

ZIATA

Napa Valley

Karen Cakebread creates her own vision with Ziata SB

*By Phil Toohey, Saint Helena Star
07/30/2009*



Like so many of the veteran winemakers and vineyard sources, there comes a time when you decide to strike out on your own. Having garnered the experience and spent time “in the game” with the competition learning the ropes, you have paid your dues and eventually make the leap of faith that somehow your voice, your wine, your experience can make a difference in the industry. In this way, Karen Cakebread can now add vintner/owner to her list of accomplishments. Karen released her first Ziata Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc in May, and I think it’s a winner.

Karen’s bio reads like a resume from an MBA at Harvard. She came to the valley as wife of Steve Cakebread when both were working in the high-tech industry in 1984.

The two moved to Hong Kong and Singapore as a part of his job and returned to Napa Valley in 1989. Karen continued her work with Cakebread Cellars — she worked here for 18 years — and helped developed the winery’s educational, corporate hospitality and international marketing efforts. She managed the winery’s American Harvest Workshop, flying in groups of five or six chefs from around the world to work crush for a week and to cook “farm-to-table” meals at the winery’s kitchen. Karen parted ways with Steve Cakebread in 2004 and subsequently left Cakebread Cellars in 2006.

In a conversation with Karen, she is most proud of her work with the Napa Valley Vintners. Karen served on the nonprofit trade association’s board of directors for four years and was on the Steering Committee and co-chaired Auction Napa Valley when Cakebread Cellars presented it in 2006. She has traveled tirelessly internationally to promote our little valley in her 18 years of service above self.

Karen is an avid mountaineer and has traveled to Mt. Everest, bringing a three-liter bottle of wine to the skirts of the roof of the world, and then returning home to auction it off for charity. Karen went to Mongolia, trekked the plains and carried wheelchairs with vintner Joan Smith and the Wheelchair Foundation to the needy in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia’s capital.

She has traveled with other women vintners from the Napa Valley and reached the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro, rafted the Ganges River in India and had other adventures. What is different about Karen Cakebread is that she has not only the business sense, but much like Dick Grace and so many others, she also has the sense of wanting to give back.

Karen is quoted on her Web site: “The desire to create a wine overtook common sense. I started Ziata Wines to incorporate the skills I’ve accumulated over the years, and to make my two favorite varietals. I like being hands-on, and launching Ziata Wines is the perfect outlet for being involved in all aspects of the winemaking process, from the vineyard to the winery to the table — which I wouldn’t necessarily get to do working for someone else.”

The name “Ziata” is an abbreviation of Annunziata, the middle name of Karen’s Italian mother and her great-grandmother’s given name. She adds that Ziata is a tribute to her mom, Mary.

The 2008 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc was made under the direction of Anne Vawter, who recently has been working with Heidi Barrett at Paradigm Winery. Before that, Vawter worked on projects in Washington and Chile. There were 252 cases made of Ziata from about four tons of grapes from a vineyard in the eastern hills near Monticello Road, Napa. The wine, at \$23 for a 750ml bottle, is steely clean, crisp with hints of pear, honeydew melon and Meyer lemons.

Karen is currently delivering her wine direct to stores and restaurants. You can taste the 2008 SB at Press in St. Helena, Cole’s Chop House in Napa and purchase the wine through the Web site, www.ziatawines.com, or at Backroom Wines in Napa. Karen is going to release 200 cases of her Ziata Carneros Pinot Noir in November. Sign up on the Web site www.ziatawines.com or call (888) 942-2008 for release notice.

(Toohey is a food and wine purveyor who lives in the Napa Valley. He has been an industry insider and a vintner for the past 25 years. He enjoys finding and reporting on new food and wine experiences throughout the Napa Valley.)