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MacRostie Winery and Vineyards

After building a national Chardonnay program, a well-known Sonoma winery constructs a new facility to focus on Pinot Noir

by [Andrew Adams](#)



The recently remodeled MacRostie Barrel Room.

A busy harvest day at the new MacRostie Winery & Vineyards facility entails about 10 tons of grapes.

That may not sound like much, but the small production team at the winery near Healdsburg, Calif., also manages up to 100 different fermentations over the course of a harvest. The owners built the structure to produce vineyard-designate Pinot Noir in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma County, and processing a few tons of grapes is often bracketed by conducting dozens of pumpovers and punchdowns on small-lot fermentations.

But that is exactly what MacRostie winemaker Heidi Bridenhagen envisioned when she helped design the winery that was built just in time for the 2015 harvest. “I am totally vineyard-driven, and I love how each vineyard, each block, each chunk of vines is different. So, knowing that it wasn’t less work but more, I was like, ‘How can I split these into really small ferments and keep everything separate?’” she told *Wines & Vines* during a tour of the new winery in late October.

Keeping everything separate means that all the wines ferment in 1-ton “Super Ts” or 48s by MacroBin. This enables Bridenhagen, who has

KEY POINTS

- Finished in 2015, the new

been working at MacRostie since 2011, to set different processing and fermentation protocols for each tiny lot of grapes. “We bring in about 100 tons of Pinot, so I’m literally doing about 100 different fermentations.”

New home for the MacRostie brand

Since Steve MacRostie founded his eponymous winery in 1987, the name MacRostie has meant high-quality Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. A few years after launching the winery, MacRostie set up shop in a warehouse in the industrial area along Eighth Street East near the city of Sonoma. While the area has become a hotbed for boutique warehouse wineries in recent years, MacRostie’s may have been the first. The original MacRostie facility is now being used for the brand’s Chardonnay program, which has grown to around 35,000 cases and is distributed nationally.

Pinot Noir production, meanwhile, is around 5,000 cases, and that’s where the program will stay for the foreseeable future.

The new winery is designed to produce small lots of Pinot Noir wines with grapes from vineyards in the Sonoma Coast and Russian River Valley appellations. That focus came from a slight change in strategy in 2011 to build up MacRostie’s direct-to-consumer sales. MacRostie initially focused on using the grapes from the Carneros AVA that straddles the southern reaches of both Sonoma and Napa counties. “The question came up of how do we grow our Pinot program? And the answer wasn’t distribution,” Bridenhagen said. “It’s how do we find really neat, cool-climate Pinot Noir vineyards. Let’s start looking further west for cooler climates.”

That search led the MacRostie team to the Russian River Valley and the far west Sonoma Coast area of Fort Ross-Seaview. Bridenhagen joined the winery as assistant winemaker around the same time in 2011. Before joining MacRostie, she worked at Sonoma Cutrer and completed internships at other North Coast wineries and in New Zealand.

Bridenhagen graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a degree in biochemistry, and a trip through Europe inspired her to pursue a career in winemaking. She said her science background has given her a propensity for rigorous experimentation, and that fit perfectly with the small-lot style of winemaking practiced by MacRostie. “I’m kind of a science and experiment person at heart.”

The change in direction also coincided with founder Steve MacRostie’s decision to sell the winery to the Distinguished Vineyards & Wine Partners group that also owns Argyle Winery in Dundee, Ore. Steve MacRostie still works as a consultant and meets and tastes with Bridenhagen regularly.

With an injection of new capital and a new focus on small-lot Pinot Noir production, the company also began looking for property in Sonoma County to build a new winery and hospitality center. “Once we figured out what we wanted to do, the next step was finding a home and land in this area,” Bridenhagen said.

Distinguished Vineyards purchased the property near the end of 2012. The land had originally been planted with vines that surrounded a private residence. Another wine company had purchased the site to build a winery and had redeveloped the 14 acres of vineyards in 2009. That company had done some initial grading and site prep for a winery but decided to sell the site.

In 2013, Bridenhagen was promoted to the post of winemaker and took part in planning the new winery. “The treat for any winemaker is that I then got to go, ‘OK, I have this space to build

MacRostie wine-production facility is dedicated to Pinot Noir.

- The winery has the space and equipment to accommodate up to 100 small fermentations.
- Each small-lot fermentation is managed, pressed and aged separately.

a Pinot Noir facility, so what do I want?”

In addition to the Pinot-production facility, the property on Westside Road in the Russian River Valley includes the MacRostie Estate House hospitality area set on a hilltop overlooking an estate Pinot Noir vineyard. The winery is situated to the rear of the estate house.

Both the winery and estate house were designed by San Francisco, Calif.-based architecture firm Gould Evans and built by Wright Contracting of Santa Rosa, Calif.

Designed for Pinot Noir and flexibility

A key design element of the winery is that it provides flexibility to accommodate the high number of small fermentations. One of the flexible features is a large cold room near the crush pad that Bridenhagen can use to store grapes so that she’s not forced into picking decisions because of the weather or a lack of tank space. “With all these small fermentations, the flexibility I’m looking for is kind of the story of this winery. I was just trying to find as much free flex space that I could isolate and cool or heat...just to keep the temperature and timing decisions that are the bane of the winemaker’s existence to be really easier to make.”

The cold room can keep harvested grapes stable until the winery has a place to put them. “This is for the days when there’s a rainstorm on the horizon and you need to bring in 30 tons of fruit and we can’t process that much in a day.”

The area can also be used for cold soaks. During the recent harvest, Bridenhagen said she could store destemmed grapes in the 1-ton bins for more than a week. The must stayed at a cold 40° F and didn’t require dry ice or additional sulfur dioxide. “I actually pushed it to 10 days just cold soaking prior to fermentation, and there was no risk of wild fermentation,” she said. “It was pretty amazing, no extra sulfur and no extra dry ice.”

A separate cooling system keeps the room at a steady temperature. Simpson Sheet Metal in Santa Rosa and Refrigeration Technology in Middleton, Calif., designed and installed the winery’s heating and cooling systems.

Bridenhagen said she will do everything from destem and begin fermentation on the same day to putting the must through an extended cold soak. Using a variety of methods allow her to experiment for quality but also assess the various protocols and determine what’s best for a particular vineyard or how to achieve certain style goals. “What I also like about doing these separate fermentations is you can just layer. Maybe you do blend it all together, but they’re all different to start and you can layer complexity, which is pretty fun.”

The grapes are typically picked at night and arrive at the winery in half-ton bins. Some of MacRostie’s source vineyards include Goldrock Ridge and Hellenthal in the Sonoma Coast and Bacigalupi, Thales, Dutton Ranch and Wohler in the Russian River Valley. The winery still produces a Pinot Noir from the Wildcat Mountain Vineyard that Steve MacRostie planted in 1997 in the Petaluma Gap area.

A forklift driver will dump the bins into a hopper with inclined sorting table by Santa Rosa, Calif.-based P&L Specialties. The sorting table dumps into an Armbruster Rotovib destemmer from Scott Laboratories in Petaluma, Calif. Bridenhagen said she likes the machine because the destemming motion can be finely tuned to the size of the grape berries and how easily they’re pulling off the rachis. “It has two motors: one that vibrates and one that spins the cage, so you actually have two points of control,” she said.

Destemmed grapes are collected in the fermentation bins, or Bridenhagen will set up the sorting table to dump directly to a bin if she wants a portion of whole cluster. How much whole cluster depends on stem lignification as well as the typical qualities of a particular vineyard. “We have some vineyards that have typically been very fruity and bright and kind of clean, so I usually don’t do whole cluster because it can kind of add this herbaceous, stemmy quality that

can be confusing.”

Other times, a bit of whole cluster can help set color. When a lot appears as if it may need some help, Bridenhagen said she might add 10% to 15% to provide “a little more tannin to fix the color pigment.”

All of these are nearly bin-by-bin decisions, making a slow and steady sorting process a bit slower and more deliberate.

Once the must is collected in bins, Bridenhagen said she inoculates with primarily two strains —either Assmanhausen or BRG. The winemaker said she has experimented with letting some lots of Chardonnay spontaneously ferment, but she prefers the control and reliability of inoculating. “I think it’s the scientist in me,” she said. “It’s really a gamble, because the good, spontaneous fermentations probably mean an inoculum that you know and like ended up in the wine.”

For pumpovers and other cellar work, the winery is equipped with a Yamada air pump and both a positive displacement and centrifugal Waukesha pumps. All three are from Carlsen & Associates in Healdsburg.

Bridenhagen uses pumpovers primarily before and during the initial stages of fermentation. She uses a stainless steel “rocket” from TCW Equipment in Santa Rosa to filter out the free-run juice to spread over the top of the must. Once a cap forms, the fermentation is managed with manual punchdowns.

The cellar is equipped with a carbon dioxide-monitoring system that triggers fans to pull out any excess gas during harvest. The same system, by Refrigeration Technology, also pulls in nighttime air to keep the cellar cool and manages the glycol flow.

While all fermentation takes place in small bins, the winery does have three stainless steel tanks by Santa Rosa Stainless Steel. Bridenhagen makes a direct-press Pinot rosé that is fermented in one of the tanks. Aside from the rosé, the tanks are used for blending, racking and bottling. “You’d be surprised at how many people on a tour would say, ‘Where are all the tanks?’ and I’d say our barrels and bins are our tanks,” Bridenhagen said, before adding with a laugh, “I guess you’re not a winery until you have some tanks.”

Depending on the grapes, Bridenhagen will either press when dry or allow the must to linger on the skins for a bit. Once ready for pressing, the free-run wine is pulled out with a pump and rocket, and the must is dumped with a Cascade bin dumper directly in to the Sutter EPC 25 press from Bucher Vaslin.

Larger press for smaller lots

Unlike many premium Pinot Noir producers, Bridenhagen did not opt for a basket press and instead went with the membrane unit. The larger press is a bit gentler, and that helps preserve aromas. She said the open press design also gives the wine some air, which isn’t a bad thing at that point in its life. “You’re already taking the free run and putting it to barrel, so you’re really only dealing with your press (wine) anyway. I like to air it out; it cleans it up a little.”

Bridenhagen added that the press also doesn’t require a minimum amount of fruit, so she can load it up with just one bin. “You can literally press 1 ton of pomace, which is not very much fruit, but that is in line with fermenting everything separately. You might as well be able to press it all separately if you want to.”

The wine ages in 100% French oak, and a good portion are older, neutral barrels. “I definitely like oak; it’s a really nice tool and enhancement to a wine, however, I am more focused on the fruit and what’s that doing with a wine.”

Some of Bridenhagen’s preferred coopers include Tonnellerie Radoux, Francois Freres, Damy,

Tonnellerie Remond and Tonnellerie Rousseau.

The winery has two barrel rooms, one of which can be warmed or chilled as needed. The main barrel room can house 400 barrels, which rest on Western Square racks. At one end of the barrel room, which faces the hospitality area, two Schweiss bi-fold doors provide visitors a glimpse into cellar operations.

Barrels are cleaned and sanitized with an Aaquatools washer, ARS/Swash steamer and DEL Ozone machine.

Once the wine is ready for bottling, it is filtered with a Bucher Vaslin Flavy X2 and then bottled from one of the tanks with AT Mobile Bottling Line out of Napa, Calif. All of the Pinot is packaged with Saxco glass and Stelvin screwcaps.

Construction on the winery finished in June 2015, and Bridenhagen said the crush equipment came through the doors just in time. The winemaker said she told equipment suppliers a mid-August delivery date, only to have harvest arrive early. "We were picking by Aug. 16, so some of our first fruit had to go to Sonoma, because we didn't have our sorting table yet. So then the day we got it, we started rocking and rolling here."

Bridenhagen splits her week between the two wineries, while cellar master Taylor Boydston is at the Healdsburg winery full time. "I have two different facilities and two really great crews," Bridenhagen said. "They can be bringing in 50 tons of Chardonnay, and we can be bringing in our max Pinot on the same day, and I'm not worried about this is red day this is white day, so it's actually given us a lot of flexibility."

Steve MacRostie built his brand's reputation on quality wine and a national Chardonnay program out of an improvised warehouse space. The current owners' goal of cultivating a DtC following for small-lot Pinots appears much more achievable today, as they now have a winery and tasting room to support that goal.



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