

Niki's Rosé Debuts at Wente Vineyards

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Growing up in an American wine family that is now in its fifth generation of living on and cultivating the same land makes you something of a special breed. While children born to the vine do not always set fruit in this grape-focused business, for Niki Wente, fifth generation grapegrower, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion by the time she hit her early teens. She literally grew up in the vineyards, following her Dad, Phil, as he went about his daily tasks.

"I knew I wanted to be in the family business around the age of 13," says Niki. "I always enjoyed being outdoors as a young girl with loads of energy so when I would watch my dad going to work out in the vineyards it was pretty clear to me that I wanted to follow in his footsteps. Growing up in the vineyard definitely played a big role in my decision as well; it really feels like home when I am out there and how cool is it to work somewhere that you feel at home."

She says her Dad, Phil, taught her a lot about respect and integrity. "He always tells me to keep eyes and ears open because we learn something every day and great ideas can come from anywhere. I get new advice from him weekly, sometimes daily. I could write a book on all the things he has taught me about life, farming and happiness."

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Fifth generation Winegrower and Viticulturist Niki Wente

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When Niki graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in 2014, where she studied viticulture, she hadn't really thought about winemaking until after she finished college and had been in the workforce working for a couple years. "I considered going back to school to study enology, but shortly after, I received a job offer and put the idea to rest. I am so happy in the vineyard I can't imagine a career that would be more fulfilling for me," she says. That job was working at Wente Vineyards, where she had previously interned for three summers, also working for a brief time at Hunneus Vintners in Napa Valley.



These days, Niki manages all the buying and selling of grapes, as well as all winegrower relations for Wente Vineyards, where she works with Senior Viticulture Manager, Keith Roberts. With vineyards in Livermore, as well as Arroyo Seco, she keeps pretty busy with her day job, but she truly does enjoy turning those grapes into something she can share with others.

This week, Niki officially released her first commercial rosé, the 2018 Niki's Pinot Noir Rosé (SRP \$30), just in time for Valentine's Day. It's a collaborative effort between Niki and her cousin, Karl, Wente Vineyards' Chief Operating Officer and Winemaker. The result, according to the company, is a crisp, pure rosé with notes of cantaloupe, rhubarb, white strawberry and mandarin zest, while maintaining a sophisticated, almost rose quartz-like acidity. They suggest this as an ideal way to elevate weekend brunch. It would also be perfect with a slice of Manchego cheese. The packaging is sleek, with a tapered bottle and a bright, fresh label that shows off the perfect color of the wine inside.

We wondered what inspired Niki to make a rosé, and if she had considered other varietals besides pinot. "For the last couple of years, I have been making a little wine with left over Sauvignon Blanc from Arroyo Seco. It was a great learning experience and something I really enjoyed doing. So, with pinot noir being my favorite grape, I began to work with my cousin Karl on reimagining our pinot noir rosé. I'm really excited about the new packaging. Our guests have also shared a lot of excitement around it as well." For Niki, color was extremely important. The pale pink hue of this wine reflects her visual and subsequent flavor aesthetic. Niki's uncle, Eric Wente, has a namesake Chardonnay (Eric's Chardonnay) that was crafted to reflect his love of lean, mineral-driven Chablis – this rosé is literally the next generation of that flavor profile.

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Truly, the color is just exquisite. We wondered what inspired her to shoot for that particular hue of medium light pink peach chiffon with a hint of salmon. Says Niki, "The color was super important to me. I love rosés with a light peach hue, so one of our winemakers, Andy Lynch, and I worked together to get it to the perfect shade. We had multiple different picks and lots to blend with. We started by eliminating tanks that didn't have our desired aromatics or flavor profile, then blended the lots that we liked in order to get the right color. I love Flowers rosé and Provence-style rosés."

Niki and Andy used eight different clones of pinot noir, picked between 21 and 24 Brix, from different blocks at different times, sometimes on the same day, but more often than not, on different days. The method use was mostly saignée, which minimizes skin contact and helps ensure the light, bright color they were seeking.

We asked Niki if her peers drink rosé: "All my friends drink wine and they all love rosé, even the men. I think that the industry has done a great job in changing the perception that pink wine is for girls only: it's totally not. If friends aren't drinking wine, they are drinking craft beer. There are so many great breweries in Livermore."

We also wondered if her Uncle Eric's Chablis-style of Chardonnay was popular with her peers, or if they preferred a more oak-influenced style? It's pretty split, says Niki. "Some of my friends love the big buttery chardonnays and some prefer the unoaked style. I personally love all chardonnay."

We wondered if she was considering any more "Niki-driven" wines, and if so, what they might be. Said Niki, "I think this will be the only wine I produce on a semi-big scale (2,000 cases). I don't want to pull too much of my time away from my focus on the vineyards. I enjoy making some small projects, like the Sauvignon Blanc, just for fun."

Says Niki, "I absolutely love being able to continue this legacy and maintaining quality in our vineyards. Sustainability in the vineyard has always been our practice. We wouldn't still be here after 136 years otherwise. Being able to farm the land I love and make a beautiful wine from the grapes is such a meaningful experience and I'm so excited to share it."