

Guy Noir

A passion for Pinot inspired Bill Spell to start his own winery.

BY DAVID MAHONEY



Like the character Miles in *Sideways*, Bill Spell has always had a special fondness for Pinot Noir. “When you find an excellent Pinot, where it’s all coming together, it’s really like a piece of art,” he says. “It’s a thing of beauty.”

Spell, who runs a private equity firm that bears his name, has been an avid wine collector for years. He and his wife, Tiki, enjoy drinking wines from all over the world, “but we love California Pinot the best.” So when they were approached by an experienced winemaker from Minnesota working in California’s Sonoma County looking for a partner, it was an offer they couldn’t refuse.

From its first vintage in 2006, Spell Estate has dedicated itself to making high-quality Pinot Noir from premier vineyards in Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Specifically, the winery makes the kind of Pinot Noirs that the Spells like: aromatic and fruit-forward.



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“Some people think Pinot Noir should be light and delicate,” says Bill. “I like a heavier fruit — the big nose, the aroma, is half the fun.”

Coming up with the right mix of vineyards for their single-vineyard releases as well as their proprietary blend (named after the Spells’ oldest daughter, Nichole) has been a process of trial and error. Over time, they’ve dropped some and added others, though Bill thinks that with the 2013 vintage they have a winning combination in place for the long haul.

Along the way, they switched winemakers, too. Their current winemaker, Andrew Berge, is also a transplanted Minnesotan. He embraces the opportunity to work with grapes from distinctively different locales. “They say Pinot Noir is the varietal that really captures the essence of time and place, and I think that’s totally true,” he says. “That’s what I’m trying to preserve. I want to preserve that vineyard characteristic, I want to preserve that vintage characteristic. To me that’s what makes wines interesting.”

Spell acknowledges that making first-rate Pinot is no walk in the park. “Pinot is one of the most finicky grapes there is,” he says. “That poses a challenge, but also has a big reward to it.”

That reward has come in the form of outstanding reviews from the wine press and a regular spot on wine lists of prestigious restaurants around the country — but also from more personal sources. Like the time Bill got a call from an acquaintance who wanted to serve his wine at his daughter’s wedding, but couldn’t find it in stock anywhere. (He got them the wine.) “It means they value it enough that on their special day, they want to serve it because it’s important to them,” he says.

Spell Estate produces about 1,700 cases of wine a year. That will probably grow as they get into new markets, but Bill doesn’t want to sacrifice quality for quantity just to boost the bottom line. “I make money in my investment business. That’s my day job,” he says. “We’re doing art now.”