

Cool Vintages

By *Virginie Boone*

Kimberly Pfendler grew up in a small town in Minnesota, the daughter of a firefighter and a nurse. The harsh winters kept her inside, where she fell in love with the movies. That eventually led her to UCLA's School of Theatre, Film and Television, and positions at International Creative Management, Warner Brothers and MGM Studios. She left Hollywood behind in 2004 to marry Peter Pfendler, a former Air Force pilot and airline executive who had moved to a 1,000-acre Sonoma Mountain cattle ranch east of Petaluma where he also planted grapes, mostly bordeaux varietals, which struggled at times to ripen in the cool climate. Peter Pfendler died in 2007 at the age of 63. Having earned degrees from UCLA and Harvard Law School, he had made his money founding Polaris Aircraft Leasing Corp. in San Francisco in the 1970s, at the time the world's largest commercial aircraft leasing company. He sold it to General Electric Credit Corp. in 1989, a few years after moving to Sonoma County.

His time here was not without its controversies. As a Press Democrat obituary read, Pfendler was scorned by some for his 10-year battle against opening Lafferty Ranch near Petaluma to the public, and hailed by others for his philanthropy and environmentalism. Lafferty Ranch is a 269-acre tract near the top of Sonoma Mountain owned by the city of Petaluma. In 1992, the city decided against selling the property to Pfendler, who had made a bid to buy it. That's around the same time Pfendler, with winemaker Don Baumhefner, began planting the first wine grapes on Pfendler Ranch, including a 6-acre pinot noir vineyard along its lower slopes near Copeland Creek. The two made wines under that name until 2005. After her husband's death, Kimberly Pfendler, who is also raising the couple's young son, now 5, decided to carry on that winemaking legacy, but with a distinctively different twist, capitalizing on her property's proximity to what people have increasingly come to recognize as the Petaluma Gap, a growing sub-section of the much larger Sonoma Coast appellation.

"There is no other area in California I can think of that offers such great new potential for pinot noir and chardonnay as the Petaluma Gap," she said. "The region is like a wind tunnel, with the mountains funneling in cool Pacific breezes and ocean fog." With Pfendler's vineyards extending from the top of Sonoma Mountain to its base, allowing for a wide variety of sun and fog conditions, she wisely tapped local viticulturalist and winemaker



Greg Bjornstad to replant her four estate vineyards to pinot noir and chardonnay, releasing a miniscule amount of the first vintage, 2007, late last year. "I wanted to find a well-respected winemaker whose style would complement the beauty of our land," noted Pfendler, adding, "I've always been a fan of Greg's wines."

Bjornstad, originally from a farming community in Colorado, where his mother worked at Coors, earned a degree in viticulture from UC Davis, then nabbed a prestigious internship at Chateau Lafite Rothschild in Bordeaux before working in the Napa Valley at Joseph Phelps Vineyards, and later nearby Newton Vineyards, as vineyard manager. He gained invaluable insight into cooler climate wine-growing, however, through his time spent at Flowers Vineyard and Winery on the Sonoma Coast. For several years, he was also a partner with Greg LaFollette in Tandem Winery, a producer of pinot noir and chardonnay from many different Sonoma-strewn sites. As a sought-after vineyard consultant, Bjornstad also worked closely with Kistler, DuMol, Hirsch, Peay, Peter Michael and others, and launched his own wine brand, Bjornstad Cellars, specializing in chardonnay and pinot noir.

At Pfendler, Bjornstad has been invited to start over almost from scratch, a dream assignment, experimenting with different clones within each of the different sites, 19 acres planted in all, T-budding, or grafting vines already in the ground to more suitable fog-loving specimens. The vineyards include, at the lowest elevation, the Penngrrove Vineyard, that first six acres planted by Pfendler and Baumhefner near the Petaluma Gap's Crown, the area's best known vineyard, a decidedly cool, windy spot, whose fruit goes to, among others, Kosta Browne, Flowers, Paul Hobbs, Roessler and Patz & Hall. Penngrrove, with its adobe clay soils, is mostly pinot noir. The Pullis Vineyard - Pullis is Kimberly's maiden

name; her parents now live in a house overlooking that vineyard - is cooler and foggier than Penngrrove, about 1,000 feet up the western side of Sonoma Mountain with lighter, well-drained gravel soils, again planted to pinot noir. The Pfendler Vineyard, where Kimberly and her son live, is higher still, 1,200 feet elevation, on the first section of the mountain that was originally planted in 1992. It was grafted in 2008 to Pommard pinot noir and Hyde chardonnay. Its soils are more akin to Penngrrove's, heavy with clay, the vines southeast facing and somewhat sheltered by the surrounding hills. The highest vineyard, Helgren, is between 2,000 and 2,200 feet, the warmest of all the sites, and planted to Swan and Calera clones. The first fruit was harvested from it in 2009. Bjornstad likes the spiciness and aromatics of the Calera, the rich fruit characteristics of the Swan.

With so much thought put into the planting, in the cellar Bjornstad's winemaking approach is fairly hands-off. He relies on native yeast fermentations and eight months of sur lie aging, racking the wines twice before bottling them unfinned and unfiltered. They are aged in 50 percent new French oak, experimenting still with toast levels and coopers. Still, the inaugural results are delicious, the 2007 pinot noir a mix of lusciousness and bright acidity, a touch of forest floor, but all-in-all very balanced, true to its cool climate. The 2007 chardonnay is equally compelling, with green apple and Asian pear predominating and plenty of structure and acidity.

The 2008 vintage, to be released in spring, shows just as much promise, Bjornstad and the vineyards in even greater sync. The 2008 pinot's fruit characteristics are accentuated, a result of his toning down the toast levels of his barrels. A project still in its infancy, Pfendler is nonetheless an already interesting estate, and with Bjornstad at the helm, a new beacon for what the Petaluma Gap can achieve.