

NEW WINES, NEW FACES

Chardonnay Perks: One Man's Journey From Coffee to Wine

Christopher Calkins finally woke up and smelled the coffee.

Fifteen years of roasting beans and brewing java had tuned his senses to the nuances of taste and aroma, leading him to launch a new career in wine.

Calkins co-founded Spinelli Coffee Co., a San Francisco-based chain of specialty coffee shops, in 1983, and served as Spinelli's chairman, president and CEO. But all the while, his heart was in wine, and in his spare time, Calkins dabbled in home-winemaking. When Tully's, a Seattle-based coffee chain, offered to buy Spinelli in 1998, Calkins left the coffee business. He founded Destino Wines a year later.

"Everything has a life span," muses Calkins, 52, who has no regrets about the switch.

Inspired by a bottle of great white Burgundy he shared with his wife, Susan, on their wedding anniversary in 1997, Calkins decided to focus on Chardonnay. Destino's first wines, a Chardonnay Russian River Valley 1999 (90 points, \$38, 621 cases) and Chardonnay Napa Valley 1999 (89, \$32, 294 cases) have recently been released.

When Calkins decided to start his own winery, he knew that his home-winemaking skills weren't sufficient to make the quality of wines he desired, so he hired winemaker Ken Bernards of Ancien to oversee production. Calkins describes Bernards as a "terroir-ist" who uses traditional Burgundian techniques with an open mind. Destino Chardonnays are whole-clus-



Inspired by great white Burgundy, Christopher Calkins launched Destino with two Chardonnay bottlings, one from Napa, one from Sonoma.

ter pressed, undergo a partial malolactic fermentation, and are aged *sur lie*. "We're not locked into any particular protocol," said Calkins. "If it makes sense to filter, we will. If it doesn't, we won't."

While working at Spinelli, Calkins tasted coffee several times a week, much as wine-makers taste wine. "Taste is objective in the sense that you can develop the ability to discern flavors, and that level of awareness is something you can train," he said. By tasting wine together, Bernards and Calkins have calibrated their palates, and now Calkins believes "there's a certain harmony, a certain note we both hear."

Calkins doesn't own any vineyards; he rents space from Bouchaine Vineyards for his winemaking. To ensure high quality, Calkins went for the best grapes he could find. The Russian River Valley Chardonnay is a blend of grapes from the famous Dutton and Poplar ranches. For his other

wines, Calkins has sought out a variety of small, quality-oriented growers. A 1999 Napa Valley Cabernet, due out next year, is from a hillside property called Marcia's Vineyard, near St. Helena. Destino's total production is slated to double to 2,000 cases with the 2001 vintage.

Wine has rejuvenated Calkins, who says he gets a spiritual lift walking around vineyards. He speaks in Zen-like phrases about the joy that he finds in his new work. Destino, which means "fate" or "destination" in Spanish, is a reflection of Calkins' interest in the spiritual side of winemaking. "It's a journey for the grapes and a journey for the person who drinks the wine."

—MaryAnn Worobiec



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