

Wine: Mendocino 'queen' producing rare symphony grape

By Jessica Yadegaran

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Ms. Theodora Lee never intended to make wine. But, she did love farm life. As the granddaughter of Texas sharecroppers who raised cattle, Lee was driving a tractor, with gusto, by the age of 8.

Those farming roots clung. When she became a trial lawyer and partner at Littler Mendelson in San Francisco, she listened with longing as her colleagues discussed their pet vineyard projects. Lee knew she had to get her feet back on soil. Farming a vineyard sounded like the way.

In 2003, Lee purchased 5 acres in the Yorkville Highlands district of Anderson Valley. Located along Highway 128 in southern Mendocino County, the American Viticultural Area, or AVA, is a highly elevated, rugged wine-growing area. The hot days and cool nights provide an ideal climate for big, voluptuous reds. Petit sirah would be perfect.



Theodora Lees of Theopolis Vineyards makes small quantities of petit sirah and symphony in Mendocino. (Courtesy of Theodora Lee)

It was sheep land before Lee cut the trees out and personally planted it to vines. Some creative types who caught a glimpse of the silver-haired Lee atop a tractor dubbed her Theopatra, Queen of the Vineyard. It stuck.

"I guess they thought it fitting for my big personality," Lee says.

She had her first harvest in 2006 and sold the grapes to Mike Officer, who makes highly regarded reds at Carlisle in Sonoma. That year, Robert Parker gave the petit sirah 94 points, sealing the fate of Lee's grapes for subsequent harvests.

"I was thrilled to get that recognition for our first vintage," says Lee, who is 52 and lives in Oakland. Then, in 2010, the rains came, and she lost the majority of her harvest.

"It was a huge loss," Lee recalls. "I'm a single woman and don't make big law dollars, so that hurt during the recession."

She found a buyer the following year, but in 2012 another series of storms threatened her vineyard, and Lee was advised to pull her fruit early -- when it wasn't fully ripe. That's when she marched into a custom crush facility in Mendocino to strike a deal.

"I had to barter with two different winemakers to get my wine made," Lee says. In exchange for producing her wine, the winemakers took half the juice and released it under their own labels.

Today, Tom Rodrigues is the winemaker for Theopolis Vineyards, making not just the inky estate petit sirah (\$36), with its concentrated blueberry and black pepper notes, but also the aromatic, tropical 2013 Symphony (\$20).

Symphony is a hybrid of Muscat of Alexandria and grenache Gris that was developed in 1948 but not commercially released until 1982, by the late UC Davis viticulture professor Harold Olmo. It is a rare grape -- there are only 1,600 acres of symphony in California, but it is one of the fast-growing aromatic white grape plantings. Lee sources her symphony from a single vineyard, Maple Creek Winery, in Mendocino County.

"I wanted to offer something unique, something different," Lee says. Certified sommelier Tonya Pitts, wine director for One Market Restaurant in San Francisco, features both wines on her list. "My staff loved the wines as soon as we tasted them," says Pitts, who offers the symphony by the glass and the petit sirah by the bottle. "They are honest and true wines, and they have a story, just like Theodora."

For the 2014 vintage, Lee will offer two new wines: a rosé of petit sirah and an Anderson Valley pinot noir. She hopes to grow Theopolis Vineyards from its current 300 cases to 1,000 cases.

Lee says being a grape farmer has been a natural extension of her Texas heritage.

"However," she says, "If someone told me I would (someday) be bottling wine, I would have said, 'I want what he is drinking.' "

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theopolis vineyards

Who: Theodora Lee, aka Theo-patra Queen of the Vineyard What: 300 cases total of petit sirah and symphony, a hybrid of Muscat of Alexandria and grenache gris, from the southeastern Mendocino County

Where: 32674 Highway 128, Yorkville; theopolisvineyards.com. The wines are also available at One Market Restaurant in San Francisco.

-- J. Yadegaran, Staff

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