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Dreaming of GRENACHE

California rising star Helen Keplinger has pursued this finicky grape from Spain to the Sierra Foothills

By James Laube

Photographs by Jessamyn Harris

As harvest nears, Helen Keplinger shifts into high gear, becoming a feisty road warrior. The petite, 41-year-old Napa vintner logs trucker's hours, covering 1,200 or more miles a week to keep tabs on the vineyards that supply her eponymous label. There's little room for error in her tiny operation—every grape cluster counts.

Keplinger buys grapes from a dozen vineyards spread throughout Northern California. I accompany her on a two-day tour of them, split into two circuits. "Loop one" is a 240-mile trek from her home in Napa Valley to the Sierra Foothills, where until recently she has bought most of her grapes. "Loop two," a bit shorter, zigzags through Sonoma, ending up in the hamlet of Graton, where the Russian River and Sonoma Coast appellations overlap; vineyards in Sonoma produced Keplinger wines in 2012 and 2013 and are part of the brand's modest expansion.

At present, Keplinger makes a total of 1,200 cases a year under her Keplinger label, working with her husband, DJ Warner, in rented winery space in the Carneros district of Napa Valley. With a string of 22 outstanding wines since 2006, Keplinger's is one of the most exciting and

innovative wineries to emerge in California in years. In embracing a handful of Rhône Valley grapes, especially Grenache, Keplinger has created captivating and uniquely styled wines that are stretching the boundaries of what has been a Syrah-centric arena among California vintners.

In addition, she is working with Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir and after a brief hiatus is again making Napa Valley Cabernet. She's also introduced her first white wine to the lineup, Rhône-inspired like many of her reds. In all, with the 2013 vintage, the roster has expanded to more than a dozen bottlings.

Keplinger came to love Grenache while working in Spain's Priorat region, where Garnacha (as the variety is called in Spain) is king. "The time in Priorat [2003 to 2006] really shaped my understanding of *terroir* and Grenache, vineyard practices and winemaking," says Keplinger. "I worked with at least 10 different distinct Grenache sites and saw the impact of the aspect, slope, soil and microclimate. I fell head over heels for Grenache."

IN EMBRACING RHÔNE VALLEY GRAPES, ESPECIALLY GRENACHE, KEPLINGER HAS CREATED UNIQUELY STYLED WINES THAT ARE STRETCHING THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT HAS BEEN A SYRAH-CENTRIC ARENA IN CALIFORNIA.

Keplinger at home, analyzing data for her blends. Although she owns no vineyards, she works closely with the growers whose fruit she sources, ensuring the quality and characteristics she is looking for to perfect her various blends of Rhône varieties.

But her path was very nearly a different one. Keplinger was *this close* to a career in medicine when she overheard the first of two conversations that would change her life.

One day while working at a medical facility in Boston in the mid-1990s, she listened as doctors talked about their work and what they might do differently were they starting their careers over. They seemed bitter and disillusioned, she recalls. "'If I could do this over again …,' they'd carp. None said they'd choose medicine.When I heard that, I did a lot of soul-searching."

Keplinger is strikingly attractive, with dark eyes, a mane of chestnut hair, a warm smile and hearty laugh. She was intrigued by science, but also had a strong interest in the outdoors, and in geology in particular; she was torn, but finally decided to pursue wine because it appealed to her love of science, soil and the outdoors, and also evoked her upbringing, where wine was ever present.

The second conversation came a few years later. While making wine in Santa Barbara at Fiddlehead, Keplinger heard a fellow winemaker say he was starting a winery in Priorat. Ready to expand her horizons, she expressed interest. She landed the job. Living in Priorat put her up-close-and-personal with Grenache, working with it hands-on instead of simply drinking it.

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BONUS VIDEO: Join Helen Keplinger as she visits her plot of Grenache in Napa's Stagecoach Vineyard. The winemaker, who sources grapes from Sonoma to Sierra Foothills for her label of mostly Rhône-style wines, explains what each variety contributes to her blends. www.winespectator.com/061514.

In retrospect, Keplinger's childhood hinted at what might lie ahead for her. From the time she was 5, she collected rocks and wine bottles. Her parents, who still live in Canton, Ohio, where Keplinger grew up, were and remain avid gardeners. Connie and Pete Keplinger also loved to travel, honeymooning in Europe, where they dined at Michelin-starred restaurants. "No one did that," says Keplinger. "That was in 1969." She shares her parents' wanderlust. They were not go-sit-on-the-beach people, she says. "I'm not a sit-on-the-beach kind of gal."

Vacations were typically spent exploring historical sites or natural wonders. Art museums, the symphony, opera and musicals were all part of her upbringing. Connie Keplinger in particular was keen on how land formations developed, and that and an appetite for cuisine had led her throughout Europe, engaging her twin passions of dining and exploring.

Pete Keplinger kept the family wine cellar well-stocked with a few hundred bottles from a variety of producers. Dinners in the Keplinger household were made from scratch, served by candlelight and always included wine. Everyone knew not to interrupt Connie when she was watching her favorite TV show, Julia Child's *The French Chef*. All the while, the Keplingers were amused by their rock-hound daughter, who paraded her stone and bottle collection through the neighborhood in a red wagon.

Despite her petite size (she stands 5' 4"), Keplinger has always been determined and competitive, whether as a swimmer, marathon runner, or, later in life, a surfer and rock climber. She is able to succeed, family and friends say, because of her intellect, passion, ability to focus and, above all, her versatility. "Helen could be riding a

skateboard one moment, [be] a girly-girl in high heels the next. She was the all-around good student, athlete, tomboy, cheerleader," says older sister Elizabeth Keplinger-Keene.

"When I used to run marathons, I would approach each race with the goal of running it faster and smarter than the last," Keplinger says. "I do the same with winemaking—assessing each vintage as it unfolds and trying to do everything better to fit the year. It's something I love about winemaking—the physicality of it, and getting my hands dirty."

The seasonality of winegrowing and the puzzle each new vintage presents keep her mentally and physically fit, she says. "Marathons were a good fit for me, because 26 miles was plenty of time to really think about the race. Winemaking is similar." She still runs, surfs, climbs and bikes, but she's given up paragliding and does less scuba diving than she used to.

HELEN'S FATHER KEPT THE FAMILY CELLAR STOCKED WITH A FEW HUNDRED BOTTLES FROM A VARIETY OF PRODUCERS. DINNERS IN THE KEPLINGER HOUSEHOLD WERE MADE FROM SCRATCH, SERVED BY CANDLELIGHT AND ALWAYS INCLUDED WINE.

The Keplinger family, with friends the Blaus, in 1981. From left: Art Blau, Helen (age 9), parents Connie and Pete Keplinger, Emma Blau and Elizabeth Keplinger (age 11). Evenings spent together over home-cooked food and fine wine were the norm in the Canton, Ohio, household.

Keplinger attended Smith College in Northampton, Mass., and moved to Boston after graduating in 1994. While working in Boston, wine remained one of her favorite pastimes and escapes. The Big Y wine store and wine books were friends she could count on. Every two weeks she would visit Big Y and buy a case. Then she'd read up on the wines. After traveling and living in Thailand for much of the next two years, her thoughts returned to winemaking. She found that University of California, Davis, offered a graduate program in enology. That was it. "I knew what I wanted to do."

In 1998, she moved to California. While attending Davis, she met Heidi Peterson Barrett, one of Napa's top winemakers, which in turn led to work as an intern at several Napa wineries, including Paradigm, and a stint in Australia, at Rosemount.

After earning a master's in enology from Davis in 2002, she moved to Santa Barbara, where she became assistant winemaker at Fiddlehead for two years. There, she met Victor Gallegos of Sea Smoke, who was starting up a winery called Melis in the Priorat region of Spain, and found a new direction for her life.

Around the same time, she had another momentous introduction. After she had accepted the job in Spain, she was researching Spanish wines in a shop in Los Angeles and met Douglas Warner Jr., called DJ, who was working there. "There was something that was special from the second our eyes met," says Keplinger. They shared many interests, including surfing and the outdoors. The more time they spent together, the greater the fun. They married in 2007.

Keplinger spent a bit more than two years in Priorat, in the small cities of Reus and later Torroja, in the heart of the region, shuttling back and forth to California six or seven times a year, and continuing her relationship with DJ. "I was sort of a one-woman show there, making the wine, overseeing the vineyards, sourcing equipment and fruit," she recalls. "It was where I really got schooled in *terroir* and vineyard practices."

The first day of harvest in 2003, she was so excited that she nearly drove a truckload of grapes off a cliff. Her deal with Melis soured in 2006, when the winery faced financial issues. "Our company simply began to run out of money. We needed to reallocate the money we were spending on [Helen's] salary and travel to other priorities," says Gallegos. "It was a very difficult decision to make, because Helen was a friend on both a personal and professional level. I would have valued her continued involvement."

With experience gained at Melis, Keplinger returned to the United States with a burning desire to explore the world of Grenache in California and see what it might offer. But she quickly discovered that Grenache of the high caliber she wanted was extremely hard to come by back home.

Despite the fact that Grenache is the world's second most widely planted grape, it's relatively scarce in California, with fewer than 10,000 acres under vine. Grown in the Central Valley since the 1860s, it was used primarily in field blends (much like early arrivals Zinfandel and Petite Sirah), often with Carignane. But as California vintners increasingly emphasized varietal wines, and

Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot emerged as popular red grapes, Grenache waned.

On the world stage, it's an entirely different story. In many wine regions, especially in France and Spain, Grenache is a defining grape, making spectacular wines and proving extremely versatile. Perhaps its most famous expression comes in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, where it represents 70 percent of the appellation's vineyard acreage and makes beacon bottlings such as Château Rayas' Pignan.

Vintners admire Grenache mainly for the range of styles it can make, from lighter, more accessible wines emphasizing snappy red berry fruit to denser, more robust versions distinguished by an intense mix of currant, cherry, raspberry, raisin, black pepper, licorice or hot brick notes. In the vineyard, Grenache can be a bit of a chameleon, adapting to and reflective of the site. It ripens mid-harvest, after Syrah but before Counoise or Mourvèdre, its chief partners in the Rhône. It is notable for its high acidity even at relatively high sugar levels, often leading to wines heady in alcohol, sometimes 15 percent or higher.

In the cellar, Grenache is prone to oxidation, which is why many producers eschew small barrels in favor of larger-format wood or stainless-steel fermentation vessels. Grenache is not particularly deep in color, either; winemakers often add Syrah and Mourvèdre to achieve a darker hue. Especially when blended with those grapes, Grenache wines can be tannic, though not overly so. The finest Grenache-based wines are long-lived and capable of maintaining their pure fruit flavors for decades.

For Keplinger, back in California, persistence prevailed, and she soon found an excellent vineyard in Sonoma's Knights Valley, tapping it in 2006 for her Grenache-Syrah blend Red Slope and her Syrah Kingpin Rows (she continued to bottle both wines until 2011, when she rejected the fruit).

In 2007, she hit a jackpot in gold country. She was introduced to Ann Kraemer, owner of Shake Ridge Ranch in Amador County, a rolling, picture-perfect vineyard in the Sierra Foothills planted to Grenache and a variety of other Rhône grapes. The quality of the Shake Ridge grapes whetted Keplinger's appetite. Not only could Grenache be a star, but she found leading roles for two other underdog California reds—Petite Sirah (from Shake Ridge) and Mourvèdre (from El Dorado County). Even Counoise has been cast in Keplinger wines.

At first, however, Grenache and its brethren did little to pay Keplinger's bills, and she had to treat her label as more of a hobby.

Keplinger: All Systems Go

There's good news for fans of Keplinger wines. With the 2012 and 2013 vintages, the winery is doubling its number of individual bottlings—going from a few to more than a dozen. The new offerings will include Keplinger's first white, a blend of white Rhône varieties, along with an Oakville Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, to be bottled under a separate label. Drinking the wines is the easy part. Getting a handle on the different cuvées and their eclectic names may take more effort.

All of Keplinger's reds come from steep, single vineyards rooted in rocky soils, for which the winemaker has an affinity (the Sierra vineyard sources are all in the 1,500- to 3,000-foot elevation range). And the wines all sell for the same price: $60 a bottle. But because individual vineyards are not identified on the labels, the best (and perhaps only) way to follow the wines is through their proprietary names. So here's an overview of "what's in a name" when it comes to Keplinger wines.

Sumō showcases the power and finesse of Petite Sirah co-fermented with Viognier, a Côte-Rôtie twist for Petite. It's a big yet polished wine that comes from one of Keplinger's vital sources, Shake Ridge Ranch, in Amador County. It is the lone holdover from her initial lineup, which also included two Knights Valley wines—Red Slope (Grenache-Syrah) and Kingpin Rows Syrah—that she discontinued with 2011.

Lithic, another Amador County wine, is also from Shake Ridge. A mix of Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah, it's highlighted by hot brick and floral notes. The wine called Caldera emphasizes loamy, tarry Mourvèdre, with Grenache and Counoise; it comes from Goldbud Vineyard in El Dorado County. Basilisk is a pure and vivid Russian River Valley Grenache from Greywacke Vineyard, a hillside site shaped like a snaking dragon.

Shake Ridge vineyard in Amador County

Several of the new wines are coming from Sonoma vineyards, including a Syrah from Silver Eagle (owned by Ulises Valdez) which will be called Fuego y Mar (Fire and Sea), and El Diablo, a Russian River Grenache. A Syrah from Skinner Vineyard will be called "Diamond Bar" and use the Fair Play appellation.

The debut white, Eldorado, is a Sierra blend of Viognier, Roussanne and Grenache Blanc from Shake Ridge and Goldbud, and is the only wine that's from more than one vineyard. The remaining wines—a Syrah from Hudson Vineyard that will likely have dashes of Viognier and Grenache, the aforementioned Cabernet from Oakville Ranch, and two Rhône reds from Sonoma Valley—are still unnamed.

"My goal is to make complex, balanced, concentrated, polished wines," says Keplinger. "Great wines from all over the world inspire me and make me think about the site, farming, vintage, and winemaking that may have gone into them." —*J.L.*

DJ WARNER

She had signed on as winemaker at Kenzo Estate, a $100 million, star-studded startup owned by Japanese video-game mogul Kenzo Tsujimoto, in 2005, which reunited her with both Peterson Barrett and top vineyard manager David Abreu, who helped reinforce her understanding of viticulture.

She also consulted for a number of Napa wineries, and was winemaker for cult Cabernet producer Bryant Family for two years, beginning in 2009. Neither Kenzo, which she left in 2009, nor Bryant panned out the way she'd hoped, but ultimately the separations allowed her to devote more time to her own wines.

Bryant, one of the most visible and highest-paying wineries in Napa, was an important opportunity, but also a risky one. The winery has a reputation for stunning Cabernets, but is also a place where winemakers and the owner have been known to collide. At the close of 2011, Keplinger and Bryant parted ways. "It was never a good 'marriage,'" she says, and it proved a financial setback for her as well. In order to take on Bryant, she had dropped other clients, such as Sarocka, Arrow & Branch and Fort Ross. After downsizing her consulting business and then losing the Bryant job, a disappointed but still forward-looking Keplinger was forced to regroup.

"We don't have family money and we don't have partners," explains DJ, 43, who runs the business side of Keplinger Wines while also serving as general manager for the St. Helena–based winery Carte Blanche. "It's all self-financing. We have a house, we have bills, so we need jobs."

The two draw upon each other's strengths; they have different perspectives on wine, says Keplinger, and each appreciates what the other brings to the discussion and decision-making process of their business.

RECENT RELEASES FROM KEPLINGER

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WINE	SCORE	CASES MADE
Caldera El Dorado 2011	94	150
Lithic Amador County 2011	94	230
Syrah Knights Valley Kingpin Rows 2010	93	100
Grenache Russian River Valley Basilisk 2011	92	60
Red Slope Knights Valley 2010	92	150
SUMŌ Amador County 2011	91	190

"I'm a vineyard person," Keplinger explains as we begin "loop one" and head for the foothills. Along the way, her black Volkswagen Touareg races through small cities and towns with names that evoke the area's history—Sutter Creek, Plymouth, Placerville and Drytown—the counties of Amador and El Dorado and, within the Shenandoah Valley, the appellation of Fair Play.

"First is picking the site that has potential to make great wine," Keplinger says. A lot of vineyards have that potential but aren't farmed to their max, she notes. All of her vineyards are on steep, rocky hillsides. And she has a say in how they are farmed. Growers have to be "fully invested in making great wine, willing to do all I ask." Every year, she suggests small changes to the vineyards in order to improve the wines, changes whose worth is clear to the growers once they taste the wines she's made from their grapes.

"I'm looking for light yields," she begins, rattling off a list of criteria. "Small berries, clusters that are not tight but looser for circulation and light exposure, better tannin development, better flavor development." She pauses. "Everything has really come around."

One of her great strengths, her friends say, is the ability to size up a property. Her time in Priorat gave her insight into Grenache that's become an advantage in working with it in California. "That's so important in the Grenache world," says fellow vintner Aaron Pott, of Napa. "It's a varietal a lot of people don't have much experience with." Moreover, "Helen really gets *terroir*. She can check out a site and know it's going to work for her."

"She's fussy," says Kraemer, of Shake Ridge Ranch. The growers Keplinger works with realize that she is meticulous and demanding, but they admire her drive and that she's raising the quality of the wines, particularly those from Sierra Foothills, which continue to improve in step with better viticulture there.

If Keplinger's wine horizons have broadened, financially the business' belt remains tight. Because the price of Keplinger Wines can be narrowed to the cost of grapes, barrels, bottles and rental space, there is very little margin for error. Most of the wines are made in quantities of 100 to 150 cases; all sell for $60.

Her goal is to push the envelope of quality further. For the 2012 vintage, she and Warner invested in concrete "egg" fermentors; for 2013, they purchased small, insulated fermentation tanks. "Everything we do is still in small lots with indigenous yeasts, punchdowns, gentle winemaking, good skin contact—but now we're able to keep the fermentation temperatures more consistent, and the wines protected," Keplinger says.

The next level includes adding six new wines from the 2012 and 2013 vintages, including her first white, a Sierra blend of Viognier, Grenache Blanc and Roussanne. She's also making Cabernet from Oakville Ranch (under a separate label). In addition, she has several new projects—making wine for pro golfer Cristie Kerr, and for Boris Guillome of the Elixir Fund—and two new consulting clients, neither of which has a brand name yet.

"We started with Grenache and that is still the most important grape," says Keplinger. "But this has been and continues to be a journey, and I've always been open to discovery."

The highs have been many, she says. "Finding really exciting new vineyards, the wonderful press we've received and earning the respect of our colleagues means the world to us. Having people call or e-mail us to tell us that they love the wines is so gratifying and makes our hard work so worth it. People send us pictures of them drinking our wines and now we're being sought out by vineyard owners to work with their fruit."

With 2013, grower Lee Hudson asked her to make Syrah from his highly regarded vineyard in Carneros. Hudson Vineyard is conveniently located across the highway from Cuvaison, where Keplinger rents space for her 70 barrels and those of her clients. Along with Oakville Ranch, that gives her two vineyards closer to home, though she'll continue to drive loop one and loop two.

"Winemaking isn't just a job, it's my way of life," she says. There's no middle ground. It's all or nothing; every cluster counts. "If something resonates with me, I'm in, totally passionate and fully invested. If it doesn't, I just don't do it. I believe that when you make wine with real passion and dedication, you can taste the heart and soul in the wine." □

Keplinger and husband DJ Warner in their backyard. Warner is the quiet partner in Keplinger Wines, running the business side.