

SWANSON

VINEYARDS

CHRIS PHELPS, WINEMAKER

Born in the vineyard-rich region of Livermore, California, Chris Phelps fell in love with two things early on in life: wine, and the French language.

So it was natural that he studied enology and French at UC Davis, and after graduation in 1981, entered the Institute of Enology at the University of Bordeaux. In addition to participating in an intensive wine program, his requirements demanded practical experience, and he was fortunate enough to discover a landmark immersion opportunity, serving as winemaker at Château des Laurets in Puisseguin-St. Emilion during the blockbuster 1982 harvest.

During Chris's Bordeaux experience, Christian Moueix (often referred to as "Mr. Merlot") and winemaker Jean-Claude Berrouet became his mentors, an association which allowed Chris to work and live at Chateau Pétrus for a winter. "Many luminaries in Bordeaux are very in touch with the cycles of nature, how they 'feel' about a vineyard or a wine," says Chris of what he learned while in France. "Berrouet taught me about the passion of wine, and why he was inspired to write a book of poetry about terroir."

Chris was then invited by Moueix to join a new Napa Valley winery, Dominus Estate. Following six months of intensive training at Pétrus, Chris was named winemaker at Dominus, where he worked from 1984 through 1995, honing his skills with iconic Bordeaux styled, or 'Meritage' wines.

In 1996, Chuck Wagner of Napa Valley's Caymus Vineyards recruited Chris for several winemaking projects, hiring him as full time red specialist winemaker in 1999. While there, he led the production of both the prestigious Caymus Napa Valley and Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon bottlings.

When Chris joined the Swanson Vineyards team in April 2003, it was an ideal partnership for both winery and winemaker. The Swanson family's passion for innovation and history of consistently producing French-style wine from its Oakville vineyards posed an irresistible draw.

"Merlot was a big reason to move to Swanson, bringing me back to my Bordeaux roots," Chris explains. "Merlot is the biggest red variety in Bordeaux, and in all of France. It is a winemaker's grape, with natural acidity, lots of tannin, but the gentle kind that makes drinking red wines pleasurable."

Since then, Chris has contributed a fresh, cutting-edge perspective to all phases of winemaking, from pre-harvest through blending and bottling. His style can be summarized as minimalist, in respect of excellent grapes. "If the fruit is picked when it is physiologically ripe and balanced, intervention through winemaking techniques is minimized," Chris says. "My job as a winemaker is to form an honest interpretation of what a specific vineyard site in a specific vineyard is trying to tell me."

Chris is a member of the American Society for Enology and Viticulture and the Napa Valley Wine Technical Group. He lives in St. Helena with his wife, Maria, and their four children, with whom he shares a love of swimming and backpacking. An assistant scoutmaster, he also leads his local Boy Scout troop on expeditions.

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