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An Interview with Launny Steffens of Vineyard 7 and 8
By Jim Clarke

Jim Clarke: How did you develop your interest in wine?

Launny Steffens: That's a long story. I started getting interested the late '60s, and it's grown over time. I think I've always been fascinated by the ability to grow wine, the way different climates and different grapes work together. Creating wine – the ability of nature and humans to work together – is fascinating and interesting to me.

JC: What prompted you to make the jump from wine drinking to winemaking?

LS: Some would question my sanity. Like lots of things, it's the result of what I'd call "coincident experiences." I was organizing high-end wine dinners for a charity in New York for four or five years; we used to serve absolutely exceptional wines and follow the dinner with a wine auction – they were very successful.

There was one vendor I bought a lot from because he always had access to high-quality, early vintages of high-end wine. We were talking and told him I would like to own a piece of a high-end Cabernet producer, in case he knew someone who was looking for investment and so on. He said, "Would you consider owning a vineyard on your own?" and I said, "Sure."

We looked around for two or three years and finally discovered the site in Spring Mountain that became Vineyard 7 and 8. A lot of it was a matter of being in the right place at the right time. The Spring Mountain District has exceptional grape-growing potential, and there are a lot of people making great wine there. There are relatively few places for really good Cabernet Sauvignon. Napa has them, especially certain areas. We bought property with that kind of potential. It helped that it had already been planted in the late '80s; we've made major efforts to make the vineyard an even better place to grow good grapes.

JC: What sorts of input do you get to offer when working with Christian LeSommer and Larry Langbehn?

LS: Christian sets the strategy and looks at blendings; he visits the vineyard four or five times a year. They keep him updated all year long, sending him samples from different

barrels and so forth. He's very involved. He and Larry have a terrific relationship; Christian sets the strategy and Larry is the day-in, day-out implementer of it.

We try to set our goals together. We knew that we wanted to make a really special wine; the question is: How do you define that? In our grape-growing and winemaking we try to take a little different tack. We aim for a lower alcohol content and a more traditional framework than some of the other wines out there. We think about how it goes with food: we don't want it to be overpowering. We knew we wanted something complex and drinkable over a long period of time. I think all that sets us apart from many of the better-known wineries in the Valley.

So I sit in when we're doing tastings of different blends, compare and contrast the wine with others, look at the structure...

JC: What balance do you aim to strike between early drinkability and ageability?

LS: We hope for the wine to last a long time, but also that you won't have to wait forever to enjoy it. We're early in the process, so time will tell.

JC: You already make a Chardonnay; do you have any interest in taking on Burgundy's red grape, Pinot Noir?

LS: We haven't had any interest in doing that. We've tried some Merlot, Malbec, and Cabernet Franc – other grapes that might go into a traditional blend – but we haven't gotten anything we're really happy with. Right now it's 100% Cabernet, but we could possibly go for something more blended if we saw some added value there. But Pinot is not in the cards.

Our newest thing actually starts on the 1st of the year: we've built our own winery. The question will be: does it add value? The people who have helped us to date have done a nice job, but they're 14-15 miles away from the vineyard. So there's transportation, and the inability to do things in small lots. Now we'll be able to do unlimited amounts of tests, assessments of ripeness, etc., and the grapes travel a couple hundred yards to be crushed at most.

We ought to gain a leg up with the new winery, making sure we only use the best of what we could produce. Even though it's a small site, different parts of the vineyard can ripen a week to ten days later than another section. So now we'll be able to pick one one day and the other a week later; we couldn't do that before. And we can customize our process; 2006 should be the first year for another step up in quality; that's the theory behind the investment. Whether the small things make a difference is the question; I believe they must in something very special. Once they reach a decent size, most producers go in-house. It's not the cost – in-house winemaking costs more – it's being able to do your own thing in your own time.