

SNOWDEN VINEYARDS

A Napa family finesses Cabernet, with Burgundy in mind
San Francisco Chronicle, by Jon Bonné
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At the top of a hill in Rutherford, at the end of a private road, three gates converge in a wood.

To the right, the dramatic property of Kathryn and Craig Hall, billionaire owners of Hall Winery. Straight ahead, an imposing gate marks the entrance of Sloan, one of the take-no-prisoners Cabernet stars of the early 2000s, now owned by Hong Kong investors.

To my left, a simple chain-link fence and rising dirt road, at the end of which I find Scott and Randy Snowden, plus Scott's daughter, Diana Snowden Seysses.

The three are warming themselves on a cold February morning next to a pickup with a bumper sticker that reads "iFish."

"Welcome to Napa Valley the way it used to exist," Scott tells me. "We're probably antediluvian here."

Not entirely. The Snowden name is a familiar one in Napa, if not necessarily for wine — although it should be, and increasingly it is. Scott was a longtime presiding judge in Napa County, working in the courts from 1980 to 2005. (He now works as an arbitrator.) Randy, his brother, was the county's health and human services director until 2013.

Seysses, the family's winemaker, has a slightly more global view. While she grew up here, tasting Cabernet grapes on the Snowden ranch, today she spends much of her time in Burgundy's Morey-Saint-Denis. There, she works with her husband, Jeremy Seysses, and his father, Jacques, making the wines at the family's property, Domaine Dujac.

unlike St. Helena, the major Burgundy wine town of Nuits-Saint-Georges is still a sleepy little village largely untouched by fame.

The Dujac wines are known for their particular finesse. So, increasingly, are the Snowden Cabernets.

I'd like to think, at the risk of drawing one of those comparisons, that the Snowden wines echo Seysses' contemplative, occasionally shy and exacting personality. (After my visit, she calls, insistent on clarifying some particularly nuanced details about winemaking.) More practically, they are the result of her handling sturdy Cabernet grapes with the light touch required in Burgundy. The Snowden wines can be big — at 15 percent, they'll chase away alcohol hawks — but they do not come across that way. They reveal layers of perfumed fruit and savory, often herbal, flavors. What could be stiff tannins from the Rutherford hillside speak in a whisper. I always ascribe this to Seysses being so conversant with the subtleties of Burgundy.

"I have colleagues who say, you have to beat up Cabernet," she tells me later. "And I don't like the idea of beating up my fruit. You know, do unto others."

Yet her Burgundy ties explain only half the story, which is why I'm here. The Snowdens have built what you might call the right sort of legacy, a rare and modest one by today's Napa standards. ("We have the land," Randy tells me. "Beyond that we don't come into this with personal fortunes.")

Scott and Randy, who both grew up working summer jobs for wineries like Inglenook and Heitz Cellar, still reside in a Napa that's a shade or two into the past. In their respective



I've come to get a better sense of how Seysses balances these two divergent worlds. She has thrived as a winemaker in some tony places — although she points out that

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jobs, they saw more of the reality of the valley than most of their neighbors, which includes not just the Halls but also San Francisco attorney Robert Lief and George Biel, founder of the Houston's restaurant chain.

The brothers enjoy the benefit of their parents' foresight in buying a fine piece of land: 160 acres, with 23 currently in vineyard, a sweet spot on a hilltop between the Napa River and Lake Hennessey watersheds.

Their parents bought this ranch in 1955, when it was mostly planted to apricots and prunes, for \$87 an acre. (Going rates in Napa are now somewhere north of \$200,000.) With a boundary line around 600 feet, it sits just above the St. Helena and Rutherford appellations.

The vineyard's pedigree is evident, not just because of neighbors like Sloan but also nearby vines belonging to Heitz and Joseph Phelps just to the north. Prior to 1993, when the family began making its own wine, grapes were sold to Warren Winiarski at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, then to wineries like Caymus and Silver Oak.

And grapes have been on the property for a long time — since 1878, when it was first planted by the colorfully named Levi Philander Davis. As many as 60 acres once stood in vineyard, but when the Snowdens acquired it, barely 6 acres were left.

They have slowly replanted several parcels, including Palomino Hill (named for the white grape once grown there), Lost Orchard (prior use self-evident), and the east-facing Los Ricos, source of a particularly dusty and beefy Cabernet. All told, it's enough to make about 3,000 cases of estate wine.

Then comes the influence of Seysses, who, as Randy puts it, is "a crusader for healthy terroir." She lobbied the family for eight years to absorb the extra expense and eliminate the use of the herbicide Roundup, and now is pushing toward fully organic practices. ("My family is very, very, very generous with me," she says.)

After several challenging years in the early 2000s, including 2003, when the spoiling *brettanomyces* yeast caused the entire vintage to be declassified, the family tapped Seysses to make the wines in 2005, with a hand from consultant David Ramey. By then, Seysses had trained at UC Davis, worked at Robert Mondavi Winery — where she met Jeremy — and Araujo, and apprenticed in Bordeaux and Burgundy.

Seysses' Napa work occupies just a few weeks each year, which further heightens the differences between her two

homes. If Burgundian cellar work is inefficient almost by design, an extension of old-time farming, Napa is all efficiency and forklifts.

That gives Seysses an opening to stand slightly afield from Napa's dominant aesthetics. The Snowdens, always mindful of what Napa once was, are keen to provide, at the least, an alternative.



"I feel like I shape the world a bit in the wines I make," Seysses tells me. "I'm not going to make a crowd-pleaser. I want to make something else. I want wines that are alive and changing."

I wrap up my visit with a look at the brothers' lower block, a patch of what was Petite Sirah and is now Cabernet, just above the Heitz property. Next to it

lie the remains of their old summer home, now a leaning pile of rubble. Lacking a proper foundation, it finally collapsed a few years ago.

"We kind of don't want to take it down," Scott says. "We want to leave it as an artifact."

"Like Rome," his daughter replies.

From the Notebook

Cabernet is the thing at Snowden Vineyards, although they make a bit of Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc. Seysses' cellar work is a study in minimalism: indigenous yeasts, no acid or enzyme additions, no tinkering with alcohol levels.

Snowden's mainstay is The Ranch, blended from their various parcels, and their 2013 The Ranch (\$50, 14.9% alcohol) is a case study in the suppleness of their tannins, matched by olive brine, bright mineral and a dusty aspect to the plum fruit.

They've also shifted from their Reserve bottling toward an effort to showcase individual blocks of the property, a la Diamond Creek. The Brothers parcel, sitting astride two watersheds and back in production since 2009, is meant to be their benchmark. The forthcoming 2013 Brothers (\$80, 15%) is still young, oak-tinged and forceful in its flavors. I'm admittedly partial to their Ricos block, planted all to clone 337. The 2013 Ricos (\$80, 15%) is both beefier and more herbal than its counterparts, with a brightness to the tannins. It's an exceptional Napa specimen.

