

Kelly Fleming Winery: World-Class Cabernet Sauvignon, Timeless Beauty

Scores of wineries line **Napa Valley's** main roads. But there are many hidden gems you'll never find on casual, signpost-to-signpost wine tours. Places like **Kelly Fleming Winery** offer great wines, serene settings and are easy to get to once you know about them.

Kelly Fleming Winery is located in the hidden Simmons Canyon, just 5 minutes off of Silverado Trail in the **Calistoga AVA**. Drive into the hills on a short road of rural residences then make a right turn behind the houses. A little valley opens before you, revealing Kelly Fleming's beautiful stone winery set on a slope amongst the estate vines.



Kelly Fleming Winery, Fall 2012. Photo: Fred Swan

Kelly and her then-husband Paul bought the 300-acre property in 1998 for its potential as a vineyard. The neighboring **Araujo Eisele Vineyard** testified to the terroir. They liked the land's undeveloped state — nothing to tear down or rip out — as well as its beauty and relative isolation. It's adjacent not just to a number of well-established vineyards but to the land trust. The area will remain undeveloped and low-traffic.

The Flemings had been coming to Napa Valley for years, making evaluations for their

restaurant chains' wine lists. She grew to love the valley and thought they would retire to the property, plant a vineyard and sell the fruit. That plan evolved.

Paul was attached to the restaurant business. Kelly wanted the vineyard life. She moved to the property, building a house further up the canyon and, with consultant **Celia Welch**, overseeing the planting of eight acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. When the vines began to produce wine-ready grapes, she decided to vinify rather than sell. So much for retirement. "I'm working harder now than I ever did before," Kelly smiled.

In addition to her role as proprietor of the vineyard and wine label, Kelly played a large role in the design of the house and tasting room. She has a background in fine arts and later designed interiors for her husband's restaurants, which include Ruth's Chris Steakhouses in Arizona and California and P.F. Changs. For the winery and house her inspirations were Italian villas of weathered stone: simple, elegant, low-maintenance and timeless. Inside, furnishings follow the theme and are sparse but both functional and comfortable. The tasting room also includes a restaurant-quality kitchen to handle winery lunches and dinners.



The tasting room carries on the feeling of an Italian villa. Photo: Fred Swan

Celia Welch made the first small commercial vintage of Kelly Fleming Cabernet Sauvi-

gnon at **Rombauer Vineyards**. The next year, with a larger crop, they moved production to **Laird**. But Kelly wanted to follow her fruit through the whole process to guarantee the best representation of the vineyard and to provide her customers with the provenance they expect at nearly \$100 per bottle. To do that, she began construction of a 5,000 square-foot winery/tasting room. It opened in 2010. Though the winery has a 5,000 case capacity, Fleming intends to keep production at or below 3,000 cases to ensure quality.



Workers used dynamite to blast a 7,000 square-foot cave into the solid, volcanic hillside at Kelly Fleming Winery. Photo: Fred Swan



The cave houses not just barrels, but a library of bottled wine. Photo: Fred Swan



A custom chandelier highlights the volcanic bedrock and creates a dramatic setting.
Photo: Fred Swan

Celia Welch — **2008 Food and Wine Magazine winemaker of the Year** — continues to make the Kelly Fleming wines with help from **assistant winemaker Becky George**, Kelly and the rest of the small staff. “We’re all certified on the fork lift,” Kelly quipped as she led me through the fermentation room. It’s a family operation too. Kelly’s daughter, Colleen, works in hospitality, sales and marketing for the winery. Kelly’s son Robert handles national accounts.

The estate vineyard is just over 12 acres now, with four acres of Cabernet Sauvignon added in 2005. There is a small plot of Malbec too. Six blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon lie in four distinct areas. Six clones of Cabernet Sauvignon on five rootstocks provide diversity for nuance. Soil depth ranges from just four inches on steep slopes to eight feet in the flats, but it all drains quickly. “My second crop is rock,” Kelly muses. The rhyolitic

bedrock includes channels of softer material that lets roots dig in for water, but limited irrigation is still required to keep the vines alive.

I highly recommend a visit to Kelly Fleming Winery whether you're on a buying trip or just looking for a delightful tasting in a romantic setting. It is open by [advance appointment](#), Monday through Saturday. Visits, \$40 per person, include a tasting of available wines accompanied by cheese, crackers and often another treat made from the property's olives, fruits or vegetables.

Current Releases

The **2011 Kelly Fleming Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley** is pretty, aromatic Napa Valley blend. Celia Welch took all the Sauvignon Blanc Musque U.C. Davis' To Kalon Vineyard could provide. It delivers lovely floral highlights with white peach and spice. A jolt of Sauvignon Blanc Clone 1 from elsewhere provides accents of sweet citrus and dry grass.

Half of the wine fermented in stainless steel. The other half went into a mix of new, once-used and twice-used French oak barrels which lent nuanced flavors of wood and spice. After fermentation the wine aged sur lie for 4 months. The palate is lithe with a satiny texture, medium body and long-lasting finish. Drink now through 2014. **Highly Recommended.** [14.1% alc., 884 cases, \$36]

Big Pour is a new label for Kelly Fleming. This wine will be a different blend every year. It will always include estate Cabernet Sauvignon and, starting in 2010, estate Malbec, but will be complemented by other Bordeaux varieties from elsewhere in Napa Valley to create a wine that's intended to be immediately accessible but still age-worthy.

The **2009 Kelly Fleming Big Pour** is a blend of estate Cabernet Sauvignon (84%) and Merlot from a select vineyard in Oakville. Dark ruby in the glass, it offers pronounced aromas of black currant, blackberry, dusty earth, violets and dark spices (allspice, pepper). The palate is full-bodied with a lovely, silky-smooth texture imparted by rich fruit and medium+ fine, powdery tannins. Black currant, chocolate and oak flavors are at the fore. It is ready to drink now and doesn't require decanting but will gain complexity, through 2020. **Highly Recommended.** [14.7% alc., 756 cases, \$60]



Made solely from estate Cabernet Sauvignon, the **2009 Kelly Fleming Cabernet Sauvignon** is a testament to that vineyard's excellence. For maximum quality control and blending flexibility, the blocks/clones are picked and vinified separately. The estate Cabernet Sauvignon ages for about 22 months in French oak. Final blending takes place six months before bottling. The wine matures in bottle for another 14 months prior to release.

The nose is a charming melange of dark fruit, flowers, sweet spice, cedar and oak. In the mouth it is full-bodied and smooth with medium+ fine, powdery tannins. Rich but graceful, the flavors echo the aromas (dark fruit, sweet oak and spice) and add a

bit of chocolate. The finish is long. The wine I tasted had been decanted for 24 hours and I would encourage decanting if drinking this wine in the next couple of years. It will age well through 2028. **Very Highly Recommended.** [14.9% alc., 997 cases, \$98]

[Follow NorCalWine on Twitter](#) for breaking wine news, information on events and more. [Become a fan and join the NorCal Wine community on Facebook.](#) Also check out [our comprehensive Northern California winery listings.](#) They are very useful for planning a tasting trip or just getting in touch with a winery.

This article is original to [NorCalWine.com](#). Copyright 2013 NorCal Wine. All rights reserved.