Dry Creek Valley typicity prevail. In the end we select the best barrels to complete the final blend. "This wine then, is composed of components from the best vineyards and the best barrels. "I'm a very traditional winemaker," says Knuttel, explaining his philosophy. "I prefer to make balanced wines without any hit-you-over-the-head characters. When I came to DCV in 2003, I knew there was a core of great vineyards here. The first part of my plan was to utilize the best of those vineyards by reducing the number of wines produced." By doing this, Knuttel was also able to reduce the grower profile by jettisoning the poorest vineyards.

Blending is where it's at in Knuttel's winemaking philosophy. "I want a good entry, a broad, supple mid-palate and a long, finesseful finish. I want them all present to complement one another." Retooling at DCV has given Knuttel a tremendous number of colors to work with on his winemaker's palette. With five Bordeaux varieties, grown in the best vineyards, plus the option to select the best French oak barrels, he can blend the best-of-the-best in each vintage. And he has!

## TASTING NOTES

- **DRY CREEK VINEYARD 2004 THE MARINER, \$40** is a real bargain for the quality. This wine shows breed and finesse from beginning to end. Floral and toasty aromas introduce black raspberry, dark cherry, brown spice, plum and integrated oak that unite to form a seamless whole—accessible now yet ageable.
- **DRY CREEK VINEYARD 2004 MERLOT, \$19**, boasts bright cherry and red plum aromas with a touch of smoke. The wine fills the palate with good length and fine finish.
- **DRY CREEK VINEYARD 2004 CABERNET SAUVIGNON, \$22**. Dusty aromas of exotic spice and dried flowers launch black cherry, raspberry, cardamom and pepper in a luscious version that brings distinctiveness to the portfolio.
- **DRY CREEK VINEYARD 2002 ENDEAVOUR, \$55**, highlights dark, brooding blackberry and ripe cherry in a wine with maximum character. A wine of power and elegance, produced since 1997.