

# Egelhoff Wines

## St. Helena, California

ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S TOP CONSULTANTS MAKES HIS OWN WINE ON THE RUN.

JULIANNE WILL

He had worked as an assistant winemaker for Merryvale Vineyards. He had made *Wine Spectator's* 1997 wine of the year, the Cabernet Sauvignon Elevation 1147, for David Arthur Vineyards. So in 1999, Bob Egelhoff decided it was time to hang out his own shingle and establish Egelhoff Wines. But that shingle doesn't hang in one place; Egelhoff's operation is mobile and international. He crafts wines at his clients' wineries with grapes selected from vineyards around Napa Valley, and even with finished wine flown in from Australia, through a unique partnership with Two Hands proprietor Michael Twelftree.

Egelhoff earned his bachelor of science degree from the University of California-Davis in 1981, but he didn't go there with the intention of studying wine. "Far from it," he says. "I went to Davis to study agriculture. I had always been attracted to farmland from an early age, when my parents would take me to our relatives' farms in Nebraska. Growing grapes and making wine was a lot better than growing corn! In reality, Davis had a premier program for both viticulture and enology."

He got his start in vineyard management at Doe Mill in Chico, Calif., in 1982. After spending one crush at Simi, he then worked for three years at Beckstoffer Vineyards. Egelhoff joined Bill Harlan's Merryvale Vineyards in 1988, honing his winemaking skills under Bob Levy and consultant Michel Rolland. There, he had the opportunity to make wines for such clients as Amizetta, Harlan Estate, Hartwell Estate, Oakford Vineyards, Pahlmeyer, and Staglin Family Vineyard. "Michel Rolland had a big influence on me in the early '90s, when I learned blending techniques and winemaking philosophy," Egelhoff says. "He is a neat guy and willing to

share. It wasn't like he thought everything was a big secret."

Egelhoff funneled this wealth of experience into private consulting, counting among his clients Amizetta, Axios Wine, Bella Vista, Phelan Vineyard, Richard Partridge, and Robert Craig Winery, in addition to David Arthur. The initial 1999 release under his own label was of 112 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon; production grew the next year to around 300 cases, then 500 and 700, with sales primarily to high-end restaurants and a mailing list. For the first few years, grapes were sourced from Sacrashe Vineyard in Rutherford, Calif.; today, Glendale Ranch in St. Helena's Conn Valley is the mainstay of the Cab program. "But we never stop searching," Egelhoff says. "I



*Julianne Will passed the introductory level of the Court of Master Sommeliers in 2008. She left a career in marketing and publishing to pursue freelance writing full-time, covering food, wine, fitness, travel, and other subjects. She has also authored or co-authored four best-selling Catholic children's books. She can be reached through her website [www.juliannewill.com](http://www.juliannewill.com).*

Photo by Julianne Will

## WINERY SPOTLIGHT



Cellar at Amizetta winery in Napa, Calif. (left); Bob Egelhoff (above left); Michael Twelftree (above right).

purchase new vineyards each year to keep improving on the quality and flavors.”

Egelhoff's next label took far longer to get to market. In 1994, he set aside six barrels of Port and essentially forgot about it. “I tasted it again in 2001—yowza!” he exclaims. “We didn’t know it could pack so much flavor.” He immediately increased production, adding three barrels a year, and the first Walton Port was released in 2005. There are only 10 cases left of that brilliant 1994 Tawny, made from 90-year-old Carignan vines, Early Burgundy, Garnacha, and Touriga Nacional. Beginning with the 2001 vintage, the Port contains 100% Carignan from the backyard of one of the valley’s many Italians who have traditionally grown an acre or two of vines to make their own wines. “Now they’re in their 80s and don’t really care to do it anymore,” says Egelhoff, “so I’ve been able to sneak in and buy these eclectic varietals from them.”

And the name Walton? “It’s my wife’s maiden name, which is genius-level thinking, really,” Egelhoff jokes. “Her father likes it as well, so I win on both sides. It’s a British name, and a lot of Ports have British- or Spanish-sounding names, so it was an easy match. Egelhoff, that’s for Riesling.”

In fact, he made his first Riesling in 2008. Grapes come from the coolest-climate Riesling vineyard in the county, on the Napa side of Los Carneros. Motivated by his interest in learning cooking techniques from the famous chefs who populate Napa Valley, Egelhoff believes Riesling “just makes a better food wine. You think of how diverse we eat: Asian, Tex-Mex, Cajun—you can’t drink Cabernet very well with those foods. They have curries and spices, so if you have a

touch of sweetness in the wine, it pairs better with the food.”

When the economy went south in the late 2000s, Egelhoff Wines needed an alternative for red-wine drinkers; the solution was the Walton Cabernet Sauvignon, first released in 2006. “It was a wine to beat the economy,” says Egelhoff—“to get some wine on the table at a less expensive price and move some of our barrels out, because believe me, when restaurants quit buying wine like they did the last couple of years, they quit buying wine completely. You have to reinvent the marketing wheel.”

Additionally, since he already had a strong following among chefs, “I started going to some of my best restaurants and saying, ‘Hey, would you guys like a house wine made exclusively for you by me? We’ll put your label on the front and mine on the back and see where it goes!’” Bonnell’s in Fort Worth, Texas, was first on board. Nick and Sam’s Steak and Fish House in Dallas soon followed. Egelhoff is currently preparing a Bonnell Chardonnay for bottling in spring 2011. “Their private label was made here in Napa Valley,” he says. “And we source high-quality vineyards.”

At the other end of his spectrum is the elite Two Worlds, a 50-50 mix of Egelhoff Cabernet Sauvignon and Two Hands Barossa Valley Shiraz that debuted with the 2003 vintage. It’s a partnership borne of a crazy idea between friends to mix a little of this and a little of that. “Basically, we were tasting each other’s wines one afternoon, and the wheels came off,” Egelhoff remembers. He blends two barrels of his best finished Cabernet with two barrels of Twelftree’s best finished Shiraz and ages it in French oak for six to eight months at Napa’s Amizetta win-

### Egelhoff Wines

P.O. Box 525  
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## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Egelhoff filters his Riesling for commercial stability. His red wines are racked often, but never filtered or fined, and aged in French oak. "You want to look at oak like a tea bag," Egelhoff says; "if you put four in your cup, that's what you're going to get. You want to spend extra money to get good oak, because you're flavoring your wine."

### **Egelhoff Riesling** 2009 \$29

Aged in 75-gallon stainless-steel barrels for five months. Straw-colored and bright, the '09 offers a citrusy nose of lemon and pineapple, with flavors to match. A suggestion of sweetness is offset by noticeable acidity.

### **Egelhoff Cabernet Sauvignon** 2006 \$77

Aged 22-23 months in French oak and one and a half years in bottle. Inky, opaque, and viscous with a purple-red rim. Aromas of oaky black fruit, a hint of wet straw, and spices lead to rich flavors of ripe black plum and crushed blackberry, backed by silky tannins and balancing acidity. At 14.2% alcohol, this Napa Cab is as well rounded as it is delicious.

### **Walton Cabernet Sauvignon** 2006 \$45

95% Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Napa Valley Malbec, aged in French oak for 22 months. Opaque, dark garnet at the center with a faint orange rim, the Walton shows aromas of cherry, spice, cinnamon, and a slightly herbal note. It has bigger tannins and bolder acidity than the Egelhoff Cabernet, with raspberry, a hint of smokiness, and an oaky sweetness on the finish. Decant for aeration, and it will be perfect with a flavorful soft cheese.

### **Two Worlds Cabernet Sauvignon Shiraz (magnum)** 2006 \$300

50% Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, 50% Two Hands Shiraz Bella's Garden, aged in French oak for 22 months. The nose is modest at first, with the Cabernet leading the way, but the Shiraz eventually comes forth with smooth fruit. Take your time with this one: rich, bold, and complex, it will age for years. If you choose to drink it now, allow plenty of time for it to open up. The large format guarantees a lovely evening.

### **Walton Tawny Port** 1994 \$70

A blend of Carignan, Early Burgundy, Garnacha, and Touriga Nacional aged in French oak barrels for 13 years and then packaged in Port-style bottles sealed with red wax. Deep, dark auburn in color, with a rich, fruity nose, it provides a lush texture, loads of flavor, and a finish that doesn't quit. I noted nuts, raisins, and butterscotch-cream pie with a graham-cracker crust and a sprinkle of coconut; Egelhoff finds Bit-O-Honey candy bar. Chefs have used this Port on both pork chops and ice cream, but Egelhoff's dessert recipe is to "put it in peanut-butter-cookie dough and bake it."

Prices are current estimated retail.



*Amizetta winery.*

ery. Characteristically modest about his own involvement, Egelhoff praises the Two Hands contribution: "They make great wine. They just got another big number—No. 2 in the *Wine Spectator* Top 100" of 2010.

But getting the Shiraz flown in from Australia is no simple matter. "It's a pretty serious ticket," Egelhoff reports; "they put it in the cargo. It's like a 4-foot-by-4-foot bag in a box." Thanks to the skill and talent of the two top winemakers, though, the process is seamless. "We know how we roll," Egelhoff says. "He just trusts me to blend the

five cases each of the 2003 and 2004 Egelhoff Cabernet Sauvignons remain. "I sell about 85%," he notes; "10% goes to charity, at least, and then I keep a few around just to see how they go." In recognition of his charitable efforts, Egelhoff is the honoree—the Tête du Cuvée—of this year's American Heart Association Côtes du Coeur, to be held in April in Dallas. He's also traveling to Bloomfield Hills, Mich., in May to support the Alliance for Vision Research's "A Night for Sight" wine auction, and he'll take part in the annual TexSom Conference in August.

Besides spending time with his wife Marianna and his adult son and daughter, Egelhoff plays golf and piano and indulges in fantasy baseball. He obviously has a gift for balance that carries over to his consulting winemaking. So what does he do differently at his own winery? "Nothing," he replies. "I harvest the grapes when all of the parameters tell me it is time. Every year, Mother Nature gives winemakers a set of variables to deal with. We get one shot per year! Some of the variables are treated the same: quality oak, cleanliness, and sound crushing procedures. But winemaking decisions on pump-over and additions, the balance, the chemistry of the must, are individual styles. The ability to determine when the tanks are ready to press is a learned art."

There may still be more surprises in store from Egelhoff Wines, he adds, but "what they might be is anyone's guess right now." Where they might be grown and made is anyone's guess as well. 🍷

right one. If he's here, we'll do it together; if not, maybe we'll send some samples back and forth." Production of the 2006 was just 480 etched magnums, and that's not likely to increase, according to Egelhoff: "It goes against the principles and the ideology we chose when we conceived the project."

Nor is he one to hold on to library wines; only

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