

Taming Howell Mountain

"Precision viticulture" is the secret to La Jota Vineyard's success.

ELEANOR AND RAY HEALD

La Jota, Lokoya and Cardinale, all Jackson Family wines, are made by Chris Carpenter, who hasn't always been a California boy. He speaks with a deep baritone Midwest accent, indicative of his Chicago roots. In 1995, he arrived in California armed with a degree in biology and an MBA from the University of Illinois, but with a goal to make wine. By 1998, he had earned a Masters Degree in Viticulture and Enology from the University of California Davis.

Following an internship at Antinori in Italy's Tuscany region, where Carpenter did plant research to help determine which new varieties Antinori would plant, he returned to California where he passed his résumé to Marco DiGiulio, who was then making wines at Lokoya. "After being hired, I soon realized I had the opportunity to help DiGiulio make Lokoya wines, but also assist Charles Thomas to make Cardinale wines. I was fortunate to have two great winemaking mentors. U.C. Davis teaches the science, but not the craft of winemaking, so having great mentors is crucial. They have helped me formulate my winemaking skills. I've walked the vineyards with both DiGiulio and Thomas who have helped me interpret the fruit. I was with them for over three years before they moved on to other industry positions and I inherited their winemaking responsibilities." By then, Carpenter realized that making wine was all about farming.

Of the three wineries now under his charge, his greatest challenge may be La Jota, produced from Howell Mountain



Chris Carpenter, La Jota Winemaker

vineyards. La Jota wines are full, rich and intense without the astringent tannins so frequently present in other mountain-grown wines. He explains how he tames the often wild tendencies of Howell Mountain vineyards. Carpenter believes that La Jota's Howell Mountain vineyard, in the Napa Valley AVA, is closest in character to Bordeaux in terms of climate and flavor concentration. "Howell Mountain has a cool climate with thin volcanic and red iron-like clay soils. There is a tremendous amount of biomass in the soils that has accumulated over centuries. Put this all together and when you taste the wine you realize that you have an appellation that is really something special."

LA JOTA'S UNIQUENESS

La Jota Vineyard is very cool and fog affected, extending hangtime into November when the last grapes are harvested. "Concentration of flavors we get from our mountain vineyards," Carpenter emphasizes, "is much greater than valley floor sites because of the diurnal temperature effect. There is an intensity to mountain fruit that you don't get from the valley floor wines, which can be round, rich and fruit forward. Mountain-grown fruit gives all of that plus structure, acidity and ageability." He further explains that La Jota Vineyard, with its 28 planted acres, was started in 1899, then purchased by William Smith who restored it in the early 1970s, following years of neglect during Prohibition. Currently, La Jota grows Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and a small fraction of Petit Verdot, producing about 3,000 cases annually.

Photo courtesy of Kendall-Jackson

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"I'm fortunate to work for the Jackson Family who has fantastic vineyards and the resources that allow me to make good choices and focus on wine quality." He explains that parts of La Jota have been replanted using "precision viticulture," a technique adopted by Jess Jackson, which requires that a vineyard be defined by its soils, climate, aspect and history to help the grower make planting decisions about variety, rootstock and clone. "At La Jota, we dug 30 soil pits in a five-acre parcel to understand soil composition and drainage. We've tracked the sun's path on the vine rows and the angle of light on the vines. We've retrained some of the vines on a better trellis system to take advantage of what we learned."

Carpenter admits that La Jota vineyards are the source of his success. He and his vineyard manager Mariano Navarro work together to maintain vine health which is so important in a climate that puts the fruit just on the border of getting ripe. "It takes a lot of precision viticulture to do this. Fortunately, we have had a series of Indian summers that help stretch the growing season and complete the ripening process. It's also important to provide the vine with enough water near harvest to avoid early leaf aging — without leaves there is no further ripening."

PRECISION VITICULTURE IMPACTS WINEMAKING

When Carpenter evaluates a new vineyard, he uses the technique of precision viticulture, but admits that he really won't know that vineyard until he has evaluated fruit over two or three harvests. "In the winery, we've added a sorting system that allows us to examine individual grape clusters, followed by destemming every berry. This is a great tool since I tend to leave fruit hang longer because the vine can carry it and continue to ripen the grapes. I've adjusted the blend of French coopers for barrel aging to more reflect my wine style and give me more flexibility."

To manage tannins in an effort to avoid dry, bitter, astringent palate perceptions, Carpenter does aerative pumpovers and judges the structure by tasting every day. To develop a velvety tannin structure, he barrel ages La Jota Cabernet Sauvignon in 85 percent new French oak barrels for 22 to 24 months. Tasting La Jota wines demonstrates that Carpenter has mastered the art of growing mountain fruit and molding it into a big, structured red wine that tastes good when young with the potential for long cellar aging.

TASTING LA JOTA VINEYARD HOWELL MOUNTAIN ESTATE WINES

- **MERLOT 2005, \$60** (140 cases), showcases black cherry and black raspberry fruit aromas and a rich, round palate impression hallmarked by a layered complexity with great structure.
- **CABERNET FRANC 2005, \$60** (150 cases), boasts aromas and mirrored flavors of blueberry, black cherry and raspberry with a solid, velvety, elegant structure and finishing notes of roast coffee.
- **CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2005, \$60** (1,296 cases), is 88% Cabernet Sauvignon with small amounts of Merlot and Petit Verdot. It's rich, structured with mineral notes, deep, dark cherry, blackberry accents and generous with coffee and fine tobacco notes. This wine screams Howell Mountain with pleasant earthiness and palate weight. Cellar worthy yet approachable now when accompanied by a rare, grilled steak.
- **HERITAGE RELEASE 2005, \$90** (382 cases): best blocks, best barrels 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. A big boy with deep, rich color and an attractive combination of red and black fruits, cherry, blackberry, currants and smooth, integrated tannins. Outstanding. ☞