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Prominent Sonoma County winemaker Merry Edwards sells Sebastopol winery to French champagne maker



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Merry Edwards, CEO of Merry Edwards Winery of Sebastopol, and Frédéric Rouzaud, president and CEO of the Louis Roederer Champagne house. (Alexander Rubin)

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Venerable Sonoma County winemaker Merry Edwards, one of California's first female vintners, announced Friday she has sold her Sebastopol winery and tasting room plus 79 acres of vineyards to French Champagne maker Louis Roederer Champagne House.

The sale follows the October move by the 71-year-old Edwards to step down as winemaker of the namesake winery she founded in 1997 and turn over production to associate winemaker Heidi von der Mehden.

For Roederer, the acquisition adds to the other well-regarded wineries the company owns in Mendocino County's Anderson Valley. It also gives Roederer its first Sonoma County wine property.

The company already owns Roederer Estate, Scharffenberger Cellars and Domaine Anderson in the acclaimed wine region known for its pinot noir. It has 620 acres of vineyards there and produces about 138,000 wine cases a year, said Arnaud Weyrich, vice president and winemaker at Roederer Estate.

"Over the years, we have had opportunities to look at renowned wineries in Northern California but it is not until I met Merry Edwards that I felt my heart beating. Her personality, her story, her wines won me over. I knew it was the right moment," Frédéric Rouzaud, CEO of Louis Roederer Champagne House, said in a statement.

The sale places a capstone on an incredible 45-year career in which Edwards shattered the glass ceiling in winemaking, after encountering gender discrimination in the 1970s. Early on, her work included breakthrough research at UC Davis, where she analyzed the use of lead in wine. That led to the discontinuation of the use of lead capsules that cover the wine cork.

“Merry Edwards is one of the founders in our industry here in Sonoma County and is an amazing leader and winemaker,” said Karissa Kruse, president of the Sonoma County Winegrowers trade group.

Edwards and her husband, Ken Coopersmith, will continue to work for one more year as Roederer searches for a general manager at the Sebastopol winery. The sale price was not disclosed.

Edwards said she had hired von der Mehden in 2015, intending for her to eventually take over winemaking responsibilities, so she could focus on running the business as chief executive officer. After she and Coopersmith decided they wanted to have more time away from work, she changed her plans. Edwards thought more about succession and knew her children were not going to take over the business.

“I just started thinking how realistic is this? How much longer can I continue at this pace?” Edwards said in an interview.

For almost two years, she explored potential buyers, concerned about who would be able to carry on her legacy, which includes honors such as being a member of the Culinary Institute of America’s Vintners Hall of Fame and the 2013 winner of the James Beard Award for Best Wine, Beer or Spirits Professional in the United States.

Edwards said she eventually bonded with Rouzaud, of Louis Roederer, especially given that the company has been in the same family hands through seven generations since 1832.

“We just had an instant bond,” Edwards said. “The synergy was really incredible. ...What they have created is a portfolio of family-owned companies they have kept intact.”

Edwards said she was relieved to find the right buyer, after one potential acquirer told her that, “I don’t think I could do justice to your legacy.” She ruled out selling to any private equity firms because “you lose the soul of the business” she said, as they seek a financial return typically within seven years.

She was adamant that her 28 employees be retained.

“This business is just not me. It’s the people,” she said.

Edwards started as a winemaker in 1974 at Mount Eden Vineyards in Saratoga. Three years later, she was hired at Matanzas Creek Winery in Santa Rosa, where she became an expert on using different clones within a vineyard. She later worked as a consultant before starting her own winery.

Her Sebastopol winery is known for producing stellar chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and a pinot noir that is fruit forward and dark in color.

There are likely to be a few more high-profile winery sales over the next two years in Sonoma County, said Robert Nicholson, whose International Wine Associates consulting firm represented Merry Edwards Winery in the sale transaction.

“The reality is that there are always buyers for good wine businesses that have strong cash flow and market presence,” Nicholson wrote in a text.

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