

AS SEEN IN *Wine Spectator*

CATALONIA *to* CALIFORNIA

Marimar Torres cultivates her own wine legacy in Sonoma

By Aaron Romano

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANNA HALE

“Spain just never fit me very well,” says Marimar

Torres, seated in the dining room of her namesake winery in Sonoma’s Russian River Valley. Her Marimar Estate has been making high quality Chardonnay and Pinot Noir since the early 1990s. It’s an independent venture by a strong-willed woman who left her native Spain to find her calling.

The vintner’s Catalan lisp still occasionally hangs at the end of words as she reminisces. Spirited, with a slight curl to her short brown and silver hair, she is quick-witted and full of stories. Born in Barcelona in 1945, Torres grew up under Francisco Franco’s three-decade dictatorship in an era when a woman’s place was at home and her ambitions were not meant to extend beyond being a good wife and mother.

There was certainly no place reserved for Torres in the family wine business, at that point run by the third generation and rebuilding after the devastation wrought by the Spanish Civil War and World War II. The



Marimar Torres founded Marimar Estate in 1992 after emigrating from her native Spain.



The 45-acre Don Miguel estate vineyard is planted predominantly to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay but also holds a few Spanish varieties Torres is experimenting with.

youngest child and only daughter of Miguel Torres Carbó, Marimar recalls being 8 years old when her father began grooming her brother Miguel A. Torres, four years her senior, to be his successor in taking over the company. “I thought wine was very interesting, but I had to play with dolls,” she says, rolling her eyes.

That didn’t suit Torres, even at a young age. She convinced her parents that she needed an education beyond high school, which was not commonplace for women at the time. “I told my mother and father, I would never find a man to marry if I did not go to school,” she says with a sly smile.

Torres’ ambition was equaled by her tenacity. She graduated from the University of Barcelona with a business and economics degree at just 19. She is fluent in six languages.

Her hard work has translated to three decades of success as a vintner in California. She made her first wine, a Chardonnay, from the 1989 vintage. She recalls taking the wine to her father in 1991, just months before he died.

“He declared it the best white wine he had ever tasted,” she says, adding that he told her mother, “Marimar must have a winery in California!”

Torres used inheritance from her father’s estate and some funding from the

family to construct a 15,000-case facility in Sebastopol, which was completed in 1992.

And though Torres had to leave Spain to build it, her winery is full of mementos of her former home. The interior is decorated with Catalonian furniture, antiques and portraits of Torres family members. The tasting room overlooks the 45-acre Don Miguel Vineyard, named for her father, and while it’s planted predominantly to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, it has also served as an experimental site for Torres’ exploration of Spanish varieties such as Albariño, Tempranillo and Godello.

Torres owns a second estate vineyard just a few miles to the west in the Sonoma Coast area between Occidental and Freestone; the Doña Margarita Vineyard, named in honor of her mother, comprises 20 acres planted entirely to Pinot Noir.

Her wine story, of course, is rooted in Spain. Shortly after completing her university studies in Barcelona, Torres began accompanying her father on sales trips and became increasingly involved in the family business. She eventually took charge of sales in North America and later became global export manager for Torres.



Marimar and Miguel A. Torres and their father, Miguel Torres Carbó, sample from barrel in the original Familia Torres cellar in the early 1970s.

Her California chapters began with a trip to San Francisco in the spring of 1973. “When I came [to California], I felt like a fish in water,” she quips. She urged her father to allow her to stay longer. He obliged, but with one condition: She had to meet with American wine critic Robert Finigan, who had recently ranked a Torres wine very highly.

“We met for lunch, and it lasted four hours,” Torres recalls. Two and a half years later, despite opposition from her family, the two were married. “My father thought it was a mistake and didn’t expect the marriage to last a year, but it lasted four!”

She continued working for the family, selling Torres wine in North America for the next decade. From 1975 to 1984, shipments of Familia Torres wines to the United States grew from 15,000 cases to more than 150,000.

With the expansion of Familia Torres wines into Chile and the founding of the Miguel Torres winery, keeping up became increasingly challenging for Marimar. In 1984, she asked her father if she could start her own import business, but he said no. “So my ultimatum was, either I take a national importer or I quit. You can guess what he chose,” she jokes. Shortly thereafter, Familia Torres took on Château & Estates as its U.S. importer.

In her decade selling wine, Torres became more interested in the bond between wine and food. She decided to craft a cookbook and spent much of two years traveling throughout Spain, learning about its cuisine and how it had evolved in the decade since Franco’s death in 1975. Based on this research, Torres published two cookbooks, *The Spanish Table* in 1986 and *The Catalan Country Kitchen* in 1992. Today, her winery’s tasting room utilizes these traditional Spanish recipes for food-and-wine pairings.

The year before Torres handed over U.S. importing to Château



The Marimar Estate team includes technical director Bill Dyer (left) and cellar and vineyard master Tony Britton, both of whom have collaborated as consultants at the label for more than 20 years.

& Estates, she purchased a 56-acre plot in the rolling western hills outside the town of Sebastopol, Calif., in Russian River Valley. She saw that her brother’s foresight to invest in estate vineyards and improvements to the winemaking had been keys to the Torres brand’s success over the previous four decades, so she asked him to advise her in planting her sites. The first Chardonnay plantings were established in 1986; Pinot Noir followed in 1988. Independent and determined as ever, she also enrolled in the enology and viticulture program at the University of California, Davis.

One of the more unique things about Marimar Estate is that there has never been a sole official winemaker. Bill Dyer, former winemaker at Sterling Vineyards, serves as a consultant and technical director, while Tony Britton is the cellar master and vineyard manager. Torres, 73, is no longer as hands-on as she used to be, but she still contributes to all winemaking decisions. The collaborative approach has worked. Britton has been with the winery for more than 20 years, and ditto for Dyer.

The team’s focus is on creating estate-bottled, *terroir*-driven wines. “The grapes make the wine,” Torres explains, adding, “It’s our job to guide those grapes into expressing the personality of the vineyard.”

A range of Pinot Noir bottlings (seven in total) from both vineyards highlight various blocks or clones within the sites, such as in the Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Mas Cavalls Doña Margarita Vineyard 2014. This wine blends three different clones and showcases Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir at its finest, with clean fruit flavors and earth notes folded in.

The four Chardonnays range from the fresh and lively Chardonnay Russian River Valley Acero Unoaked Don Miguel Vineyard (2016: 88, \$32) to medium- and full-bodied styles. The Chardonnay Russian River Valley La Masía Don Miguel Vineyard 2016 exemplifies Torres’ fondness for wines that balance fresh acidity with rich fruit on a medium-weight frame. La Masía undergoes malolactic fermentation and is aged on the lees for 10 months in 60 percent new French oak, which adds richness and texture.

Selected Recent Releases From Marimar Estate

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	CASES
92	Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Chico’s Run Doña Margarita Vineyard 2015	\$55	220
91	Chardonnay Russian River Valley Dobles Lías Don Miguel Vineyard 2015	\$57	238
91	Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Don Miguel Vineyard Earthquake Block 2014	\$59	298
91	Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast Mas Cavalls Doña Margarita Vineyard 2014	\$47	1,912
90	Chardonnay Russian River Valley La Masía Don Miguel Vineyard 2016	\$39	424
90	Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Cristina Don Miguel Vineyard 2015	\$65	255
90	Syrah Russian River Valley Don Miguel Vineyard 2014	\$53	125

In Spain, the Torres family is widely recognized as a leader in environmentally sustainable winemaking practices, and Marimar Estate also follows this long-view philosophy. Both the Don Miguel and Doña Margarita vineyards are sustainably farmed, including the use of biodynamic processes.

Marimar Torres attributes her success, and that of her extended family, to the basic values passed from generation to generation.

“We live the work,” she says. “The family is the business, and the business is the family.” She says it started with the ethic that the older generations instilled in the children. “They were such powerful examples, and made us love our work,” she says. “And to this day, that yearning for challenges drives me to accomplish what people thought I couldn’t.”

She calls her brother Miguel A. Torres a born leader and a pioneer of his era. “His achievement is undeniable, and he showed the family what he could accomplish on his own. My father and mother would be very pleased with the prestige and renown that our brand name has achieved.”

As she traveled her path, there were no aha moments for Torres, just one foot in front of the other. She knows her family respects her accomplishments: “It’s like my father used to be—when I was in front of him, he never gave me any praises, but I always heard from others that he was very proud.”

The relationship with Spain remains complex, a mix of very close and just distant enough. For example, she originally named her winery Marimar Torres Estate but shortened it to Marimar Estate in 1998. “I had a very generous agreement with my brothers that I could use the name Torres,” she explains. “But I came to the conclusion that I expected my business to last more than two generations, but who knows what will happen in the future?”

The second generation at Marimar Estate is already at work. Marimar’s daughter, Cristina, 30, has recently begun working alongside her mother. In an ironic twist on the past, the Torres family wanted Cristina to join the business in Spain, but Marimar told them Cristina’s education was the priority.



Marimar Torres’ California wine legacy will be carried on by her daughter, Cristina (right), who, like her mother, has earned university degrees and gained business experience in the wine industry.

Having completed degrees from Princeton University and University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, in economics and business, respectively, Cristina has been working since last year at California wine giant Jackson Family, building a foundation in marketing and sales while also collaborating closely with the team at Marimar Estate. Now she is poised to take over.

“It’s always been clear to me that I want to continue in wine,” says Cristina. “And it’s especially motivating to carry on my mother’s legacy in California.”

“It will be the first Torres winery to pass from mother to daughter,” Marimar says with a smile. □