



Glass Acts

A new vintage of Santa Cruz Mountains winemakers is emerging

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The ancient practice of turning grape juice into wine is wonderfully Old World and low-tech. But just like the rest of the world, winemaking undergoes generational shifts. In spite of its culture of age and wisdom, it needs new blood.

For our Food & Wine issue, we're celebrating the Santa Cruz Mountains winegrowing region—a rambling appellation that runs from Woodside to Watsonville and from Santa Cruz to Saratoga—along with a new class of young winemakers who

are writing the next chapter of a local winemaking story that began 130 years ago.

Martin Ray, a protégé of Paul Masson, proved the power and grace of Santa Cruz Mountains wines nearly 70 years ago with his pinot noir and chardonnay grown in vineyards high above Saratoga. Mount Eden Vineyards winemaker Jeffrey Patterson carries on Ray's tradition on the same mountaintop site where Ray once lived and made wine. Just to the

north, Ridge Vineyards showed the world that California wines were every bit as good as those of France in the now famous Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976.

Do any of these four winemakers, all in their mid-30s or younger, have what it takes to make a wine for the ages and prove once again that California's best wines don't all come from Napa and Sonoma? Time will tell.

—Stett Holbrook

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Denis Hoey

Jamie Soja



IT WAS while enjoying a glass of wine with his then-girlfriend and future wife, Claire, that Denis Hoey realized he wanted to become a winemaker. He had been helping out at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, and one day he got the last bottle of grenache rose to come off the bottling line. That day, the satisfaction of a hard day's work, the beauty of the wine and the pleasure that came with enjoying it with somebody he loved sealed the deal.

"It was the 'aha' moment," he says. "I was hooked."

Hoey continued working for Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard's Jeff Emery, one of the region's elder statesmen. At first he worked part-time, but he was clear about what he wanted, and he stuck with it. Now he's the production manager and assistant winemaker.

"I've been blessed that Jeff allowed me to just go for it," he says. "He is the one reason I am where I am."

Hoey, now 29, is an exuberant man with tight, curly hair and a cherubic, ever-smiling face. He seems to realize

his good fortune and is enjoying the ride. In 2004, he decided to make his own wine, and Odonata Wines was born. He started with just 65 cases—three barrels. Now he's up to 2,000 cases. But he doesn't want to get a whole lot bigger. He likes running a one-man show. This spring he's going to open the doors to a new tasting room (Odonata currently occupies a back corner of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard's densely packed winery).

He loves working within the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation, a region whose potential has yet to be fully tapped, he says.

"My aspiration is to breathe new life and energy into the Santa Cruz Mountains [appellation] and showcase the energy that is here," he says.

He aims to make wines with less tannin and acid to make them drinkable right away.

"I'm not trying to make 30-year wines. I'm trying to make wines that people are going to latch onto day one."

They are definitely drinkable. He focuses on Rhone varietals—syrah, grenache and mourvedre—but is

working with other grapes as well. His 2009 malbec won a double gold medal at the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition in January. My favorites are his 2009 syrah—a well textured wine made from Santa Cruz Mountains fruit with abundant flavors of black pepper, cocoa and raspberry and a long, drying finish—and his 2009 grenache, made with grapes grown near Lodi. He's also got a grenache blanc still in the barrel that promises to be a stunner.

Until his tasting room opens, he pours his wines out of the Santa Cruz Mountain Winery space the first weekend of the month. Sometimes his dad helps out, and people assume the elder Hoey is the winemaker and he's the assistant.

"I've had plenty of people tell me, 'You're too young. What are you doing?' But I'm starting to get gray hair," he says. "People are starting to take me seriously."

—Stett Holbrook

Kenny Likitprakong



Jamie Sola

Everything about Kenny Likitprakong's story is filled with independent attitude. Growing up in Healdsburg of Thai, Chinese and Jewish ancestry, he exercised his passions for skateboarding and snowboarding in tandem with plenty of world travel. His umbrella Hobo Wines group is named partly in homage to songwriter/vagabond Woody Guthrie and the free spirit of wandering.

He had launched the Banyan label

with his father to showcase a line of crisp white wines, including varietals like riesling and viognier. "We started with Banyan for aromatic whites that would pair with foods I grew up eating," explains the winemaker, now in his mid-30s, "and Hobo for Sonoma County Reds, where I am from originally."

"Later, some wines came up that didn't really fit that well into either of those categories, so we added the

Folk Machine label to have an outlet for more 'experimental' type wines."

That includes, at the moment, a rare and feisty valdiguie. Likitprakong makes no promises as to what grapes might show up in his bottles from one year to the next, something that gives his fan base plenty to look forward to.

The winemaker admits that his "career path" has tended toward many forking paths, rather than a single, obvious goal. In fact, Likitprakong refuses to pin down ultimate goals, as might be expected from an experienced traveler who left arts studies at UCSC to snowboard in Tahoe; sample wines in Italy, Peru and the south of France; crush his first grapes in the Santa Cruz Mountains and surf a bit in Mexico before settling into his current oenological explorations. His avant-garde blends and unexpected varietal bottlings have already made him a cult figure in a domain well-stocked with mavericks.

The story behind his Ghostwriter label began in Santa Cruz. He made connections with Santa Cruz Mountains grape growers and winemakers when he worked at Felton's Hallcrest Vineyards in the early 2000s. This connection led him to the Woodruff Vineyard,

a hallowed patch of ground in Corralitos. The vineyard has yielded a particularly intense dose of Santa Cruz Mountains terroir in the form of the 2009 Ghostwriter Pinot Noir. Jon Bonné, wine editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, named it one of 2011's top 100 wines. The wine is a collaboration between Likitprakong and partner Brian Wilkerson.

"The Woodruff Family Vineyard is special," Likitprakong acknowledges. "It has the right geographic orientation and natural hillside drainage. The vines are old and well taken care of. They're dry farmed and always have been."

But there's more to the story. "I have walked through and worked in a lot of vineyards over the last 15 years or so, and each vineyard has a certain energy or feeling somehow," he says. "You just know which ones are special. The Woodruff Family Vineyard carries a certain peace and tranquility, where you feel like things are right and as they should be."

Like many restless creators, the winemaker has a strong sense of place. "There is no doubt in my mind that the vines feel this too—and the resulting wines are a testament to it." Many palates agree.

—Christina Waters

Lindsey Otis

Lindsey Otis' travels as a winemaker have taken her all over the world, but she finally found her place in the Santa Cruz Mountains, close to home.

After graduating from UC-Davis' prestigious oenology program, she headed to France. She then spent time working at Saratoga's Cooper-Garrod winery and later Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz. She moved to New Zealand. She made shiraz and riesling in Australia. Back in the States, she worked in Napa Valley at Silver Oak Cellars, makers of one the region's bestselling cabernet sauvignons. But Napa wasn't for her.

"It was very clear to me I didn't belong in Napa," she says, recalling how she chafed under a conservative

winemaking culture.

From Napa, Otis headed west to Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley and the Williams Selyem Winery, maker of one of California's most lusted-after pinot noirs. But still Otis, 30, longed for home.

She'd grown up on Santa Cruz's Westside a short walk from the beach and had developed a love of quirkiness, a willingness to take risks and a distaste for buttoned-down, textbook style. Most of all she wanted the latitude to create.

So when Bradley Brown, winemaker and owner of Big Basin Winery near Boulder Creek, posted a job for assistant winemaker, she jumped on it. So did about 100 other people. Brown says he picked



Otis over all the rest because of her technical expertise and breadth of experience were big selling points—and because she knew the area well.

“She really wanted to be here,” he says.

As a winemaker, Otis says she wanted to come home to Santa Cruz because she loves the multitude of microclimates and soils in the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation. And people here, she says, “aren’t afraid of making wines that taste different.”

Otis looks the Westsider part, with her Haut surfshop sweatshirt, oversized sunglasses and straight blond hair. But a taste of some of the vintages she’s had a hand in during her 18 months at Big Basin reveals a winemaker of real talent. She oversees production of the winery’s white and rose wines while Brown handles the reds, mainly pinot noir and syrah. But in reality they collaborate on everything.

Otis was attracted to Big Basin’s commitment to “natural

winemaking,” a minimalist approach that involves using wild yeasts and as little intervention as possible. She calls it “guiding the grapes to the bottle” to produce wines that are “transparent” and “pure.”

Keep an eye out for the winery’s first-ever riesling. It’s still in the barrel, but already the 2010 vintage is a racy beauty with floral aromas and juicy flavors of pineapple and tropical fruit backed with well-edged acidity.

While Big Basin has made its reputation with its syrah, the winery’s pinot noirs are outstanding, particularly those from Corralitos’ Woodruff Vineyard. Otis and Brown collaborated on the 2009 and 2010 vintages, and they are flat-out gorgeous wines built with tannin and heft. They are made to last.

“As a winemaker I like that people can share in it and that you’re passing on a message of place,” says Otis.

—Stett Holbrook

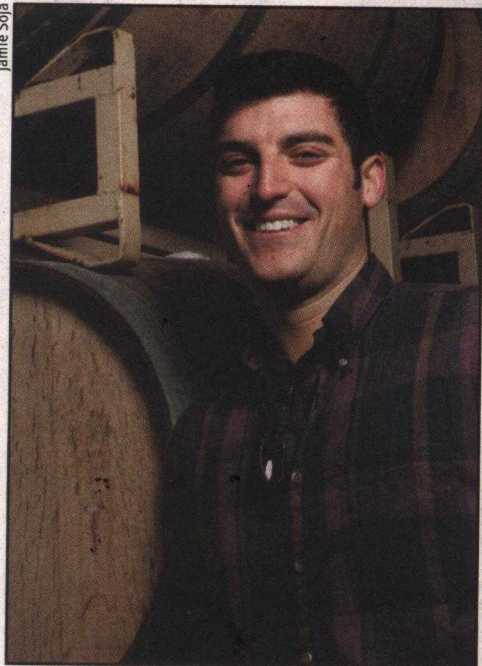
Mica Raas

Winemaker Mica Raas is a rebel and an outsider. A tall 29-year-old with close-cropped dark brown hair, he has a singleminded focus: to restore the Santa Cruz Mountains wine appellation to greatness.

He rejects what he says is the

cliquish old-boy network of Santa Cruz Mountains winemaking. He says he often finds himself unable to buy grapes from local growers because he doesn’t belong to the right club. He calls the Santa Cruz Mountain Winegrowers Association, the region’s member-based promotional arm, ineffectual.

Jamie Soja



But he thinks the appellation can achieve greatness.

"The Santa Cruz Mountains in my opinion is one of the most underdeveloped and underappreciated wine regions in America," he says.

Raas went to school at Sonoma State University, where he discovered his love for winemaking, a passion he likens to a disease.

"You either have it or you don't," he quips.

His affliction took him to several

wineries around the state, from Sonoma Port Works to a "custom crush" house that made wine for scores of big-name brands like Charles "Two Buck Chuck" Shaw. The experience exposed him to all sides of winemaking, from small-batch, artisanal production wines to industrial sugar- and acid-flavored wines made to mask crappy grapes.

"I found out what I like to make is single vineyard-designated wines," he says. "I don't want to make something that is repeatable. Even if it is the same vineyards, it's not the same every year."

He established Mica Cellars four years ago to showcase what a single vineyard can do. It's a tiny winery, just 405 cases. He sources grapes from this area and beyond, but in the future he plans to make his wine from all Santa Cruz Mountains fruit.

His 2010 Smith Road Pinot Noir, a meaty but well-balanced wine made from grapes grown in Corralitos, picked up 91 points from the Beverage Tasting Institute, making it the second-highest score given to a Santa Cruz Mountains pinot noir (Windy Oaks Winery took the top score). He also makes a charbono, a unique but highly drinkable red wine made with

an obscure Italian varietal. For easy quaffability, my favorite was his 2009 CFM, a delicious blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot.

If he's the Santa Cruz Mountains' rebel outsider, his Winemakers Studio in Watsonville is his rebel base. The industrial-looking winery near the airport sits between a bike factory and auto repair shops and occupies a warehouse with cement slab floors that hold the chill of the morning all day. His runt-sized boxer Tule runs about and chews on stray bits of wood. He calls it "an above-ground cave," a rather ideal setting for making and cellaring wine. It's unglamorous, but still attracts visitors for tastings.

But Raas says he's not after the glory alone. The Winemakers Studio is a collective. He shares it with three other wineries, and a mead producer is planning to move in as well. He envisions the place as an incubator for new winemaker talent. The idea is to offer a supportive (and affordable) environment for a new generation of winemakers who can learn from each other and create wines to match or beat those of better-known winegrowing areas.

"I'm trying to bring in all the upstarts who have a dream," he says. "This is how a region becomes successful."

—Stett Holbrook