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Lifestyle

Sips: A childhood off the beaten path leads to inspired winemaking

By **Ellen Bhang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 28, 2017

When you ask Faith Armstrong Foster how she became a winemaker, she'll tell you about a childhood that included rowing herself to school in the family's boat.

The proprietor and winemaker of Onward Wines grew up on an island in British Columbia's Inside Passage. "My parents moved there from California two years before I was born," she shares. "We grew our own food, and lived off the grid." Every weekday, she and her siblings climbed into a dinghy, named the Onward, and rowed themselves to a one-room schoolhouse on a neighboring island. "My brothers felt they should 'drive,' but my sisters and I didn't agree," she recalls. She insisted on her turn at the oars. That independent spirit influences how she makes wine today.

After leaving a marketing job in the boating industry, she took a wine sales position in California, where she also experienced the production side of the business. She went on to earn a degree in viticulture and enology from University of California, Davis, then became assistant winemaker at a Napa winery. Over time, she found herself drawn to a style of wine that's lower in alcohol. "I always gravitated toward picking earlier, but I was told, 'It's not what we do here,'" she says, recalling feedback from colleagues. She vowed to do things differently when she had her own place, convinced that vineyards express unique characteristics at earlier stages of ripeness.

Fast forward to the present, and Armstrong Foster — now married to winemaker Sean Foster and raising four children — has her own operation in Sonoma. Her portfolio includes pinot noir and carignane, sourced from individual vineyards cultivated by trusted growers. She also makes a pétillant naturel — a "pét-nat" — from malvasia bianca. The lovely white gets its bubbles from one continuous fermentation that starts in a tank and finishes in the bottle. The fine yeast sediment is not disgorged, so there's a hint of cloudiness in the finished product.

How she came to make that wine reflects her can-do attitude. A grower told her about a ranch in the Suisun Valley, east of Napa, and she went looking for it. "Tasting the grapes, I was head over heels," she enthuses. She struck a deal with the owners. Two days later, she was picking that fruit — even though malvasia or pét-nat wasn't part of any master plan. "I've realized that I get excited, and that's enough to drive me to figure things out."

The winemaker has hit on a winning formula. Enticing aromatics suggest rose petals and lemon curd. The fully dry palate, with gentle, fine-streaming effervescence, offers floral notes and lemon spritz, anchored by lime skin and saline.

While she draws on her formal training to monitor things like wine chemistry, life experiences — both past and present — play a vital role. Managing her wines, she says, is like raising her children. It's an act of letting go.

"I'm not a helicopter parent," she insists. "I say, 'Let's see what you will become.'"

ONWARD + FARMSTRONG



MEGAN REEVES

Faith Armstrong Foster of Onward Wines.



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