



Finding Truth in Vineyard Expressions

Onesta Wines, 2013 Cinsault

At UC Davis, one of Jillian Johnson's animal behavior classes provided a watershed moment. A self-professed "science geek" since an early age, she attended the university to study neurobiology, with the intention of going into medical research or pursuing medical school after graduation. On the side, she was producing beer at home and pursued an elective course in brewing as part of UC Davis' fermentation science program, from which she learned about the winemaking program and also enrolled in those courses. There she found a creative outlet that met her scientific mind.



But it was a video of a bird that learned how to fly into a vending machine and craftily steal snacks that changed her course.

"I was impressed actually," said Johnson, "But I sat there, and I thought 'You know, this is interesting, but this isn't my passion.' So, I marched right over to the counsellor at the Viticulture and Enology department and said, 'I'd like to switch my major to viticulture and enology.'" Since Johnson had done all the science pre-requisites and then some—she was able to cruise right in and do all the upper

division classes. "It's been a great life choice."

Since then, she spent some time interning at wineries in Australia and South Africa and held the associate winemaker position at **Bonny Doon Vineyard** in the Central Coast, but she has been blending her geeky and artistic interests as a technical winemaker for **Laffort**, a French company providing precision winemaking products, a position she has held since 2010. In essence, she travels up and down the West Coast, finding solutions for other winemaker's problems.

"I see more trends, more problems, and I'm tasting more wines than the average winemaker who's just at one winery," she said. "I get to help people troubleshoot their wines or improve their wines before bottling or create new protocols and a lot of that does take some scientific research to figure out what's going on."

Her position at Laffort has afforded her the chance to work with and learn from a team of research scientists actively working on the development of new products and innovations that help winemakers produce better wine. While she enjoys the opportunity to be at the forefront of new research and the exposure to dozens of wine regions and varieties, Johnson also wanted to make her own wine.

During her time at Bonny Doon, she worked with the owners of **Bechthold Vineyard** in Lodi, the oldest Cinsault vineyard in the world—the grapes were planted in 1886. **Randall Grahm** purchased all the Cinsault, and the majority of it went into a Vin Gris Rosé, but they also

blended some of it into all of their red wine brands, giving each of their SKUs more of a mid-palate weight and a "pop of fruit."

So, when Johnson heard that Grahm was not renewing the vineyard contract at Bechthold in 2009, she jumped at the chance and bought as much fruit as she could afford at the time—4 tons of Cinsault—and **Onesta Cellars** was born.

Onesta Cellars is her passion project turned business, a chance for her to unleash her artistic expression, while nurturing a love of the vineyard. Onesta is Italian for truth and honesty, something that is reflected in her life and wines.

"The name came to me when I was soul-searching. I was trying to get back to my roots, what is really important to me," Johnson said. She found a **Mark Twain** quote that resonated: "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." "It totally speaks to me and that's what stuck. Just tell the truth, be yourself, be honest with yourself and with everybody else in life. It'll be so much easier. And that's really what these wines are."

Onesta focuses on small lot, single-vineyard Rhône varieties, true expressions of the place. Currently, she's sourcing about five other Rhône varieties from vineyards in Lodi, Mendocino and Napa, and producing about 1,000 cases, but she'd like to increase production to 5,000 cases.

What does she love about Rhône wines so much? "I love that they're robust. The vines themselves are at the vineyard are usually big, vigorous vines and they produce gigantic clusters. It gives you a lot to work with, they're not so fragile. I've made some Pinot Noir, and I feel like you almost have to whisper around the barrels, tip-toe, where Syrah wants you to play Rolling Stones as loud as it can go. It wants to be pumped over, it wants lots of oxygen and the Rhône varieties express a lot of fruit."

When it comes to vineyard or variety selection, Johnson says she follows her heart, even if it leads to varieties that aren't hugely popular. "I like to make life challenging for myself, they're [Rhône varieties] much harder to sell. The general consumer doesn't understand these varieties. I love them. I make what I love to drink at home," she said. Most of it is sold directly to the consumer, sold through the wine club and out of her tasting space at **Feast it Forward** in Napa.

Johnson is launching a new brand, one she says "morphs honesty to guilty pleasure": **Mentida**—a Spanish word for "a little lie." With Mentida, she'll focus on blends of different vineyards. "So, not the purest, like Onesta, but blended to perfection," she said. It'll be bottled under a white blend, red blend, and a basic Rosé, giving her the chance to work with more Viognier, Syrah and other fun varieties. She's starting out with 2,500 cases but hoping to ramp it up to 50,000 cases in the future.