

## Editing Wine with Kurt Russell

By Matt Kettmann ( [Contact](#) )



Courtesy Photo

**CELEB SIPPER:** Kurt Russell sniffs his way toward a 2012 blend of pinot noir for his Gogi project at the Ampelos Cellars facility in Lompoc, where owner/winemaker Peter Work (right) advises the actor.

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Movie Star Makes Gogi Pinot Noir with Ampelos Cellars, Opens Tasting Room in Los Alamos

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With five decades in the movie business under his belt, Kurt Russell can pretty much be expected to reference filmmaking when discussing his six-year-old winemaking project at Ampelos Cellars on the western outskirts of Lompoc. During the long afternoon last month when Russell and Ampelos owner/winemaker Peter Work were deciding which 2012 barrels to blend into the next incarnation of Russell's brand Gogi, the blockbuster actor did not disappoint.

"This is where wine reminds me of moviemaking," said Russell, who sees the blending process of winemaking as like being in the editing room. "You want all the best takes." And like a film editor who must rely on what's already been shot by the director, a winemaker is reliant on the farming decisions made in the vineyard long before blending day. "You can't make chicken salad out of chicken shit," explained Russell, sporting a grin that lasted 'til the session

finished nearly seven hours later. “Its structure comes from what happens out there, but the balance is what we are gonna do today. That’s why I say that today is the best day of the year for me.”

Luckily for Russell, the biodynamically farmed Ampelos Vineyard in the heart of the Sta. Rita Hills is renowned for quality fruit, full of flavors, tension, and verve, the same qualities that attracted Russell to wine in the first place, 30 years ago, during bicycle rides with his family through Tuscany and Burgundy, where he ate grapes off the vine from the esteemed La Tâche Vineyard. He met Peter and Rebecca Work — who have been growing and making their own Ampelos wine for more than a decade now — through a family connection, and 2008 was the first vintage of Gogi, which got the nickname “Forbaz.” (Each vintage’s nickname is a nod to people or places in Russell’s life.)

He loved it so much that when the time came for the 2009 blending, he wanted to do the same exact thing. “But Peter told me, ‘Kurt, this isn’t like Coca-Cola,’” recalled Russell. “It took me a while to reckon with that, but now that’s the fun of it.” The 2009 was named Bosty Boy, the 2010 Jelly Bean, and the 2011 Angelbaby. During blending day last month, we tasted each past vintage and reviewed their individual components to calibrate our palates, and then Peter pulled samples from more than a dozen barrels: a range of clones (2A, 115, 828, 777, etc.), different barrel toasting, some new oak, some neutral, each aged for 22 months. “It’s all Kurt’s palate,” said Peter of how the Gogi project goes down. “We’re in the front seat steering, but Kurt is in the back telling us where to go.”

That process involves forming a pyramid of the various selections on the folding table, calling out percentages of which clone to include in the next sample, and then fine-tuning the blend into something that tastes good enough today, but has the potential to be even better in a couple of years, when most of it will be sold and consumed. “I work mostly from the nose,” said Russell in between sniffs, and, in another analogy, compared the blending to making the lineup for a baseball team. Thanks to the good fruit, he can’t really screw up, but he could make a stronger team if he selects the optimum order. “You can’t miss,” he explained, “but you’re trying to catch lightning in a bottle.” One year, they went through 27 different blends before deciding, though this year, it seemed to progress rather quickly, with the first blend pleasing most of the tasters. It still carried on for hours, though.

Intensely focused on making the best pinot noir he can, Russell, who bobs around like a pre-fight boxer throughout the blending process, is not out to make a vanity wine, and he laments those celebrities who simply slap their name on a bottle without really getting involved. “Those people are missing out,” said Russell. He’s also quite approachable and friendly and can often be found behind the bar at his new tasting room in the old Union Hotel of Los Alamos, ready to chat wine and life.

But pinot noir’s romantic, feminine side is what keeps Russell so passionate about the Gogi project, and he likes the idea that maybe someone’s life will change by drinking his wine. “Who knows?” asked Russell in the midst of blend number three. “Maybe a person will be born because of this wine. Why isn’t that worth doing?”<sup>4·1·1</sup> Kurt Russell’s Gogi Wines can be tasted — alongside other Ampelos wines, as well as Hudson-Bellamy wines, a project by actress Kate Hudson (the daughter of Russell’s longtime partner, Goldie Hawn) and her rock-star fiancé, Matt Bellamy of the band Muse — at the new Wine Saloon inside the 1880 Union Hotel of Los Alamos, open Friday-Saturday, noon-8 p.m., and Sunday, noon-5 p.m. Visit [ampeloscellers.com](http://ampeloscellers.com) and [1880unionhotel.com](http://1880unionhotel.com) for info.

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