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Marks of a Master

WINEMAKER JOEL AIKEN BUILDS HIS OWN LEGACY IN NAPA VALLEY

by Christopher Sawyer

When Joel Aiken became the Director of Winemaking of Beaulieu Vineyards in Napa Valley at the ripe age of 28 in 1985, he inherited a prestigious legacy started by Georges de Latour, the visionary Frenchman who established the winery affectionately called “BV” in Rutherford in 1900.

As Aiken matured, he worked under the watchful eyes of “The Maestro,” the legendary winemaker André Tchelistcheff, who served as consultant for BV in the early 1990s. And in 2000, Aiken led the famous 50-year retrospective tasting of the Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon at the Centennial Anniversary of Beaulieu Vineyards.

During Aiken’s 27-year tenure at BV, the winery owned or leased more than 1,000 acres of vineyards and produced a million cases of quality wines per year. With these achievements, Aiken could have retired a happy man after his final harvest at the winery in 2008. But his passion for fine wines wouldn’t let him.

Instead, today Aiken is busy crafting a series of small-batch wines at the Amici Cellars, a boutique winery on Old Lawley Toll Road in Calistoga. Founded by wine fanatics John Harris, Bob and Celia Shepard, Bart Woytiewicz and Sharon Kazan Harris in the 1990s, Amici means “friends” in Italian.

As a partner at Amici and proprietor of his own eponymous Aiken Wines, Aiken has fine-tuned his technique to work with small blocks from unique vineyards. The end results are elegant red wines with lively flavors, chewy tannins, structure and finesse.

His latest offering is the Amici 2010 Cabernet

Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$45). Made with fruit from pristine vineyards in Rutherford and Yountville, this food-friendly wine features alluring aromas of high-tone fruits, sandalwood,



PHOTO: CHRIS SAWYER

Joel Aiken (right) and Amici Cellars assistant winemaker Bobby Donnell.

espresso, wild herbs; deep flavors of black cherry, raspberry, licorice and layers of spice; smooth tannins; and vibrant acidity on the finish.

On the higher end of the Amici red wine spectrum, Aiken makes a Reserve Napa Cabernet Sauvignon and limited release wines from the Spring Mountain District and the Morisoli Vineyard in Rutherford. In each case, Aiken says his ultimate goal is to craft wines that show well when young and age gracefully.

“In the vineyards, you take what nature gives you,” said Aiken. “There’s not a certain recipe that works the same every year. That’s why attention to detail is what helps preserve the quality and legacy of great wines made with premium fruit grown in Napa Valley.” ■■

