

New wine a toast to mom

By Michelle Locke

CALISTOGA — Vintner Karen Cakebread can remember when women in wine were a rare vintage. Fast forward a decade or so and Cakebread is launching her own line of wines, Ziata, made by a woman winemaker, named after Cakebread's mom and being released, naturally, on Mother's Day. "It's a different world," she says of women's viticultural efforts. There aren't exact statistics on the number of women working in wine around the nation, but Cakebread estimates that today as many as 15 percent of California winemakers may be women. One sign of the times is the National Women's Wine Competition. Though it was only launched in 2007, it already gets entries from more than 200 women winemakers annually, most of them in California, says organizer Lea Pierce. Yet despite the changes, the wine industry as a whole remains predominantly male, especially at the executive level. **"You don't see a lot of all-women operations," says Brandi Jocelyn Pack, who works with mom Susan Curtis at the Jocelyn Lonen Winery in the Napa Valley. It was founded by her late father, Lonen Curtis. Their winemaker is Alison Doran, who started in the industry in the '70s and worked her way up to winemaker in 1981. Back then, women winemakers were "sort of a mascot," Doran says with a chuckle. But breaking into the male domain of viticulture, getting out into the vineyard, was tougher. "I'd be the only girl at all viticulture things." Now, women have realized "if they take the course, if they get the degree, they're going to get the job," says Doran.** Robert Smiley, a University of California, Davis, professor who follows the industry, thinks the sink-or-swim nature of the business — bad wine won't sell, whether it's made by a man or a woman — was a factor in women succeeding in winemaking. "The wine industry essentially rewards quality," he says. "It's a pretty clear meritocracy and I think they were good." Timing may have been an issue, too, says Michaela Rodeno, chief executive of the St. Supery Vineyards and Winery in Rutherford. The industry essentially was revived during the '70s when "there was quite a feminist movement going on," she points out. Cakebread is starting her new brand with 250 cases of a crisp sauvignon blanc; she plans to release 200 cases of pinot noir at the end of the year. The wine is named after her 86-year-old mother, Mary Annunziata, and the sauvignon blanc is being released May 10, Mother's Day. Not surprisingly, that went over well with Mom. "She's very excited to have her name on the label," Cakebread said with a smile.