

Q&A

MARIMAR TORRES

Doing things her own way with gracious hospitality and estate grown wines.

BY M. V. WOOD
PHOTOS BY BRENNEN POWERS

Marimar Torres with her dogs, Bonita and Chico, on the patio of her home, overlooking her Russian River Valley winery and vineyards.



Marimar Torres, owner of Marimar Estate Vineyards & Winery in Sonoma County, was born into European wine royalty. Part of the fourth generation of the famous Bodegas Torres wine company of Spain, Torres became fascinated with the family business at an early age. She went to the University of Barcelona to earn her business degree, and then, fluent in six languages, she traveled the world promoting Torres wines. Yet despite all her accomplishments and drive, Torres knew she wouldn't have a hand in running the family business. She was a well-bred, young woman in Francoist Spain of the 1970s. As such, her fate was to be a fashionable lady, marry a rich man and live a life of leisure. But Torres isn't the leisurely type, sitting back and awaiting her destiny. She's more of a take-the-bull-by-the-horns, never-say-die type.

With that independent streak and tenacious spirit, Torres left the Old Country and moved to the American West. She set her sights on running her own winery and, after exploring the area for a few years, she settled down in the Green Valley region of Russian River Valley. A world away from the mansions and servants of her youth, Torres had just enough money to buy some land, plant half a vineyard and then sell those grapes to plant the rest. But her family, which had been hoping for her return, didn't give their wayward daughter the funds to start a winery. Undeterred, Torres rolled up her sleeves and just kept working.

Following her first harvest, she took her grapes to an outside facility to make the wine there. When finished, she traveled back to Spain with a few bottles so her family could taste it for themselves. Even under the best of circumstances, Torres' father was not one to give praise. And these were not the best of circumstances. Her father took a sip of the wine and remained silent for a while. Then he turned to his wife and announced: "This is the best white wine I've tasted in my life. We must build a winery in California."

Not long afterward, with the help of her mother and brothers, Torres built her eponymous winery and planted another vineyard on the Sonoma Coast. She's been making exceptional wines ever since.

On a recent visit to the winery, Torres and I sat down for lunch and an interview:

Vineyard & Winery Management [V&WM] *This is a wonderful meal, thank you. And it seems that these are all Spanish dishes, is that correct?*

Marimar Torres [MT] Yes, and all the recipes come from the two cookbooks I wrote ["The Spanish Table" and "The Catalan Country Kitchen"].

[V&WM] *Have you always liked to cook?*

[MT] When I was young, I wasn't allowed to cook. The cooks did the cooking. I was supposed to grow up to be a lady and so I wasn't allowed in the kitchen. I'd sneak in sometimes and made very good friends with the cooks, and when my parents went on trips, I could help a bit, but I didn't really know how to do anything. It wasn't until I'd already moved to the United States that I began to cook. Back then, not many people here knew much about Spanish cuisine, and I wanted to show them what we have back home. Plus, I figured, I'd need some authentic dishes to pair with my wines once I had a winery. So, I decided I better learn to cook, and I just jumped into it by writing a cookbook. My family has many

connections to the best restaurants in Spain, so I was able to use those connections to travel all over Spain and get many wonderful recipes. It was all very exciting, but very time-consuming — it took two years full time. It was my first big project that was all my own. I had complete control but also complete responsibility. I learned so much about cooking — and also about work and myself and life. That was a long time ago, but now I see my guests enjoying this food, and I know that all that work I did back then is still paying off and it is a part of my life even now.

[V&WM] *I mentioned to a friend in the wine industry I'd be interviewing you, and the first thing she said was: "You know how Margrit Mondavi is the ultimate hostess, the grande dame of Napa Valley? That's what Marimar is for Sonoma County." Are you aware that that's your reputation?*

[MT] Thank you so much. Being compared to Margrit is an honor. I believe many of us in this business very much enjoy that aspect of it. You want to create a lovely experience for your guests. You want excellent wine but you also want good food and good company and talking and laughter. That's what we're really creating for our guests and wine club members; a wonderful time, a wonderful memory.

[V&WM] *Tell me about your wine events.*

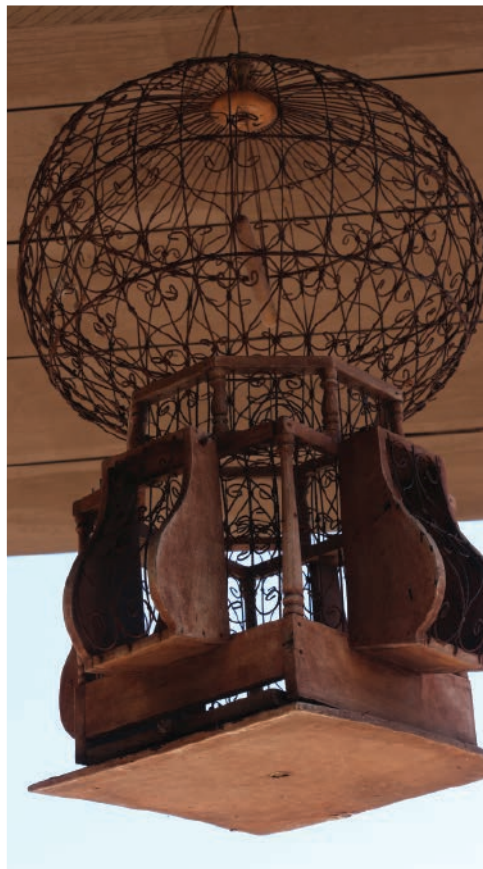
[MT] We just started a new wine experience in which we make the

MARIMAR TORRES' RÉSUMÉ

- + **Birthplace:** Barcelona, Spain
- + **Current Position:** Founder/Proprietor
- + **Professional Background:** Bodegas Torres export sales manager until a 1975 move to California. She holds a degree in business and economics from the University of Barcelona, is a graduate of the Stanford Executive Program and studied enology and viticulture for a year at UC Davis. Today, she oversees her winery and vineyards in Russian River Valley. All wines produced are estate grown.
- + **Personal Interests:** Skiing, running, biking, tennis and exercising

lunch and our guests go up into my home and to my personal wine cellar and pick out any bottle they want to have with their meal. They can explore the cellar and have some fun talking and searching together. And when they've decided on a bottle, they take it outside to our redwood grove and eat lunch out on the picnic tables, under the trees or enjoying the gorgeous view.

Another thing we do is a tour of Spain in the summer. It's very unique because it's much more personal and intimate than your usual winery tour. About 30 of our club members travel to Spain, and I show them around. We go and see my family and have exclusive tours of the Torres wineries, Barcelona, Stiges and more. And, of course, my family is connected with the other wine families, and so we go and visit them as well. It's like going to Spain to spend time with your



Torres' home is furnished with many antique items imported from Spain, including this desk cabinet (shown both closed and open) and birdcage.

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friends and family at their wineries instead of going there as a tourist.

I also like to give wine club members a taste of Catalonia right here in Sonoma County. For example, we hold an annual Flamenco dancing show and dinner that's very popular. And there are also the paella lunches — I can say that paella is my specialty. I do all the cooking for our winery events. The day before an event, I'm in the kitchen the entire time and everyone knows to keep away and not interrupt me for any reason. I have such a good time.

[V&WM] Besides the look and feel of the winery, I understand the wine itself is also European in style. Can you tell me about that?

[MT] Yes, we grow the grapes the way they do in Europe. The vines are trained very close to the ground on vertical trellises and the planting density is 2,000 vines per acre, which is four times more than the classic style in California. The high density heightens root competition and reduces vigor, which also reduces the output per vine. It's very labor intensive and the yields are lower, but the benefit is

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that the grapes have a greater concentration of flavor and a better balance. They simply taste better.

The other reason they taste so good is that they're grown organically and biodynamically. The vineyard is healthy and the grapes are of a higher quality. It's good for our environment, it's good for our vineyard workers and it's good for our customers. It's a lot more expensive, but everyone wins.

[V&WM] *What excites you about the future of your winery?*

[MT] The most exciting thing is that Cristina [Torres' daughter] is finishing up her studies. She was at Princeton and then Wharton, and now she's almost done. She grew up here, among the vines; this is in her blood. My dream is that she'll take this winery to the next level. I'm very proud and happy of where the winery is now, but this is just the first generation. In Spain, we have several generations of my family in the wine industry, from father to son. But this will be the first time from mother to daughter. And I hope that this winery is just the beginning of something that will be much greater after several generations.

[V&WM] *So, on top of running a business and hosting events and cooking and conducting tours of Spain and on and on, I see you're*



A typically cool, misty morning over Russian River Valley, as seen from Torres' vineyard home.

also the matriarch of a budding branch of a wine empire. How do you have the time and energy to do everything you do?

[MT] [Laughs] Well, the first thing is to take care of yourself. I exercise an hour and a half almost every day so that I have strength and energy. And the next thing is to simply decide to set a goal and accomplish it. It really is that straightforward. And it's something I enjoy doing.

[V&WM] *Nevertheless, running a business involves a great deal of hard work and risk. Do you ever wonder what it would have been*

like to stay in Spain and live the life of stability and leisure that was expected of you?

[MT] If I'd never left, if I'd never ventured out and lived the life I've had, I wouldn't have known any differently. So, I assume I would have been happy the other way because I wouldn't have known how much better life can be.

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Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwmmedia.com.

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