



RELENTLESS: A WINEMAKER, A WINE

A great wine is celebrated for its intriguing complexity and subtle nuances, but its foundation is simple: great vineyards and superior winemaking. With this wine, Shafer honors Winemaker Elias Fernandez, whose *relentless* pursuit of quality has marked his nearly two decades at Shafer Vineyards.

Although his roots were agricultural, Elias' path to the vineyards took a detour when his musical talent with the trumpet won him a Fulbright music scholarship to the University of Nevada at Reno. After a year, however, music's loss was enology's gain when Elias decided to return to his roots, enrolling in winemaking studies at the University of California at Davis, and graduating with honors in 1984.

Joining Shafer soon after graduation, Elias has been an integral part of Shafer's success over the years, working side by side with Doug Shafer first as assistant winemaker, and then as winemaker since 1994. No detail is too small to escape this hands-on winemaker: when he selects barrels for Shafer's Hillside Select Cabernet, for example, he personally evaluates each barrel, one by one.

"He's one of the few winemakers I know who personally inspects each barrel both visually and by smelling them," says Bayard Fox of Tonnellerie Saury Barrels. "Elias is a pain in the neck, but fair and forthright ... one of my most organized winemakers in paying attention to each detail like the quality of the grain, the toast level appropriate for each varietal, the way deliveries are handled. He's so conscientious he's practically a nuisance, but I've got to think someone paying that much attention to all aspects of the process must be a bonus to the wine."

While Elias was growing in expertise during his long tenure with Shafer, the winery was growing in vineyard acreage: currently 85% of the grapes used to produce Shafer wines come from Shafer-owned vineyards. Wanting to explore other possible vineyard sites, Doug Shafer took a closer look at some hillside acreage his father John had purchased 20 years earlier.



Doug and Elias knew when they walked the hill adjacent to the southern edge of the Stags Leap District that the site showed great promise as a potential vineyard. The elevation was similar to that of the hillside vineyards on the Shafer estate, and the property shared the moderate Stags Leap District climate, with evenings cooled by maritime breezes off San Pablo Bay.

At first it was difficult to visualize a vineyard on the scrub-covered hilltop, the manzanita and madrona so thick it required a machete to hack a path through the brush. But the

impenetrable scrub itself was a good sign, indicating there was enough soil to support vegetative life.

Once the land was cleared in late autumn of 1995, the site's vineyard potential was revealed: excellent southern exposure and rocky, fast-draining soil.

A year was spent in preparation for planting: drilling a well, bringing electricity to the site, clearing huge mounds of rocks, amending the soil, and planting cover crops to control erosion. There was plenty of time to decide what to plant.

Climatically the vineyard site showed enormous potential, with the long, warm days and breeze-cooled nights that favored optimum flavor development in Syrah. Both Doug and Elias felt confident the new vineyard would be a good place for the noble red varietal.

From the start, Elias pushed for Syrah, a grape emerging as a serious contender during the mid-90s in California. The great red varietal of France's Rhône Valley and Australia's notable Shiraz showed exciting potential in California, evidenced in its many and varied styles. "Elias convinced me that Syrah, like a painter's palette, showed an enormous variety of flavors," said Doug. "We decided to pursue it in a big way."

Gerard Rottiers, general manager of Associated Bottling Systems, knows from 11 years' experience how persuasive Elias can be. "Elias is very demanding and he's always right ... what he asks for he's right to ask for,"

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says Rottiers. “Because he’s in constant pursuit of quality, he’s a perfectionist, but that makes him easy to work with because he knows what he’s talking about. Every time we come up with some improvement to the equipment, we test it first with Elias. We call it the University of Shafer,” the French-born Rottiers chuckles.

Although the new wine would be years away, Elias began planning immediately, a fact that would be no surprise to the suppliers he’s worked with over the years. “By June of 2001 he’d already given me his numbers for the 2002 vintage,” marvels Curt Goodstill of Portocork America. “Out of all the wineries we deal with – and that’s over 350 of them – nobody does what Elias does in terms of quality control, doing a sensory evaluation on each bag of corks. It’s difficult to buy a product from our own company in Portugal knowing a certain percentage are likely to be rejected by Elias.

“But he knows that corks are the one product besides glass that are totally out of his control and have the potential to ruin his efforts for the year, so we set up extensive testing. He’s

disciplined, he’s focused and he gives us feedback when we’ve done things right!”

As with everything else, Doug and Elias focused on each detail of the Syrah project. They decided that a proprietary blend of two varietals from the site would allow greater creative expression than a varietally-labeled



wine. Considering and then rejecting Cabernet Sauvignon as a component, Doug and Elias elected instead to plant three acres of Petite Sirah, having enjoyed numerous versions of this old-time California favorite, often in the form of wines from home winemakers. The remainder of the 18-acre site is planted to Syrah, both the Shiraz (Australian) and Syrah Noir (French) clones.

The color of Shafer’s newest wine is very dark, hinting at the deep, dark and delicious flavors within the bottle. Elias describes Relentless as “multi-layered and expansive, with concentrated flavors of blackberries and black cherries on the palate, nice vanilla on the mid-palate and aromas of black pepper spice and earthy undertones from the Petite Sirah.”

Suppliers describe Elias as “disciplined,” “focused,” “extraordinarily organized,” “pain in the neck” and “very demanding.” In other words, *relentless*.

This wine is liquid testimonial to the skill and style of Winemaker Elias Fernandez.