

Keller Estate tasting room still evolving

By CAREY SWEET, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE Published 10:00 p.m., Wednesday, March 2, 2011

When Arturo and [Deborah Keller](#) decided to open their Keller Estate to the public in February 2010, it was a thoughtful process. For more than 25 years, the Petaluma Gap property had been the family's private compound. Some Chardonnay vines were planted as a hobby in 1989, with the grapes sold to Rombauer Vineyards. In 1999, the Kellers put Pinot Noir in the ground, and the first Keller label wines were released in 2001. Access to the winery was by appointment only.

If it's been a long transition from homestead to tasting room, the process is still evolving. The property is large, spanning 650 acres off Lakeville Highway north of Highway 37. The facility is imposing, looking like a corporate hospitality center.

Yet the mood is so relaxed that it feels as if you might still be at someone's home. And just like stopping by someone's house unannounced, the staff can seem surprised to see you. In fact, it's still not a bad idea to call ahead. Hours change randomly, and it took me two visits and a couple of phone calls to find out when someone would actually be "home."

The vibe: "Hello?" That's how I was greeted through the intercom after I pushed the buzzer at the front gate leading to a long, winding drive. The voice at the other end of the line admitted she was a production worker and wasn't sure if they were open, even though I had arrived 45 minutes before posted closing time. Yet once I was at the tasting room, a tortoise cat twined itself around my legs as I stood at the cherrywood bar, while the cheerful hostess asked if I would like a complimentary taste of 2009 La Cruz Pinot Noir Rosé (\$30).

The team: Arturo Keller was an automotive industry professional for 50 years, producing car seats. He and Deborah purchased the property as a country getaway before the area transitioned to grape growing. On the advice of some UC Davis associates, he started exploring the vineyard potential of the cool, foggy area. Daughter Ana Keller started helping in the lab in 1998, and now manages the estate. The winemaker is [Jacqueline Yoakum](#), who came to Keller in 2010 after a career as assistant winemaker at Littorai Wines and, most recently, as winemaker at Sonoma's Nicholson Ranch.

The wines: Keller makes about 5,000 cases of estate-grown Pinot Noir and Chardonnay annually, plus 2,000 cases of a second label called Casa de la Cruz. There's also a small amount of Syrah, Pinot Gris, Viognier and sparkling brut.

The experience: I almost felt guilty sampling the 2006 Precioso Chardonnay (\$75), because only 22 cases were made. But the wine is offered as part of the \$25 reserve tasting, and sharing it certainly fits Keller's home-style approach. Depending on whether you do the standard (\$10, waived with purchase) or reserve tasting, there are four wines poured, plus whatever else the host feels like offering, as she said, "for funsies."

The extras: The best deal is the private tour (\$25, by appointment only), which includes a tramp through the 500 feet of caves behind the tasting room, the sculpture-scattered vineyards surrounding the ponds and rolling hills, and the spotlessly clean guts of the winery cellar. This shows the true charm of the estate, in its breathtaking views, its friendly staff, and - with a little notice - the polished hospitality.

Nearby: Sonoma Valley Portworks, 613 Second St., Petaluma, (707) 769-5203. portworks.com; Kastania Vineyards, 4415 Kastania Road, Petaluma, (707) 763-6348. kastaniavineyards.com.

If you go: Keller Estate, 5875 Lakeville Highway (at Cannon Lane), Petaluma. (707) 765-2117. kellerestate.com. 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Thurs.-Sun.

Read more: <http://www.seattlepi.com/default/article/Keller-Estate-tasting-room-still-evolving-1040695.php#ixzz1Mk5fGlyN>