

*Photo by Matt Morris*

## American Wine Legend Merry Edwards Changed California Pinot Noir Forever

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*By Tom R. Capo · Updated: October 21, 2026*

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Wine Enthusiast's 2026 American Wine Legend is one of the most influential figures in California wine history. Over five decades, Merry Edwards has earned widespread acclaim as a pioneering winemaker, leaving a lasting impression on Sonoma County and beyond.

One of the first female winemakers in California, Edwards cut her teeth at Mount Eden Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains in the 1970s, when the industry was in a period of profound growth and experimentation.

California wine hadn't blown up yet. While there was some understanding of what grew well and where, our modern appellation map had yet to take shape. Even at this early stage,

Edwards became intensely focused on Pinot Noir, especially the differences among the various clones. This fascination would eventually lead her to isolate a clone from Mount Eden that's now known as UCD 37, or, more familiarly, the Merry Edwards Selection.

When Edwards moved to Sonoma County to become the winemaker at the then-new Matanzas Creek Winery in the late '70s, her focus began to sharpen. Living in Sebastopol, in the heart of the Russian River Valley, she recognized that the area was *the* place for her to craft the type of wines she intuitively knew were possible in California.

In 1996, after refining her craft for almost 20 years, Edwards purchased the site of what would become the Meredith Estate vineyard. The next year, she founded her own brand, Merry Edwards Winery and Vineyards. The wines that Edwards bottled under this new label became benchmarks for age-worthy California Pinot Noir. Her wines were celebrated in the press and were a hit at restaurants all over the country, helping cement the reputation of the Russian River Valley as a standard bearer for Pinot Noir.

Perhaps most importantly, Edwards' influence on wine culture isn't just in the bottle. Her legacy lives on in the generations of women who have followed in her footsteps, as well as the success of all the winemakers she mentored. Heidi von der Mehden, Greg Brewer, Christine Benz, Jeff Stewart, Julia Iantosca, and Greg La Follette all learned their craft under the guidance of this legend.

"Today, I can reflect on my years in the wine business and feel that I truly contributed and had an impact on people and on winegrowing philosophy and techniques," Edwards says. "I am proud of what I achieved, and thankful that I had the drive and dedication to do what I set out to do and provide others with some guidance along the way."

While Edwards retired in 2020, her label lives on under the ownership of Maison Louis Roederer, with Heidi von der Mehden crafting exceptional wines in Edwards' signature style.