

From Crimson to Rosé

Red Newt winemaker Kelby Russell establishes his own label

Last year, Kelby Russell launched Kelby James Russell Wines with a fast-selling, well received Rosé. The tasting notes for this floral-nosed, fruit-forward wine made with Cabernet Franc grapes from Seneca Lake's Nutt Road Vineyard suggest a very whimsical pairing: "Best Enjoyed While Listening To 'Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat,'" referring to Bob Dylan's 1966 song.

In just over five years, Kelby Russell has worked his way up from being a harvest intern at Fox Run Vineyards to handling winemaking duties at Red Newt Cellars. Last fall, Russell found himself on the cover of *Wine Enthusiast* as part of their annual "40 Under 40" list. In addition to his duties at Red Newt and his own label, he also makes the still Rieslings for Boundary Breaks. A native of Newark, New York, he attended Harvard University, where he was initially interested in Orchestra Management. He had a change of heart after spending part of the summer between his junior and seniors years in Italy on scholarship, working at a vineyard in exchange for room and board. Following graduation, a position at Lincoln Center fell through and Russell abandoned the Orchestra Management track for good, deciding to return home and enter the wine business.

Of the 10 wineries Russell contacted, the only one to respond was Fox Run Vineyards. He showed up at Fox Run for what he thought was an interview, but within minutes of his arrival at the winery, winemaker Peter Bell put Russell to work with Chardonnay at the crush pad. "He had an aura of quiet competence, and was clearly a very quick learner," Bell recalls. Russell and Bell bonded quickly, and by the end of harvest, Bell was encouraging Russell to work harvest in the Southern Hemisphere. That winter, Russell worked cellar hand duties at Whitehaven in New Zealand, and the following spring, returned to Fox Run. Over the next couple of years Russell went back and forth between Fox Run and the Southern Hemisphere. But by 2011, Russell was growing restless and eager to secure a year-round job in the Finger Lakes. "That he couldn't remain at Fox Run was understood by us both," Bell says. "If the timing had been better, I would have been able to offer him a permanent job here. But the fact is he belonged at a winery where he could be in charge of the entire winemaking process."

Brandon Seager, who was assistant winemaker at Red Newt at the time, recalls Russell candidly asking if Red Newt was hiring. "My mission at Red Newt was to move away from the hybrids and natives, and move toward a more profitable, Riesling-based model, and Kelby understood



Photos: Erin Scherer



that. We were on a growth trajectory, making a lot more Riesling, and that takes a lot more work. I told [Red Newt president and winemaker] Dave Whiting, “We need an assistant winemaker, and I think Kelby is the one to do it.” Russell was interviewed and hired at Red Newt in November 2011, and began working the following April, after a stint as the night-shift winemaker at Yalumba in Australia’s Barossa Valley.

Arriving at Red Newt gave Russell the creative outlet he yearned for. Seager and Russell set out experimenting with fermentations—including the Rosé and the Ports that can now be purchased in Red Newt’s tasting room. Seager and Russell’s time together, however, was short lived: within six months, Seager left his post to take his current position as chair of the Wine Marketing Program at Tompkins Cortland Community College. “When I left, I felt absolutely confident that he could do it.” Whiting, who was still active in the winemaking process but getting increasingly pulled into Red Newt’s business affairs, completely relinquished winemaking duties to Russell within weeks. “Kelby has a keen attentiveness to detail and a keen passion for Riesling,” Whiting says.

Kelby James Russell Wines allows Russell to utilize some of the skills he picked up from the Southern Hemisphere and elsewhere that he might not otherwise be able to execute under the Red Newt label. Its creation was a mutual decision between Whiting and Russell. “I had recently made a trip to the Niagara wine region, where I encountered a number of small production private labels launched by full-time winemakers at larger wineries,” Whiting says. “It seemed like a cool idea, great for everyone.”

Russell’s interest in Rosé dates back to his time at Fox Run, when Bell would make Rosé under clandestine conditions. He also felt that launching the label with a Rosé was a bold move: “People would always expect someone to open up with a Riesling. I thought that Dry Rosé was a more interesting, defiant move.” For the 2013 vintage, 321 cases were produced. Stephanie Mira de Orduna, Wine Director at Microclimate in Geneva, was an early champion of the wine. “I followed the Rosé when it was still being fermented. Kelby brought a sample in early December 2013. I liked what I was seeing, and I could see where it was going.” Production was more than tripled to 980 cases for the 2014 vintage. Russell’s musical pairing for this vintage? Charles Mingus’ “Fables of Faubus.” In the wings is a dry, Australian-style Riesling that will be released next year and a Cabernet Franc with a yet-to-be-determined release date.

Russell resides in Geneva with his wife Julia Hoyle, an alumna of William Smith and the assistant winemaker at Sheldrake Point Winery, whom he met while working at Fox Run’s tasting room in 2009. He calls his placement on *Wine Enthusiast*’s list “a remarkable and unexpected honor,” but Whiting is less surprised. “‘40 Under 40’? Absolutely deserved by Kelby. We *will* see him as a mover and shaker in the wine industry...you’ll see.”

Erin Scherer wrote about the Local Hero Beverage Artisan winner Ithaca Beer in the March/April issue of Edible Finger Lakes. She resides in Geneva.