

## purely domestic wine report | STUDIO1529

The next generation takes ownership of Ramey Wine Cellar | David Ramey becomes Chairman of the Board

*Renowned for classic Chardonnay, the latest release reveals exceptional wines including a 100 pointer.*

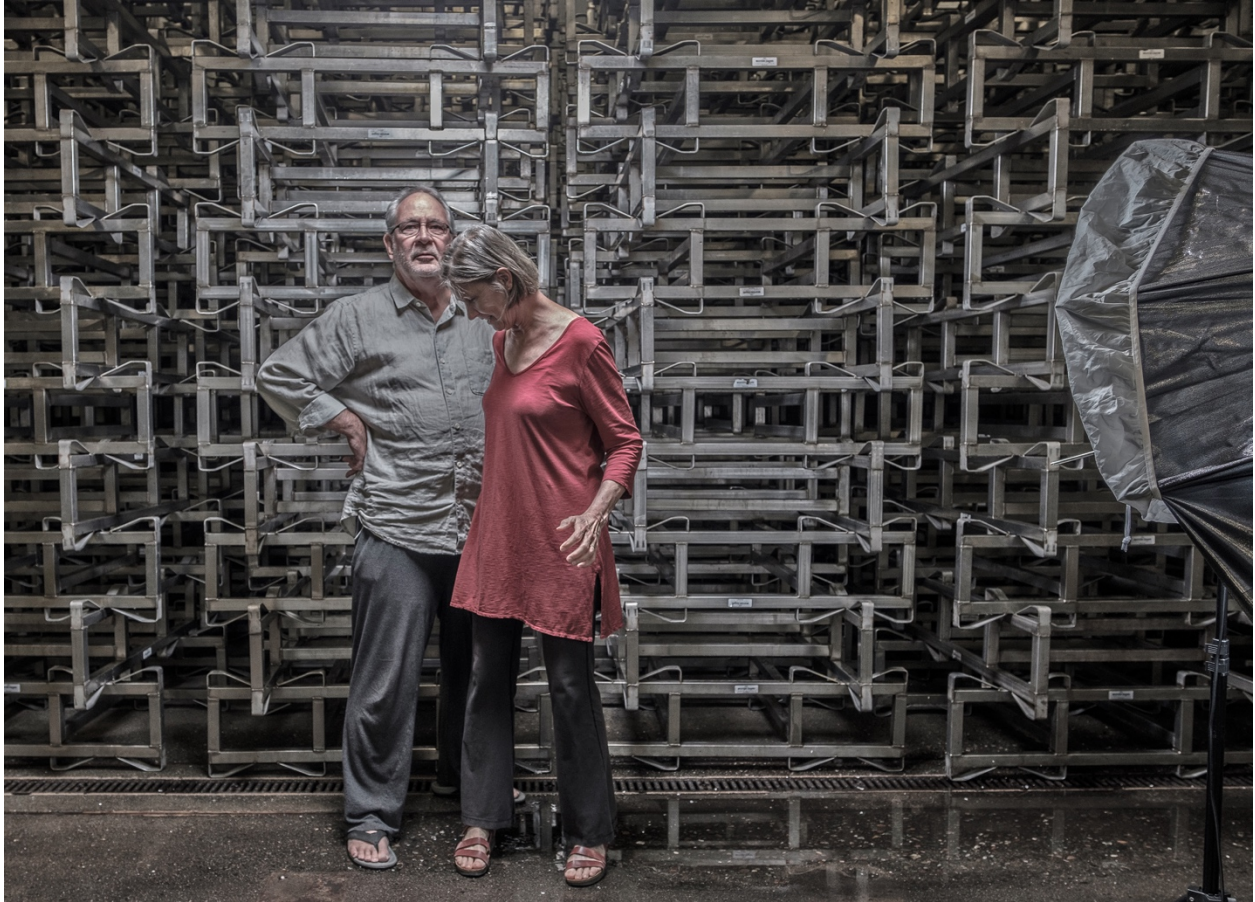
Doug Wilder, July 6, 2021 [doug@pdwr.co](mailto:doug@pdwr.co)



[l-r] Alan Ramey, David Ramey, Claire Ramey at Westside Farms Estate, Healdsburg, CA

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David Ramey is pretty much synonymous with California winemaking and led a storied career before starting his own brand in 1996, one of the most esteemed houses of Chardonnay in the state. On June 30, 2021 David and Carla Ramey passed control of the venerable [Ramey Wine Cellars](#) to their adult children Claire and Alan. Over the past several weeks I spent time with the family at both the winery, and Westside Farms, their estate property on Westside Road in Healdsburg, CA. David and I have known each other since 1999 when we worked for the same Napa Valley-based company. At the time, he was Director of Vineyards & Winemaking at Rudd Estate in Oakville and I was Director of Wine E-commerce at Dean & DeLuca in St. Helena. We now get together pretty much every year for a tasting of his portfolio and it isn't unusual that I encounter an older vintage from his library or a ringer from Jean-Louis Chave, Meo-Camuzet, or Le Fleur Petrus on the table to gauge his wines against their inspiration. As shown later the Chardonnay from Ramey in 2018 rival pretty much anything else I have tried from the vintage.



David and Carla Ramey, Healdsburg, CA

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## THE BEGINNING

After receiving a graduate degree in Enology at UC Davis in 1979, David spent time in the cellar with Jean-Pierre Moueix at Ch. Pétrus in Pomerol learning traditional methods that he has since spent four decades applying to winemaking in Northern California that were counter to the Davis 'book' on winemaking. He championed those techniques at Simi under Zelma Long, moving to Matanzas Creek, Chalk Hill, Dominus Estate where he made wine for Pétrus' owner, Christian Moueix and finally, Rudd, beginning in 1998.

John Kongsgaard's Luna Winery was the first home for Ramey Cellars in 1996 crushing a few tons of Chardonnay from Larry Hyde's vineyard in Carneros yielding about 250 cases. Growth initially was gradual, adding a designated Chardonnay from Lee Hudson's vineyard in 1997 followed by a Ritchie Vineyard bottling in 2002. Three years following his move from Dominus to Rudd, Ramey released his first Cabernet Sauvignon in 2001 and in the same year left to concentrate on his own winery now approaching 10000 cases. Ramey Wine Cellars reputation for excellence continues to grow unabated over the next decade.





Claire and Alan Ramey, Westside Farms Estate, Healdsburg, CA

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## THE FUTURE BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

In 2012, David and Carla purchased Westside Farms planted to just over 40 acres of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir along the banks of the Russian River. The following year both the Ramey's adult children did an internship at home. Claire joined the winery full-time that year followed by brother, Alan three years later. Another designated site, a Rochioli Vineyard Chardonnay appeared under the Ramey label in the 2015 vintage after being a component of the Russian River blend for a decade.

Since COVID coincided with turning 70, David moved his winery office to their home. During this time the winery entertained a serious, unsolicited overture to be acquired. Ultimately, it was Alan, 28 and Claire, 30 who wanted to continue as a family-owned company. Instilled since childhood with the knowledge their parent's undergrad degrees were not applied to their careers was freeing to Claire. "After graduating in 2013 with a degree in Religion, and an interest in pursuing graduate school for interior design. I fell into a harvest internship at the winery and realized it could be the future."

Claire's internship soon turned full-time working in Vineyard Management at the winery and introduced her to Daniel Roberts, the esteemed soil scientist who she has interned with for the last six year gaining field experience not only in the vineyards that Ramey sources, but also at his other clients giving her insights into conditions and practices that only broaden her knowledge. Roberts, who has worked with David for three decades shared with me that he views Claire as an exceptional viticulturist. "We can walk into a vineyard and I ask her what she sees and she tells me everything about it."

Alan tells me he thought about going into wine (eventually) when he was four years old though it wasn't until a college year abroad in Europe allowed him the opportunity to discover wine on his own that confirmed his early ambition circled back into his life and career working with his family. He again went abroad, this time for two harvests; first to Chile working with four brands anchored at Veramonte, then onto France, with Meo-Camuzet.

#### THEIR NEW ROLES

Claire will be responsible for managing the vineyard relationships while Alan will spend more time in the markets though both are pursuing certificates in winemaking from UC Davis. Alan tells me "The conventional wisdom is to place siblings apart in different areas so they don't fight, but my sister and I get along great and work well together, so we decided to work collaboratively." Claire adds "As future Co-Directors, we will consider everything major together, as we've already been doing as a family. (...) Alan and I will always be involved with winemaking."

I wanted to know how the quarter-century of benchmark vintages produced to this point will influence the next twenty-five. Alan explains, "There's no doubt we plan to preserve the heritage, though it's important to remember, the reason we got to the winemaking practices we currently have was through rigorous experimentation. We want that culture of control and experimental trials to continue and thrive. We do winemaking experiments every year and we plan to continue with them." Claire punctuates that vision by adding, "I think Alan put it well. Even traditions evolve. One of the biggest mistakes we could make would be to stagnate and standardize. We'll carry on the company and family philosophy of innovation for the sake of improvement, not novelty."

I posed several questions to Claire and Alan.

What was the best piece of advice your parents gave you about the wine business?

Claire Ramey: *"Hire good people and empower them. Always pay attention to even the little things."*

Alan Ramey: *"Don't trust conventional wisdom or change your approach without doing your own research. If you're going to make any change you need to do a control and experimental trial beforehand to make sure it works."*

Ramey has long histories with its growers. What challenges and opportunities does Westside Farms present being your estate property?

AR: *"Westside Farms, which is in the upper reach neighborhood of Russian River on Westside Road, has been a great new challenge. Having worked with the Hydes, Rochiolis, Martinellis and other monumentally successful growers, we've been able to learn about farming by observing and working in their vineyards, and we're able to use this knowledge on the home ranch. So overall, being exposed to so many other growers before embarking on our own site has been an unbelievable asset."*

CR: *"While we visit all of our sites frequently and regularly communicate with our other growers, we see Westside Farms daily. As such, we've come to know it on the same level one knows family rather than friends. Everyone needs friends, but even the closest friends are different than family – not necessarily better or worse, just different. The oldest blocks, planted in '89 to very wide spacing, will eventually need replanting, but it will be exciting to plant exactly what we want and develop the best plan for the site."*

If you could pull out any Ramey wine (existing or not) from the library to open for an important guest, what would it be and what story would you tell about it?

AR: *"What I love is when people visit the winery right after we've done bottling reviews, because that means we've opened up and analyzed an entire vertical of a particular wine, often all the way back to the first vintage.*

*I've been lucky to be in the winemaking room where I get to do this every year, but I love taking people who are expecting a normal tasting and surprising them with a healthy selection of wines from that lineup. It really opens peoples' eyes to how well classically made California wine can age and improve. I tell the story of how some people wrongly believe great California wine does not age, and then, by drinking the wine, we prove that view wrong. They don't have to be "important" for me to do this – they just have to be nice, care about wine and show up on the right day."*

CR: *"Tough question. I wish we had more of our inaugural vintage of Hyde Vineyard (1996) to show next to the current vintage. We opened the last case a few years ago and while most of them were shot, one was prime and absolutely beautiful. The '96 and the '18 side by side would illustrate how well the wines can age, as Alan also mentioned, and next to the 2018 it would demonstrate the longevity of our best partnerships, such as with the Hyde family. Larry Hyde has largely passed the reins onto his son, Chris, so Alan and I look forward to working with him for many more years."*

While David made the wines, Carla managed the office, compliance and the financial side of the business. I asked Carla how her role changed over the years.

"I continue to work full time and currently do not have retirement plans. Since David and I began Ramey Wine Cellars back in 1996 and with the purchase of our vineyard property in 2012, I have taken on and learned more than I would have ever imagined. I did not pay myself until 2005 because we had borrowed so heavily during the early years of our business growth. Administration covers a lot of territory: accounting, taxes, licensing and compliance, payroll, 401K plan management, etc.... Running a family business requires hundreds of tiny details, all important, like renewing the vehicle registration on our old truck each year, figuring if we make the margins to run a special depletion allowance for a distributor, and picking up garbage in the parking lot. We had some employee attrition with the pandemic, so I have had to pick up some slack. I have been lucky to be supported by great, long-term employees, who have taken on some of my responsibilities over the years. Alan now handles almost all insurance and Claire has taken on the State Water Boards. I love the idea of working for our children as they take on full ownership!"

David Ramey will become Chairman of the Board, still taste and offer direction. He tells me he will most miss the daily interaction with the Ramey Cellars team and least? The details.

A few weeks ago, David and Claire hosted me for a tasting of the 2018 Chardonnay portfolio. As shown below he and Carla are handing over the winery to Claire and Alan with some of their finest wines I have experienced in the last decade.

2018	CHARDONNAY, RITCHIE VINEYARD	RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY	14.5%	767 cs.	\$70	100
2018	CHARDONNAY, WOOLSEY ROAD VINEYARD	RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY	14.5%	540 cs.	\$70	97
2018	CHARDONNAY, ROCHIOLI VINEYARD	RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY	14.5%	905 cs.	\$70	97
2018	CHARDONNAY, HYDE VINEYARD	NAPA – CARNEROS	13.5%	905 cs.	\$70	96

**2018 CHARDONNAY, RITCHIE VINEYARD** The nose is white flowers, honey, pulverized rock dust and dried Meyer lemon flesh. The palate entry is ethereally precise and delicate, crushed rock, licorice and peach tart leading to delicate, defined mineral, pear and conifer needle. The definition of penetrating purity. Bottled brilliance. Drink 2021 - 2045. **2018 CHARDONNAY, WOOLSEY ROAD VINEYARD** The nose is fresh peach and pear along with sun-ripened apricot and notes of pineapple. The palate entry is firm, lean mineral and lemon bar accented with nectarine and pink grapefruit. Exceptional vitality. Drink 2021 - 2040. **2018 CHARDONNAY, ROCHIOLI VINEYARD** The nose is pulverized granite, toasted citrus, oak, pear and florals. The palate entry is vibrant and polished white stone fruit enhanced by juicy pineapple and grapefruit in the core. Laser-focused purity through the toasted fruit finish. Drink 2021 - 2040. **2018 CHARDONNAY, HYDE VINEYARD** The nose is sticky lemon and pear backed by licorice, gardenia and resinous peach. The palate entry is silky, lean and delicate with a core of mineral and deftly polished white and golden fruit - pear and currants evolving into sublime length and textured mineral finish. Brilliant wine. Drink 2021 - 2036.





Westside Farms, Healdsburg, CA

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug Wilder is a wine critic and commercial portrait photographer living in San Francisco, CA. Since 2011, he publishes an independent digital and print wine review magazine dedicated to an alternative viewpoint of small producers in the western US. Since its inception, [purely domestic wine report](#) has evolved into an iconic, full color art catalog-quality quarterly subscription-based magazine containing all original portrait photography of the people behind the wines and is unique in the industry. His photography is in private collections throughout California and the Pacific Northwest. Part of his portfolio is on Instagram @purelywine