

Field Stone



The Merlot-Ausone Story

What Does Famed Château Ausone Have to Do with Our New Merlot?

The story behind our new Alexander Valley Merlot begins with a prime vineyard site, a grand man, and a famous Bordeaux estate. The grapes for our 2001 Merlot were harvested from our long planned and newly planted Tchelistcheff Block which graces the north side of our winery entrance. We named this seven acre block in honor of our long-time consultant and friend, the late André Tchelistcheff, who facilitated a unique joint-venture possibility between Château Ausone and us in the mid-1980s.

Along with Cheval Blanc, Château Ausone is one of the greatest producers in the St. Emilion region of Bordeaux where Merlot is the primary red instead of Cabernet Sauvignon. (This is also the case of the neighboring Pomerol region where, for Château Petrus and others, Merlot is king.) Ausone had asked André to select a joint-venture vineyard site capable of producing Merlot of comparable quality to theirs. Undaunted, André, whose first-hand knowledge of St. Emilion and Ausone stretched back to the 1930s, selected twenty-eight sites in Napa and Sonoma for their consideration. Ours was one of them.

Ausone representatives, led by winemaker and vineyardist Pascal Delbeck, soon arrived and inspected each site, gathered climate information, tasted wines produced from adjacent vineyards, and, above all, collected precious soil samples for

analysis by their Bordeaux laboratory. After several months André received a reply along with a valuable laboratory report. Our vineyard site was selected. The negotiations which followed, however, were difficult. In the end a joint venture was not possible, mainly because of a serious split that had occurred between the two family groups who owned Ausone. For us, however, our true interest was in the potentiality of the vine-

yard as a prime site for our own Merlot. We had long asked the question: Given the success of our Cabernet should we plant more or should we also invest in a select planting of Merlot? Our fortuitous relationship with Ausone couldn't have been more timely. We now knew our answer.

After budding a smaller old vineyard block to several recommended new French clones in order to aid our final planting decisions, we planted the intended Tchelistcheff Block in the mid-nineties in a close-spaced design and utilized two out-

standing French clonal sources and a proven California cultivar. Low vigor rootstock was used to insure a controlled crop for optimum wine quality. Our 2001 Merlot represents our long-anticipated inaugural release and the results are indeed more than just promising. This fruit driven, full bodied Merlot stands shoulder-to-shoulder with its Cabernet siblings. Tannins? Yes. But supple like a delicious claret with ageing potential should be. We trust this is a vineyard worthy of Delbeck's judgement—and André's smile!



John Staten and André Tchelistcheff in their planning days

— John Staten, Vintner