

Meyer, Wattle to lead Yorkville Highlands appellation into second decade Syrah now second only to cab in upland Mendocino district

YORKVILLE HIGHLANDS, CALIF. – The Yorkville Highlands Growers and Vintners Association in Mendocino County’s Anderson Valley has named Matt Meyer of Meyer Family Cellars and Kristine Williams of Wattle Creek Winery to its two top leadership posts (<http://www.yorkvillehighlands.org/>).

The nearly ten-year-old Yorkville Highlands appellation has earned a growing reputation for outstanding cool-weather wines that mingle “old world” balance and acidity and “new world” ripeness and forward fruit. With some of the coldest evening temperatures along the North Coast and thin, gravelly soils, the Yorkville Highlands district covers approximately 40,000 acres in southern Mendocino County.

Most of its 400 acres of vineyards are planted on a continuous string of bench land where hot, sunny days are tempered by the cooling afternoon fog drawn in from the Mendocino coast at the northwest end of the Anderson Valley.

“The first year we fermented we had a refrigerant system, like any good North coast vintner would. It turned out we only used it once that year, and instead had trouble keeping the must warm during the surprisingly cool nights,” Meyer recalled.

Meyer Family Cellars and Wattle Creek Winery both specialize in cool-climate syrah, mostly grown at elevations from 900 to 2,200 feet on both sides of Highway 128 northwest of the Alexander Valley.

“When I visit our seven growers in the same day, I climb over 2000 feet three times, drop below 800 four times, put on my jacket a least twice, and spend most of my time on dirt roads,” Meyer said.

“We think the potential is that we can make this exceptional syrah in Yorkville Highlands,” Meyer continued. “As the afternoon heat arrives, so does the coastal breeze, cooling the vines into the evening.”

Wine writer Thom Elkjer has called Yorkville Highlands “a grownup appellation which exhibits a clear and coherent regional signature in its wines irrespective of grape or producer.” (www.appellationamerica.com)

The Australian connection

The Growers and Vintners Association was founded to promote grapes and wines from the district formally recognized as an American Viticultural Area in 1998. The group numbers more than two dozen commercial vineyards, family wineries and olive groves among its members.

Meyer and Williams were named president and vice-president – Williams for her second three-year term – in September.

Both family-run wineries, Meyer Family Cellars and Wattle Creek Winery share another trait in common: Williams, her husband Chris and Meyer’s wife Karen are all

Australians whose passion for winemaking – especially syrah – led them to settle in the hills of southern Mendocino County in the 1990s.

It was in Australia that Matt Meyer, too, discovered the delights of shiraz, as syrah is known Down Under. When Matt and his father, famed Napa Valley vintner Justin Meyer of Silver Oak Cellars, founded their Yorkville Highlands winery in the late 1990s, they determined that the district’s cool night air and sunny elevations made it the perfect spot to grow the kind of syrah Matt likes best:

“Slightly lower alcohol, a little more acid – I tend to like the blueberry-violet-spicy syrahs,” he said.

Kristine and Chris Williams had already come to a similar conclusion, planting their vines in 1997.

“We were looking for a cooler climate,” said Kristine Williams, who began making syrah in the Alexander Valley before moving north to Yorkville Highlands. “We wanted a different-tasting fruit for what we envisioned for our wine, and we’ve been thrilled with it.”

The Willams and Meyer families led the way: By 2006, syrah – which nobody was growing in Yorkville Highlands ten years earlier – accounted for 17 percent of the district’s production, second only to cabernet sauvignon (20 percent).

“It went from not existing to being the second most-planted vine,” Meyer said.

Meyer and Willams, along with their families, believe that as the Yorkville Highlands appellation enters its second decade, the district has the potential to produce extraordinary reds that will place it squarely on the world map of wine.

“We love our sauvignon blanc, and our chardonnay has a real minerality,” Williams said. “But the pinots and cool-climate shirazes are going to be phenomenal.”

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