

# UPFRONT

A woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a dark quilted jacket, blue jeans, and grey sneakers, stands on a rocky riverbank. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a river with many rocks and mountains in the distance under a clear sky.

AT J. LOHR'S NEW FACILITY IN MONTEREY'S ARROYO SECO AVA, KRISTEN BARNHISEL CRAFTS WHITE WINES WITH PASSION AND PRECISION

Kristen Barnhisel, J. Lohr's Winemaker for White Wines, stands in Monterey County's Arroyo Seco near the company's new winery in Greenfield, CA.

## Balancing Act



by David Gadd / photos by Jeremy Ball

It was only after a ten-year search that pioneer vintner Jerry Lohr came to Monterey County's Arroyo Seco back in 1972. With uncanny prescience, Lohr recognized that this beautiful, broad Central Coast valley, spread between the Santa Lucia Range to the west and the Gabilan Range to the east, would be ideal white wine terroir.

Arroyo Seco takes its name from the usually-dry bed of a stream that originates in the Santa Lucias and runs northeastward to join the Salinas River, which eventually empties into Monterey Bay. Captivated by this dramatic location and its attributes, Lohr planted 280 acres of vines in Greenfield. The locale was in the heart of what would eventually—thanks to Lohr's and others' efforts—become the Arroyo Seco AVA in 1983.

The region owes its long growing season to lingering fog and a cooling "wind run" from nearby Monterey Bay; the stony, well-drained soils and lack of rain during the fall season prove ideal for Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, and, especially, Chardonnay. For three decades now, the original Greenfield plantings have provided the fruit for the value-driven J. Lohr Estates tier's Riverstone Chardonnay—named for the jumbled mix of rounded, water-worn rocks in the arroyo and vineyards known locally as "Greenfield potatoes." More recent plantings, including diverse Chardonnay clones, add complexity to Riverstone and contribute to J. Lohr's two proprietary Vineyard Series Chardonnays: Arroyo Vista and October Night.

Things came full circle in 2015 with the opening of a state-of-the-art facility adjacent to the original Greenfield vineyards. A lifelong dream of Jerry Lohr's, the new winery is dedicated to white wines and reaffirms J. Lohr's commitment to both Chardonnay and the Arroyo Seco AVA.

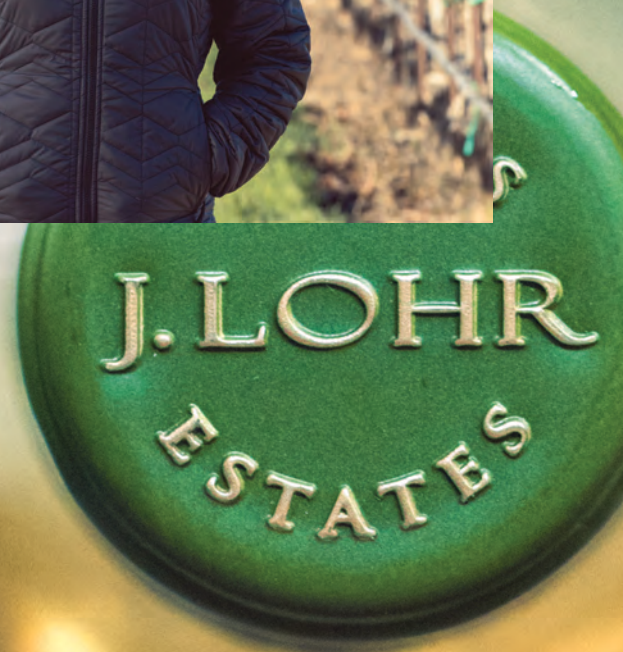
A WINERY TOUR WITH

# Kristen Barnhisel,

THE CHARISMATIC  
WINEMAKER BEHIND J. LOHR'S  
WHITE WINE PORTFOLIO



**"Where it all began":  
Winemaker Kristen  
Barnhisel stands in the  
vineyard block (planted  
to the Chardonnay  
"musqué" clone 809)  
adjacent to J. Lohr's  
new Greenfield winery.  
The Santa Lucia Range  
can be seen in the  
background.**





The winemaker in charge at J. Lohr's new Greenfield winery, Kristen Barnhisel, could hardly be more qualified to head up the winery's white wine program. A native of Santa Rosa, she grew up firmly entrenched in Northern California wine country; Barnhisel's mother worked as a biochemist at Simi Winery and her father was a home winemaker.

While traveling in Italy as she pursued a degree in Italian literature, Barnhisel was encouraged by legendary winemaker and family friend Zelma Long to cut her own viticultural teeth. Barnhisel became the first woman to work harvest at Ruffino in Tuscany—an experience that solidified her urge to become a winemaker.

As Barnhisel worked toward completing a master's degree in enology from the University of California, Davis, she also snagged several coveted internships at renowned wineries like Warwick Wine Estate in South Africa, Opus One in Napa Valley, and Long Vineyards in St. Helena, where she gained invaluable knowledge working alongside her mentor Long.

After graduation, Barnhisel spent two years as the enologist at Columbia Crest in Washington State. When she returned to California, she held positions as an assistant winemaker at Jordan Vineyard & Winery and Belvedere Winery before joining Handley Cellars in Anderson Valley, where for eight years she served as Co-Winemaker with Founder Milla Handley. Prior to joining J. Lohr in 2015, Barnhisel was the Quality Control Manager at Francis Ford Coppola's Inglenook, where she was charged with maintaining the stature of the winery's flagship Cabernet Sauvignon, Rubicon, and its top white blend, Blancaneaux.

Today, the outgoing winemaker works alongside J. Lohr's longtime Director of Winemaking Jeff Meier, bringing a vast range of experience, technical know-how, and boundless enthusiasm as she steadily ascends into a role as the "face behind the brand" for J. Lohr's white wines. Between the ever-present twinkle in her eyes and the quality of her wines, evidence abounds of Barnhisel's dedication to this esteemed Arroyo Seco winery.



**Kristen Barnhisel holds the Riverstone Chardonnay from the J. Lohr Estates series and the Burgundy-inspired Arroyo Vista Chardonnay from the "single-concept" J. Lohr Vineyard Series.**

## A Sense of Place

When we visit the small yet bustling town of Greenfield in Monterey County in mid-February, the Arroyo Seco is flowing with the remainder of this winter's rains. The weather is cool but glorious, and Barnhisel is eager to give us the lay of the land.

After visiting a block dedicated to the

Chardonnay "musqué" clone 809, which makes up the backbone of the aromatic J. Lohr October Night Chardonnay, we drive to a low bridge minutes from the winery and hop out for a look at the Arroyo Seco itself. On either side of the river are blocks of the Francioni and Griva Vineyard, which provides fruit to J. Lohr by long-term agreement.



**The J. Lohr Estates Flume Crossing Sauvignon Blanc shows zesty citrus balanced by California ripeness.**

Down in the arroyo, Barnhisel carefully picks her way across the slow-moving stream and strikes a confident pose among the rocks, the stunning Santa Lucias providing a thrilling backdrop. “Big Sur is just over that range,” she says, giving us a geographic point of reference.

Back at the winery, we don Day-Glo safety vests and enter the hangar-like barrel room, where 40,000 oak and acacia barrels exude the unmistakable wood-tinged aroma of peacefully-aging wine.

The 2017 Flume Crossing Sauvignon Blanc from the J. Lohr Estates tier awaits blending, so the barrel room team patiently stands by while we sneak in for a quick sample tasting. Barnhisel draws samples from both a stainless-steel barrel and an acacia barrel as she explains that the balance between the two fermentation methods is what characterizes this wine: The stainless steel maintains crisp, citrusy grapefruit and lime notes, while the acacia lends texture in the



**Made primarily from the aromatic Chardonnay “musqué” clone 809, the J. Lohr October Night Chardonnay exhibits notes of gardenia and orange blossom in its suave texture.**

mouthfeel and finish. The current 2016 vintage shows a delicate balance between New Zealand-like zestiness and California ripeness.

### “The Many Faces of Chardonnay”

Elsewhere in the winery, Barrel Room Manager Manny Lara has set up two tasting areas with barrels holding components of J. Lohr’s upcoming 2017 vintage Chardonnays. The first showcases the wines that will become the **J. Lohr Estates Riverstone Chardonnay** (SRP \$15), of which the 90-plus individual lots are 100 percent barrel-fermented in American, French, or Hungarian oak for seven to nine months. The lees are stirred weekly and undergo 60–70 percent malolactic fermentation for texture.

At the second tasting station, we discover the **Arroyo Vista Chardonnay** and **October Night Chardonnay** (both SRP \$25) from J. Lohr’s Vineyard Series. These are not single-vineyard wines but “single-

concept” wines, explains Senior Marketing Director Dave Muret, who is along for the visit. Barnhisel draws a sample of the clone 809 Chardonnay, grown in the vineyard block we had visited earlier, and notes its “gardenia and orange blossom” aromas.

This wine, from grapes hand-picked in early morning and crushed in a ten-ton press, will make up 60–70 percent of the finished wine in a process that Barnhisel calls “building complexity.” (She says her question during the crafting and blending of Chardonnay is always, “How much complexity can we build into it?”)

Barnhisel then moves to a component of October Night’s sibling, the Arroyo Vista Chardonnay; she draws a sample of clone 76 Chardonnay, which makes up the backbone of the blend with its brioche flavors (from lees stirring), caramel tones, and well-integrated notes of oak. “This is our ode to Burgundy,” explains the winemaker. The finished wine shows “very floral aromas, flavors of pears, apples, and Meyer lemon—it’s got a lot of layers to it,” says Barnhisel. If October Night is full and voluptuous, Arroyo Vista is poised and finely delineated—or, as Barnhisel puts it, two of “the many faces of Chardonnay.”

While striving to maintain the flavor profiles J. Lohr fans expect from these wines by “blending to a style,” Barnhisel has also managed to put her own stamp on these two icons of Arroyo Seco Chardonnay. “I love Chardonnay,” says the winemaker. “It offers such a wide palette to work with, from austere and mineral to overt and tropical.” Barnhisel has proven herself a master of both aspects of this varietal. “Balance and complexity, with freshness and texture,” she concludes. “That’s my style.”

Meanwhile, experimentation with clonal selection, cooperage, and yeast strains forges ahead at rapid pace under Barnhisel’s supervision at the busy Greenfield winery. With a couple of new blocks coming online next year, the developments will give her even more options to work with as she brings J. Lohr’s white wines into a brilliant future at the place where it all began. ■■