



COURTESY OF DON MIGUEL VINEYARD

Marimar Estate makes four Russian River chardonnays and an albarino.

Vintner brings Spanish flair

"I moved here because I got married to an American," says Marimar Torres, the eponymous owner and operator of Marimar Estate Vineyards and Winery. "My father was very upset."



Jeff Burkhardt

Marimar Torres is the only daughter of Don Miguel Torres, the founder of Bodegas Torres, the powerhouse Spanish wine company that produces Torres brandy and has spearheaded fine Spanish wine production by pioneering such innovations as varietally labeled wines and wines with uniquely Spanish names such as Sangre de Toro (Bull's Blood).

"I was in charge of exports," says the 72-year-old Torres. That American was a wine critic. "He wrote about our Spanish wine called Grand Coronas and said it was the best of the Spanish wine. So, I had to meet him, right?"

Torres did more than meet him, she married him. And in 1978 the couple bought a home in Sausalito, a home that she still owns. The marriage didn't last, but her love affair with Northern California did. "My family expected me to return to Spain, but instead I stayed here."

Her brother Miguel, the head of Torres wines in Spain, was educated in France, learning about quality winemaking. "When he came back, he spearheaded all the projects of buying vineyards and improving the overall quality," says Torres.

"I had talked my father into investing a little bit here. In 1983 I bought this vineyard (in Sonoma), which was originally 56 acres. My brother said it was too high of a price. It was \$8,000 an acre. That was history."

Torres planted chardonnay and began experimenting with making wine at custom crush facilities.

"I made my first chardonnay in '89 and my father died in '91; he was very sick, so before he died I took him a bottle of that chardonnay," she says. "He tasted it and said it was the best white wine he had ever tasted. Fortunately, my mother was there. He turned to her and said, 'Margarita, we must have a winery in California.' So, when he died I went to my mother and said 'Mom, you remember right? What Dad said?'"

Her two brothers helped Torres and Marimar Estate winery was built in 1992.

"We have continued to make that wine ever since," she says of the chardonnay. "Always the same; barrel fermented, a third new oak, a third one-year-old, and a third second-year-old."

Torres had originally planted chardonnay grapes in 1986 and 1987, and in 1988 and 1989 she planted pinot noir.

"I was trying to express the fruit, the terroir," she says. "My model was Burgundy." And the two most famous Burgundian grapes are, of course, chardonnay and pinot noir.

"I think that our wines are more European in style," she says. "Now of course in Europe they probably wouldn't agree, but here they are definitely considered more European in style. More elegant, with more finesse, with more of an expression of terroir."

Torres believes that many California wines are too influenced by the "human hand." They are too manipulated and too alcoholic. Torres calls wines that push the alcohol levels up a product of "instant gratification." A cheap way to add flavor.

"I love the wines that have finesse and balance and that will live a long time," she says. And if ratings are any indication, so do others. Her wines consistently score in the 90s in publications such as Wine Enthusiast.

Marimar Torres produces only estate-grown and estate-bottled wines. At the winery they use some organic methods and some

biodynamic practices. "We have been organic," she says. "But I decided to go for sustainability. It's more about the environment, so we are 100 percent solar."

"And we are biodynamic," says Torres. Biodynamics, the agricultural process pioneered by Rudolf Steiner (who also pioneered the Waldorf School method), is an often-misunderstood process.

"We have all the preparations. But I don't want to get the certificate, because frankly why? You don't want to put that on the label. It's not a good selling point and people don't understand it."

Biodynamics was born in the 1920s, 20 years before the organic movement of the 1940s. "It considers the entire vineyard, the whole property as a self-sustaining organism," she says.

So instead, Torres has steered the winery toward sustainability, receiving her "California Sustainable Winegrowing" certificate in 2017.

Marimar Estate makes four Russian River chardonnays (including the fabulous unoaked Acero) and an albarino. All are in the mid-\$30 price range. The three pinot noirs — two from Russian River and one from the Sonoma Coast — are in the mid \$50 price range. Torres also produces a tempranillo and a syrah.

"We decided to make a little bit of sparkling wine this year," says Torres. Marking a new first for

her, it will be made with grapes from their Sonoma coast vineyard. "We are going to make 250 cases," she says. "And we are going to make a rose, 150 cases of rose of pinot noir, named Rosaleda, which means rose garden in Spanish."

Torres still owns a stake in the Torres group of wineries in Spain along with her two brothers (her brother Miguel is the majority shareholder) but Marimar Torres Estate Vineyards and Winery in California is owned solely by her and her only daughter, Cristina, who also works for Jackson Family Wines (and is engaged to a Spaniard). Cristina is expected to join her mother full-time at Marimar Estate in a few years.

"I love my job and I love what I do," Torres says. "I think I can hold on for two more years," she jokes.

Marimar Torres wines can be found in supermarkets and in fine restaurants throughout Marin County. Tastings and tours (including light meals; Torres has also published two cookbooks) are available through the winery website at marimarestates.com.