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INSPIRATION FOR A LIFE WELL LIVED, FROM FRONTGATE

Life Well Lived: Freeman Vineyard & Winery

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A weekend in wine country is just as dreamy as it sounds. After a couple days in West Sonoma County, we didn't just understand how it inspired our designers' fall collection – we wanted to move in. Follow along on our adventure ...

While in Sebastopol, one of the area's many small cities with lots of charm, we were lucky enough to sit down with locals Ken and Akiko Freeman to talk about their path to winemaking. The husband-wife team realized their shared dream with the founding of Freeman Vineyard & Winery in 2001. Together, they've led the way in the small batch, artisanal production of cool-climate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

“I hope every one of our visitors can open a bottle when they get home and relive the memories made here in Sonoma.”

FG: When did you start dreaming about opening a winery?

KF: I had my first trip to Napa in 1987, and I knew I wanted to get into this one day – everybody was growing grapes, making wine, pairing it with great food and having a great time. We would take all our holidays to different wineries and meet the owners ... so we were kind of informed novices. And then we moved back to San Francisco in 1997, and some local sommeliers introduced us to wines from this area. That turned us on to the Russian River, Sonoma Coast. This area with the fogginess, the change of temperature on a daily basis, the soils, the elevation, the closeness to the coast – grows distinctive grapes that are perfect for making Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. It's one of the best areas in the world outside of Burgundy, France. Some would say the best.

AF: Sometimes it's better than Burgundy. In the summertime when the grapes are growing, we don't have much rain. In Burgundy, it's hit or miss.

KF: We don't have the variability that they have. They have great years and then terrible years. We have very good and great years.

FG: Tell us a little about the early days getting the winery off the ground.

KF: We were informed novices so we knew a couple things. We knew that grapes were 80% of the equation—great grapes. And so we didn't have the money or the expertise to grow our own grapes, but we looked at 300 vineyards and ended up working with 10–15 of them. We still contract about 25% of our grapes. Being an early mover was great; there's a limited amount of land out here ... there's only so many grapes. We had a winemaker for 7 years, and Akiko fell in love with winemaking working with him. She was going to get her masters

in Viticulture, and he let her know that she could apprentice here with him.

AF: He said, look you're not applying for a job at your own winery. All you need is to learn how to do it.

KF: And then about 7 years ago he said, "you know enough, I'll be a consultant." And so Akiko took over.



A visit to Ken and Akiko Freeman's winery includes a tour of the only wine cave in the region.



FG: What's the magic to making wine?

AF: To grow the best fruit. It's the same with cooking—if you don't start with good ingredients, it's hard to make a good end product. And when to pick – depending on the wine-making style, some people pick when the sugar is low and the acidity is high. The riper you pick, the more alcohol and the less acidity.

KF: We pick at night so the grapes come in at 7 am cold, and then it takes 20 or 30 minutes to hand sort each half ton. Then it goes into dimpled stainless steel tanks that are refrigerated, so we're inhibiting the fermentation process and hand-macerating these tanks, twice a day. Akiko's up there doing that. It's a huge amount of work. And then after about a 10-day period called cold-soaking, we're exploring flavor, color, texture. We turn off the refrigeration, and the natural yeast eats the sugar and it turns into wine. You can only do it like this if you're really small and focused on quality. As an artisan producer, Akiko's making 45 of these fermentations on an individual basis.

FG: What makes Freeman a unique winery?

KF: We're the only Japanese female winemaker and are fortunate in that we have estate vineyards that we planted. That kind of separates 80% of the folks out there. We have an estate vineyard on the Sonoma Coast and then also in the Russian River Valley.

AF: And small family-owned, that's less and less common.

KF: I think that right from the get-go we made a style of wine that was a little different. It's more food-friendly. So, we zigged when everybody zagged. We use less oak, we pick earlier, we make a more elegant wine. At the time that was not in favor, but it's what we like to drink. And that's where we got support from The French Laundry and Jean-Georges – all these great restaurants all over the country. Because the chefs love it *and* the sommeliers love it – because it pairs well with the food. And now the pendulum has kind of swung, where now these wines are in favor.







Before your tasting, Ken and Akiko recommend stopping at Freestone Artisan Cheese for snacks. After your tour, they have plenty of spots to open a bottle and enjoy the view.

FG: What is your favorite part of welcoming people here to the winery?

KF: Everybody's happy!

AF: It's sharing our lifestyle. We think we live in a paradise, so sharing this paradise is very exciting.

KF: It's an amazing place to live.

AF: And it's not just wines. All kinds of fruits and vegetable are grown here. Everything we eat is fresh.

KF: We love sharing how much passion, how handcrafted, how artisan and farming orientated we are. And when people come out, they're kind of hooked. People love the intimacy. You don't get this at a lot of wineries. I hope every one of our visitors can open a bottle when they get home and relive the memories made here in Sonoma.

AF: And my team, my small team, everybody gets involved with the harvest. So, whoever hosts the guests, if it's not Ken or I, everybody touches grapes and is passionate about the process and sharing it.







FG: What does an evening entertaining your friends and family look like?

KF: We're laidback; we tell people wear jeans. We'll host our friends here [at the winery], and then walk up the path to the house. It's kind of West County casual. Let the beautiful surroundings and nature speak for itself. And that ties back to our grape growing philosophy that 90% of it's in the vineyard. It's about mother nature, and we do as little as possible. We're kind of non-interventionists.

AF: All our friends come from the city, and next thing we know they are looking for a place.

FG: What does a life well lived mean to you?

AF: Getting with nature and eating the food that comes from right here. Drinking good wine.

KF: Having a great partner or spouse to share it with. Having worked hard to be able to create this and then being able to enjoy it and share it.

AF: Sharing it with people and seeing their reaction. It's very rewarding.

For a limited time, enjoy complimentary ground shipping on your purchase of 3+ bottles of wine when you use code FRONTGATE.

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