

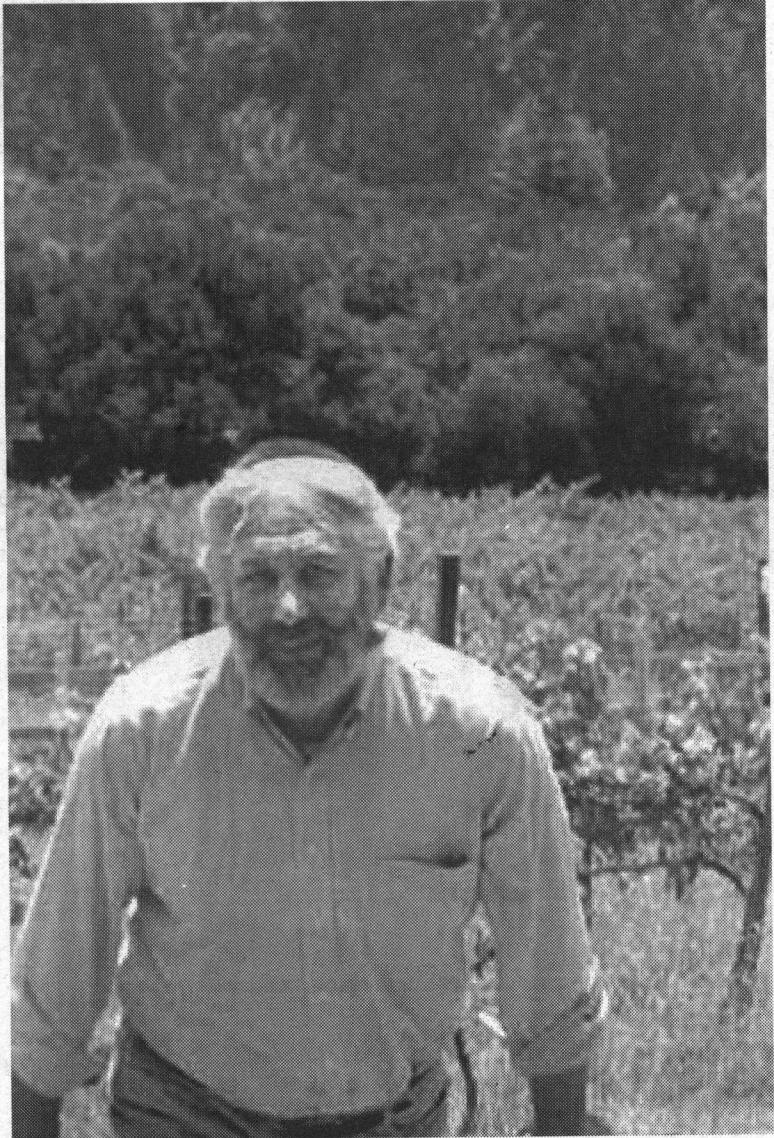
## Down From the Mountain

California's fourth—and smallest—kosher winery is run, soup to nuts, by one man on a remote Santa Cruz hilltop

by Sue Fishkoff *Wineries*

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SUE FISHKOFF

**ONE-MAN SHOW** Benjamin Cantz of Four Gates Winery.

It's not easy to get to Benjamin Cantz's Four Gates Winery. As you force your car up the three-quarter-mile, heavily pot-holed dirt path leading to his Happy Valley mountaintop operation, squeezing around the hairpin turns and trying to ignore the sheer drop into the dark, wooded ravine just inches from your front tires, you begin to understand why Cantz doesn't encourage visitors.

But when, at last, you clear the last turn and come out of the forest, a wide, vineyard-studded, sun-drenched plateau stretches

before you. The view goes all the way to the sea. Benjamin Cantz really does live on top of the world. And what he does up there, all alone, is run the country's smallest kosher winery. His three-and-a-half acres of planted wine grapes produce just 400 cases of wine a year—that's less than 5,000 bottles.

His wine is organic because, well, this is Santa Cruz. Cantz is, so far as he knows, the only person making kosher wine from certified organic grapes in the country.

"I've heard of one winery that

does it in Australia, and one in Israel, but I'm not sure," he says, adding that although his grapes are grown without pesticides, he cannot label the finished product "kosher wine" because he adds a small amount of sulfur dioxide during bottling.

Growing grapes without irrigation or pesticides is in tune with Cantz's "conscious living" lifestyle. His Web site is hosted by "ecojew," a loose coalition of like-minded people devoted to responsible consumerism and socially, environmentally-aware Jewish practice. Cantz lives simply—he has no television, he draws his water from a well, and he cooks basically vegetarian. He's currently renovating an abandoned building constructed around a 19th-century water tower, which he hopes to live in. For now, his "office" is a phone and fax machine perched on a shelf inside the building's front door.

His wine is kosher because Cantz is a ba'al teshuva, the Hebrew term for a previously non-practicing Jew who, as an adult, becomes more religious and begins to observe Orthodox practice such as keeping kosher and not working on the Sabbath. This happened to Cantz in the late '70s and early '80s, and as he began eating only kosher food, he realized that he also needed kosher wine for Shabbat and holiday rituals. And he found himself in exactly the right spot to make his own.

Cantz has been living on this mountaintop since 1971, the year he graduated from UC Santa Cruz with a degree in history and art history. At first, he worked as a handyman for his former art professor, Mary Holmes, who owned the property and rented out cabins to people like Cantz. He and the other renters built fences, tended Mary's goats, horses, chickens, cows and peacocks, as well as her extensive vegetable gardens, and basically kept the place running.

Mary's property included a sloped, sunny plateau that had been used as a vineyard in the 1880s. Many of the old vines had never been removed. In 1979, another mountaintop renter planted about 100 Chardonnay vines, but abandoned the operation and left the area. Cantz took it over, and, after practicing for a few years making kosher wine from grapes he bought in Hollister and Gilroy, in 1985 he began making wine from his own grapes. In 1991, he planted his current vineyard. His first year of commercial production was 1997. About half his product is Chardonnay; the rest is Merlot, Pinot Noir, and a little Cabernet Franc. Not only is Cantz's wine organic and kosher, it's not mevushal, or "cooked," the usual method of making wine kosher, which involves heating it almost to the boiling point and then cooling it quickly, a process known as flash pasteurization.

Boiling wine rarely improves its taste, which is why most kosher wine is barely drinkable. But for wine to be kosher without boiling, it must be handled only by observant Jews from the time the grapes are crushed until the finished wine is poured from bottle to drinking glass. This regulation dates back almost 2,000 years, to a time when rabbis worried that wine they used for the Sabbath might have first been dedicated to pagan gods. There's little likelihood of that happening today—although in Santa Cruz, who knows?—but the law's still on the books.

That's why Four Gates Winery is a one-man operation. Except for harvesting the grapes in the fall, when he calls in groups of friends or hires a couple of laborers, Cantz—whose beard and yarmulke proclaim him an Orthodox Jew—does everything himself. He tends the vines, hauls the picked grapes into his one-room winery, crushes the grapes, ages them in his oak barrels, does his own barrel

tastings to decide what he'll combine with what in any given vintage, puts the wine in the bottles, and even labels and corks each bottle himself. Then he takes his own orders by phone or e-mail, packs up the wine in boxes and drives it down the mountain in his truck to the UPS office to mail it off to his clients.

It's a lot of work. Even so, Cantz can't understand why more people don't do it.

"It's immensely satisfying," he says. "I wouldn't be interested in just growing grapes, or just making wine, but bringing something out of the ground you can then use to sanctify the Sabbath is a spiritual model."

Cantz's take on kosher winemaking draws upon the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, he's been studying for the past three decades, which teaches that a person should strive always to transform the physical world, investing it with holiness and elevating it to a higher, more spiritual plane. That's what Cantz is privileged to do every day, he says.

"To take dirt or soil and raise it up to make it something to sanctify the Sabbath is a model for the rest of life," he states. "To take something from the physical world and raise it up to holiness—not everyone has such a job."

Cantz didn't know much about wine when he started making his own. He'd had no special training, and didn't even drink it much.

"I wasn't a wine connoisseur before I became religious, so I never tasted great wine," he admits. "I was kind of flying blind."

He learned through trial and error. His first few years, he'd pick grapes until his boxes were full, even though much of it would rot because he couldn't crush the grapes fast enough.

"Now I know how much will fit in the crusher, and there's no point in picking more," he says.

If only, he mourns, he'd started making wine as a younger man.

"That first year I stayed up 53 hours to pick Chardonnay, and then I slept for 17. I couldn't do that now."

Having such a small business means Cantz is often at the mercy of larger operators. He gets his empty bottles only when deliveries arrive for the big wineries nearby, even though his grapes often ripen earlier than theirs. And he has to finish bottling the previous year's harvest before he can bring in the current year's crop.

"I don't have enough room in the cellar for two crops," he says. "You really have to time it."

Mary Holmes, a living legend in Santa Cruz, died this past January at the age of 91. A painter, teacher, philosopher, activist and mentor, she was a founding member of UC Santa Cruz who continued to paint and give lectures in the community after she retired in the mid-'70s. Her home is a treasure house of wonders, filled with mosaic floors, stained glass windows, odd, exotic furnishings, and, on every wall, her spiritually-inspired paintings, mostly of ethereal women with flowing tresses. Next to the house is a small stone chapel Mary built for meditation and quiet gatherings.

Cantz now lives alone on top of the mountain. He has a long-term lease on the land, and plans to upgrade the winery.

His is a solitary, if not lonely life, but he has no intention of leaving. "No other place calls me," he says. "And this is a nice little spot."

*Benyamin Cantz's wines are available through his Web site, [www.ecojew.com/fourgates](http://www.ecojew.com/fourgates).*