

{ winery spotlight }

# Prescience and Progress at Davis Bynum

THE LEGENDARY WINERY THAT PUT THE RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY ON THE MAP  
FURTHERS ITS QUALITY-DRIVEN LEGACY *by Stacy Briscoe*

**ONCE UPON A TIME**, Napa was a place where a humble wine lover could buy grapes from a guy off the side of the road and try their own hand at winemaking. That Davis Bynum happened upon Robert Mondavi unloading Petite Sirah from the back of a truck in 1951 was a stroke of luck that no one could have foretold, marking the beginning of a Pinot Noir—producing legacy. Bynum became immersed in the then-emerging Northern California wine boom, kicking up tractor dust with the likes of Louis Martini, the Wentes, Lee Stewart, and other iconic industry names.

It wasn't until 1972 that Bynum was introduced to Joe Rochioli Jr., who "had just planted his Pinot Noir block in 1968; it was a tiny little block that his dad didn't want him to farm," recounts Greg Morthole, winemaker at Bynum's eponymous winery. "He was dropping fruit on the ground, halving the quantity because it upped the quality—he was the only one doing that." At the time, Rochioli Jr. was fetching \$150 per ton for his grapes, selling to folks who were blending them to

produce bulk wine. But Bynum recognized quality when he tasted it and offered him \$350, more than double the asking price. "I asked him what it was about that Pinot Noir, what turned him on," Morthole adds. "And he said, 'It just reminds me of Burgundy.' He just loved the bright red fruit, the acid balance and velvety tannins." The deal was sealed on a handshake and good faith.

The label on Bynum's first bottling, the 1973 vintage, read, "These grapes come from Joe Rochioli Jr.'s fruit on Westside Road in the Russian River Valley," says Morthole, "and this predated the Russian River Valley AVA being created ten years later in 1983. He called it out. From that moment on, he just started making single-vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot. People were drawn to that."

And they still are. Morthole, who assumed his winemaking role in 2010, spent several years under the founder's tutelage before Bynum died in 2017; he seeks to carry on Bynum's legacy while also contributing his own expertise, continuing to evolve the winery's practices to suit



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVIS BYNUM

*Greg Morthole has served as winemaker at Davis Bynum since 2010.*

the modern market even as it adapts to changing climatic conditions.

Davis Bynum's current portfolio includes four single-vineyard Pinot Noirs

*A bird's-eye view of Davis Bynum's Russian River Valley estate.*



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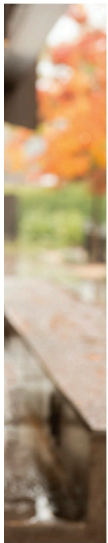


that Morthole produces with a hands-off approach, letting the fruit dictate how and when he intervenes. “[I’m] knitting together what Mother Nature gives us and what I’m sensing and then using that to make my winemaking decisions,” says Morthole. “Analytically, pH is a real marker for me, monitoring it at harvest and picking early enough to make sure it’s not above 3.65. It helps with that fresher mouthfeel, and that’s what keeps people coming back.” He’s also meticulous when it comes to

to be around 22–23 Brix. “It means the wines have natural acid and freshness, and I only acidify if I need to in really warm vintages,” he says. The jewel in the Davis Bynum Chardonnay crown is the Spring Mountain selection of Chardonnay. “[It’s] one we’re lucky enough to have at our River West Vineyard,” located on the winery’s Russian River Valley estate. “We’ve never had any other source of this selection of Chardonnay in my 19 years,” he adds. “I didn’t realize that it

some native ferment on Pinot and Chardonnay but have walked away from doing native ferment with the Sauvignon Blanc because it wasn’t showing much tropical fruit,” he says. “After doing all that work leafing the canopies, using cultured yeasts rewards you with what you’ve been tasting in the vineyard.”

The quality of Davis Bynum’s wines is also driven by its sustainability-related efforts. Its estate vineyards have achieved California Certified Sustainable Winegrow-



Chardonnay on the vine in the River West Vineyard. ▶



tannin management—an area in which, he says, he has some wiggle room to play: “With our Pinot Noir, there’s a delicacy of the skins that, I think, I can push extraction a bit further,” he adds. “Philosophically I’ve changed over the years: After a period of shorter fermentations, I’ve doubled the time on skins more recently.” And his extended barrel-aging regimen, averaging about 14 months in oak versus the previous practice of ten months—another shift Morthole has brought to the program—enables the wines’ structural components to come together and yield concentrated but finessed expressions that are enjoyable now yet can certainly age gracefully for years to come.

White wines, too, are an important part of the portfolio. “I’ve never been ‘ABC,’” jokes Morthole. “I guess I’m ‘ALC’—I’ve always loved Chardonnay.” Since he started his tenure, he’s been picking earlier and earlier, finding the sweet spot for harvesting Chardonnay

was so uncommon around here.” What makes this specific clone so unique is, as Morthole describes, its exotic expression of tropical fruit and floral notes. “It also brings richness to the mouthfeel with a pleasantly oily texture,” he continues. “It feels luxurious.”

Sauvignon Blanc has always represented a small percentage of the portfolio, and with the recent acquisition of River West Vineyard, the team has opted to plant more of the variety. The character of the Sauvignon Blanc is developed in the field. Morthole and his vineyard team found that adding T-arms to spread the canopy and defolating the vigorous green material early in the season aid in increasing airflow and decreasing disease pressure. The resulting dappled-light effect also allows for an ideal level of sun exposure that Morthole says helps drive the tropical fruit precursors he wants in his wines. In the cellar, “I continue to do

ing certification, and while they’re not certified regenerative, vineyard manager Alli Dericco points out that several regenerative practices are in place, including low- and no-till regimens and the utilization of diverse cover crops to prevent erosion, build soil organic matter, and attract beneficial insects and pollinators. Hedgerows, raptor perches, and bird and owl boxes attract beneficial predators, while weather stations, soil probes, and leaf porometers along with drought-tolerant rootstocks enable drip irrigation to be used on an as-needed basis. “The goal,” says Dericco, “is to focus on creating and maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem by aligning vineyard practices and natural processes to benefit both the environment and agricultural productivity. This approach ensures high-quality grapes while improving environmental resilience”—which guarantees in turn Davis Bynum’s continued success for decades to come. ❧