



Mission Accomplished

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Emotions ran feverishly high when Bob Cabral succeeded Burt Williams at Williams Selyem Winery in 1998. Cabral was replacing not just a winemaker but someone who had become a folk hero to wine lovers—and folk heroes, real or imagined, are impossible to replace.

Williams and his partner, Ed Selyem, were a happy-go-lucky duo who took the wine world by surprise in the early 1980s. They created Russian River Pinot Noirs that exhibited the grace, purity and elegance that wine drinkers admired in red Burgundies yet found wanting in California versions. Over time, Williams and Selyem achieved a rarified status in wine. Their names became imprinted in the public's mind. They could do no wrong.

While some imagined theirs to be the perfect dollhouse of a winery, after 17 commercial harvests wine had become more a job than the hobby it began as. To the disbelief of many, they sold their business to New Yorker John Dyson for \$9.5 million, leading to all sorts of speculation about what might happen.

In stepped Cabral, who had been handpicked by Williams to replace him amid an outpouring of sentiment from winery fans. One *New York Times* reporter wondered if this tiny operation, founded by a pair of rough-hewn Sonomans, could succeed under the ownership of a Wall Street venture capitalist—and with a new winemaker no one had heard of. There were skeptics aplenty.

Oddly, no one considered the possibility that the student might surpass the legend. Cabral, then 35, had no intention of trying to fill anyone's shoes. He wanted to make the Williams Selyem wines with the same principles, thoughtfulness and passion that guided its founders, and by most measures, he succeeded. At the end of 2014, Cabral is leaving Williams Selyem, capping a 17-year stint—the same number of years Williams logged at the winery. Like Williams, Cabral decided it was time to seek new challenges.

Not that things didn't change. They did. No two winemakers have the same tastes, and with time that difference alone can influence a wine's personality and style. Vineyards change, too, and Williams Selyem added enough new sites to triple production from the time Cabral took over, to 20,000 cases. Most of the growth came from new Pinot Noir vineyards, some of which produced more distinctive wines than others. Many of these vineyards are so young that their potential hasn't been realized yet. Their best days lie ahead.

What changed most of all was the environment around Williams Selyem. In the late 1990s, Pinot Noir was coming of age in California, with Williams Selyem riding the crest. It had created a blueprint for small-production, single-vineyard wines that aspiring winemakers studied in detail. These aspirants also knew that Williams, who didn't own a grape, handpicked his vineyards with an eye to quality farming and crop loads, and applied a tender touch to fermenting and aging his wines.

The chance to work with vineyards such as Rochioli, Allen and Hirsch while also planting new vineyards for Williams Selyem appealed to Cabral. He came from a grapegrowing family and taught winemaking at Santa Rosa Junior College. Williams, who never took a winemaking class, was self-taught. "His strength in many ways was finding all these great vineyards," Cabral noted years ago.

Cabral presided over a much bigger empire. In 2011, the winery made nearly 30 different wines, more than 20 of them Pinot Noirs, as well as Chardonnays and Zinfandels, among others.

During his tenure, Cabral made more than 300 different wines, and he'll add a few dozen more this fall. He learned to be respectful of the sites and to make wine in a careful, methodical way, allowing each grape and each site to show its personality. He was able to expand production without sacrificing quality. He changed less than the wine world around him.

Cabral leaves the Williams Selyem Pinots in much the way he found them. They are delicate, fresh and snappy, with vivid fruit flavors and an enticing vibrancy, a style that compares favorably with what he set out to do. His next move will be another wine project, though he has no illusions about the romance of starting his own winery. Cabral is a realist. He doesn't need his own winery to prove he can make great wine. He's already done that.

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