



In the Custody of 'The Warden'

August 11th, 2010 | Author: [Mark](#)

Beautiful, determined, enterprising and bold are just a few words that describe Georgetta Dane, Chief Wine Creator at Big House Wine Company. I recently had the fantastic opportunity and pleasure of meeting "Warden Dane", as she's nicknamed, in Washington, D.C. for an Octavin Wine Tasting event. The following day, before her conference session at the Society of Wine Educators, she graciously set aside some time to share a little bit more about herself, how she approaches winemaking, and her newest venture into the premium box wine category.



1. Georgetta, will you please tell WineLife365 readers a little something about yourself?

I was born in the Suceava region of Romania, an historic area in a wine-centric culture. I developed my palate by tasting hundreds of different wine varieties and learned to craft wine using both old world and contemporary wine-making techniques. In addition to training as a winemaker, I hold a Masters in Food Science from Romania's prestigious Galati University and worked in Romanian wineries before coming to the United States.



My husband (who is also a winemaker) entered a lottery drawing for a chance to emigrate to America - as a bit of a lark. Imagine our surprise when he won. We had a 2-month old baby, did not speak English and knew no one. Armed with a spirit of adventure and desire to learn about California wines, we moved to Monterey County almost 12 years ago. Both my husband and I quickly found full-time work with Kendall Jackson winery, and though we are both accredited winemakers, I started in the lab and my husband became a 'cellar rat' for one year.

Things accelerated for both of us quickly afterwards. I was approached by [Underdog Wine Merchants](#) to become the winemaker - 'warden' for Big House wines in 2006. My husband went on to become winemaker for The Monterey Wine Company.

2. How did Big House Wine Company get its catchy name?

Our Soledad Winery in Monterey County, is located right by the Soledad State Correctional Facility; hence the name "Big House."

3. The labels for all of your wines depict or have an inmate, prison/penitentiary vibe. Who was responsible for this creative vibe?

Although Big House was originally established by Bonny Doon in the 1990s, the team at Underdog Wine Merchants is responsible for evolving the creative vibe to keep it relevant to today's consumer. The Big House vibe is from the brand's long history of thumbing its nose at conventional winemaking styles. As the "warden" it is my job to ensure the wines I craft live up to the brand's unconventional essence.

4. One last question about your distinctive labels. Who is the artist(s) that created them?

There are several artists that have worked on the Big House over the years, and today's artists all embrace pushing the envelope just a little.

5. You've been nicknamed "The Warden". How did you get this nickname and does this imply that you can be tough to work with?

The term "The Warden" seemed like a natural fit as we all work in the "Big House." From a practical standpoint, the word warden actually means custodian, curator or keeper. I am all of those things as well as the steward of Big House wines. I have very high standards and take my craft seriously. I am very passionate about what I do and expect others to give their very best efforts. Despite the title, I don't think I am tough to work with but I do set high expectations for those I work with.



6. You have a very unique approach to defining the style and taste of your Big House wines. Will you share with readers how you do this?

I approach making wine much like a fine perfume. I start with a base (the foundation that gives structure to the wines). I often make between 20-40 different wines before deciding on the master blend that makes each wine.

In the case of Big House White, the base is Malvasia Bianca. I then add mid-notes of Muscat Canelli, Viognier, Gruner Veltliner, Pinot Gris and top notes of White Riesling. This mix of non-traditional grape varieties is designed to give the imbiber a new experience. The wine starts with a heavy dose of nose candy: melons, pears and lychee all surround your senses and then the palate opens up to summer peach, dried apricot and tropical fruits.

With Big House Red, the base is Syrah, Petite Sirah, Petite Verdot, followed by middle notes, Montepulciano, Mourvedre, Sangiovese, Algianico, Tannat, Nero D'Avola, Sagrantino, Touriga and Barbera. The top note is usually up to my inspiration. The Big House red wine lives up to the "Fruit Bomb" moniker that you have come to expect. The wine starts with a nose full of loganberries and raspberries, with hints of leather and spices. The palate is clean, exhibiting flavors of cranberries, roses and a touch of rhubarb. The finish lingers with a touch of vanilla.

7. What is your favorite perfume?

[Dolce & Gabbana Light Blue](#)

8. Do you blend the same grapes in your wines year after year?

Generally speaking, yes. I aim for a consistent taste profile and style that consumers really like. However, it depends on the vineyards and my master blends are different every year. Wine is not a manufactured product; it is the gift of Mother Nature. Making wine is not formulaic; it is both art and science.

9. I understand that winemaking runs in your family. Your husband is also a winemaker. Do you work together or does your husband work for another winery?

No, my husband is the winemaker for The Monterey Wine Company.

10. Be honest with me, who is the better winemaker - you or your husband?

Now, Mark. I have met your lovely wife and I know that you are happily married. Would you answer a question like this? I can say that we have both very proud of what we do and very proud of each other.



11. Who is the better cook - you or your husband?

I'll just say that I'm very lucky to have a husband who knows his way around the kitchen!

12. I've heard that you love to cook at home for family and friends. Will you share one of your favorite recipes that is out-of-this-world delicious and what Big House wine would you pair with it?

One of my favorite things to do in the summer is to grill and I love sliders. I came up with a recipe that has gone over very well with family and friends. I make sliders that use just a dash of Big House Red and a pinch of paprika as homage to my Romanian roots. I naturally serve these along with Big House Red. The recipe for my sliders is as follows:

Georgetta's Sliders

Ingredients:

(Serves four)

- 1 teaspoon onion powder
 - 1 pinch paprika
 - 2 teaspoons minced fresh garlic
 - 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 - 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
 - 1 1/2 pounds ground chuck
 - 1 tablespoon Big House Red wine
 - 12 3-inch dinner rolls
 - 2 yellow onions
 - 2 tablespoons olive oil
 - 1 bunch watercress
 - 1 bunch radicchio
- Caramelized onions (sauté sliced onions in olive oil slowly to caramelize)



Directions:

In a medium bowl, combine onion powder, paprika, garlic, pepper, salt, wine and beef. Shape into 12 small 3-inch round, 1/2-inch thick mini-patties. Grill until browned, three to four minutes per side. Heat or grill dinner rolls tops until slightly toasted; put the bottom bun on top of the grilling onions to absorb the flavorful steam. On bottom of each roll, place the grilled patty first, followed by the grilled onions, watercress and radicchio. Cap with the dinner roll top.



13. If you could have a conversation with a celebrity or well-known public figure while sipping on one of your wines, who would it be?

One person that I would truly love to meet and speak with is [Chandler Burr](#), the New York Times Perfume Critic and author. He is one of the few experts in the world on the perfume industry and a wonderful writer. Because of my approach to making wine, I think that we would have a delightful conversation and I would probably learn a lot.

14. Ok, now the toughest question: You have a strong desire to make wines that are approachable, complex, and interesting. Yet, both you and Big House Wine Company have decided to package two of your premium wines in a 3L bag-in-box system, the Octavin. Many consumers might be hesitant to purchase a so-called "box wine" because they view them as an inferior wine. What do you have to say about that stereotype and what can consumers expect when they purchase a 'box' of your wine?

First, Octavin wines answer an emerging trend: Americans are starting to enjoy wine poured from premium box wines with more regularity. While table wines as a whole were up just 2% in 2009, sales of premium cask wines have increased 24% according to Nielsen Scan Data. Purchasing good wine in a cask is very common in places like Europe and Australia and I think the trend is finally taking hold here in America.

Second, Octavin bridges the wine world's interests in fresh wine, value and environmental positives. The distinctive and shapely new package, like the wines inside, set these wines apart from other box wines and makes it easy for customers to find. Octavin also allows us to invest in making great wines rather than expensive packaging. By eliminating the expense of glass bottles, we reduce the costs of packaging and shipping, and then pass the savings along to our customers. These are wines without compromise, the same wines that would go into a bottle, but with the Octavin, we can deliver these wines at an amazing price. When consumers choose an Octavin instead of glass bottles, they reduce packaging waste by 92%, decrease carbon emissions by 55% and find great value with four bottles of wine for the price of three. Each Octavin holds just 20 glasses and keeps the wine fresh for up to six weeks after opening so it is perfect for daily drinking and can be easily enjoyed in under a month in 1-2 person adult households.

Finally, Underdog Wine Merchants delivers what we like to call "Wines a Breed Apart." Our focus is entirely on ones that bring wines to the market that are truly unique and are of great value. The Octavin Home Wine Bar Collection is a perfect fit for what we do. Either goes to a bottle or an OHWB; same wine, better mousetrap.

By the way, in addition to California's Central Coast — Big House, the OHWB collection includes Monthaven Chardonnay and Cabernet (CA Central Coast); Silver Birch Sauvignon Blanc (NZ); Boho Old Vine Zinfandel (CA Central Coast); Seven (Spain) and Pinot Evil. For more information, www.octavinhomewinebar.com