



Young women winemakers rise to top of Napa Valley

By Mary Milliken

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Behind that \$150 bottle of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, wine drinkers may be surprised to find a young woman. In the most prestigious and expensive wine region in the United States, winery proprietors are turning their prized grapes and reputations to a new generation of women winemakers hovering around 30 years of age.

Take Sally Johnson, 33, winemaker for Pride Mountain Vineyards. She says many of the women who graduated with her from the famous Viticulture and Enology Department at the University of California at Davis are accomplished winemakers today. "It is a great time for women in this industry because there are no barriers to being successful," Johnson said as she poured Pride Cabernet Sauvignon during Napa Valley's annual wine auction this month.

"The women who came before us really blazed the trail. Now nobody thinks that we won't hop in the tank, or shovel out the grapes or do the cellar work. We've been able to be as successful as the guys."

One of the trail blazing women is **Pam Starr**, who at 47 is winemaker and co-proprietor at **Crocker & Starr** after years as consulting for several top wineries in the region.

"This new generation of women winemakers is rising to the top," said **Starr**, who said there are around 25 notable young women to watch in Napa Valley winemaking.

Starr said the young women get the best of both worlds: the breakthroughs of the women winemakers who emerged in the 1980s and the new winemaking technologies.

"I am enthused that these ladies are questioning my techniques and making them better," added **Starr**.

Starr believes one of the great advantages of the up-and-coming women winemakers is that they understand the business of wine and can talk about it. That gives them more credibility in the world of wine.

Canadian businessman and Napa vineyard owner Cliff Lede has put his wine production of 15,000 cases in the hands of Michelle Edwards, who, like Johnson, is in her early thirties, studied at UC Davis. She discovered wine while traveling in Europe. "She is incredibly hard-working and makes great wine," said Lede. "That's why I hired her."

There are some in the wine world who believe that women have better palates than men. But the young women winemakers prefer to make no gender distinction. "There is some research that suggests that women have very sensitive palates, but I have met men with incredible palates too," said Johnson.