



MELKA WINES
November 2001



WINEMAKERS TO WATCH



Philippe Melka

AGE: 35

WINERY: Independent winemaker/consultant

WINE TO SERVE TO AN IMPORTANT

GUEST: Undecided — a Bordeaux or Bordeaux-style wine from any number of wine regions

So many wines, so many choices! That, in a nutshell, was Philippe Melka's response when asked what wine he would serve an important guest.

The question may have posed a genuine dilemma. Should he favor his native Bordeaux? Pick one of the wineries in other parts of the world where he honed his skills? Flatter one of his California clients, or tout his own two labels?

But while unwilling to select a specific wine, Melka readily reveals what he looks for in a wine: personality, character, finesse and elegance — qualities, he asserts, found in virtually every wine-growing region of the world. That includes California, where he and his American-born wife, Cherie, laboratory manager at Silver Oak Cellars, have made their home since 1994.

Melka studied geology in Bordeaux, specializing in the relationship between soil and plants, specifically grapes. In the course of his research, he worked with wineries and became so fascinated with wine that he obtained another degree, this time in winemaking. "I owe thanks to the wine industry" for setting him on the right course, he says with a laugh.

After graduating in 1991, he went to work for a large French company with interests in many wine regions (their most prestigious holding in France is Chateau Petrus; in California, high-profile Dominus), a job that led to stints in France, Italy, Australia and California.

The Melkas' permanent move here, in 1994, was largely a question of climate — economic climate. In France, the economy was on the skids. In California, bolstered by the stellar 1994 harvest, there was a boom, with lots of money being invested, much of it in high-end small wineries.

Young Melka quickly found his niche. These small wineries could not afford people with his expertise in both viticulture and winemaking on a full-time basis, so his services as a consultant were in demand. He started with Napa's Seavey, Lail and Constant and has since added such prestigious names as Quintessa, Vineyard 29 and Marston.

All his clients are estate wineries, meaning they grow their grapes on their own land, which "makes for great consistency," Melka says. He adds that he favors hillside wines, which "are a little wild; they need to be civilized." But when they are, they are wonderful.

And that holds true of his own labels, Metisse and CJ. The latter, he explains, stands for Chloe and Jeremy, his children. Proceeds from the wine are earmarked for their education. "It may be a very small fund," their father says with a chuckle.

—Karola Saekel

P.O. Box 82 Oakville, California 94562
Telephone 707-963-6008 Fax 707-963-4546
info@melkawines.com www.melkawines.com