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wine writers who have driven us to that point. When they talk about Bryant Family, Screaming Eagle, Harlan, and all these other wines that are high alcohol, over extracted, over this, and over that, they sell for \$300 a bottle, and everybody's clamoring to buy them. I think those wines have driven us to this style. Everybody wants those big, rich, ripe flavors. So we have to wait for the grapes to ripen to that point."

The press ripped 2000

But those who lament high alcohol wines may soon be gratified. This 2005 vintage has been a cool one, at least in north coast counties, so farmers will be unable to ripen fruit to high sugar levels. Another attribute of the current vintage is that it is a heavy one. Vines have set lighter crops in the last two years. After several years of light crops, they typically produce more fruit. Furthermore, a heavy crop in cooler weather is a happy coincidence, because farmers must drop grape clusters so that existing sugars, made in the woody part of the plant, migrate to less fruit. Since the crop is larger, even without the fruit that farmers were forced to drop, we'll have plenty of wine without price increases. "This is a cooler vintage, so it's really easy to say, 'OK, this is like '98. Well, '98 for most people in Napa Valley was not a disaster [although the press said it was]. In '98, the wines were just a little more elegant. Maybe they had a little bit of greenness, but a lot of that has aged out. The wines are really nice now. To me, they're very Bordeaux like. They've taken on some really nice character. Same thing with 2000. The press ripped 2000 because it was another cool vintage, but those wines are really

elegant, drinkable, and approachable. When we have cooler vintages that are more Bordeaux like, they tell us that they're not good. When Bordeaux has a vintage like that, they say it's a great vintage for them."

So many choices

Regardless of the criticism of big, rich, new world wines, Europeans have also been making riper wines. Yet still, some of the most prestigious and expensive European winemakers have remained faithful to more refined, traditional styles, especially Barolo winemakers in Italy and some Bordeaux winemakers in France, whose wines hover around 13% alcohol and tend to be lighter in color and contain more acid. Never before have consumers had so many choices.

"I've been making wine for 30 years," Ken remarks, "and it's incredible to me to see how much has changed. The way we make wine, the equipment that we use, the availability of barrels and yeasts, the techniques that we use, the sanitation in the cellars, everything is better than it was, the plant sources, the varieties. Well this guy's got Cabernet. So what clone is it? What rootstock is it on? What's the soil type? We think about a lot of different things than in the days when I first moved here. The wine business has changed a lot, and it could still change a lot. And eventually, we'll have tradition like the Europeans have. We tried that, or we use to do that. Now this works better. But in the meantime, American wine drinkers demand a certain kind of wine from California and Napa Valley, and I think until that changes, we have to fill that demand. And I hope Bordeaux doesn't change its style very much, because I think there's a demand for that too." ■



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September 2005

Winemakers tend to move from job to job for the same reasons that everyone else does. They can make more money at other wineries. They can gain experience. They no longer see eye-to-eye with their employers. They don't like the parameters of the job, the wines they have to make or the fruit that they're given for the task. Ken Deis is one of only a handful of winemakers in the Napa Valley, who has grown deep roots at a particular wine estate. His career developed at the Flora Springs estate, much like the vines that the Komes family first planted there in 1977 after they purchased the property. Ed Sbraga at Beringer, Craig Williams at Phelps, Mike Calini at Stony Hill, Bill Sorensen at Burgess, Ken Bagota at Raymond, Rob Davis at Jordan have all been at their posts for over 20 years, probably for different reasons. Ken Deis is clear about his. Over time, he has developed a deep and heartfelt respect and affection for the Komes family at Flora Springs. He's been their first and only winemaker and along with family members has been instrumental in the development of the winery, which today includes 50,000 cases per year, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Sangiovese, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Grigio. >

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The Komes family owns 1,100 acres, over 600 of which are covered with vines and planted in some of the best locations in the Napa Valley, from Carneros to Oakville to Rutherford to St. Helena to Pope Valley. The family sells most of its fruit to other wineries, reserving about 30% for its own production. Ken Deis feels that his reputation as much as the family's is on the line with each bottle that leaves the winery, even though his name isn't on the label. He has no need to move elsewhere to develop professionally, because in the last 30 years, he has participated in the enormous changes that the wine business has undergone and expects the evolution to continue.

Before coming to Flora Springs in 1980, Ken held only two other jobs, which represented both ends of the winemaking spectrum, one a mega winery and the other, tiny and family-owned. Out of college, he

worked for United Vintners at the Mission Bell winery north of Fresno in Madera. He remembers that it was huge, churning out millions of gallons of wine from thousands of tons of fruit. "I didn't know who my boss was not only at the facility but even who owned the company. I found out they were back in Connecticut and also owned Kentucky Fried Chicken. We were making Inglenook wines there, but Inglenook was in the Napa Valley. Finally, I couldn't stand it," he says. His next job took him to Napa Valley where he worked for Joe Heitz, one of the first celebrity winemakers in the business, famous for his Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. At that time in the mid 1970s, Napa Valley hosted no more than 30 wineries. "As hard as Heitz was to work for, as demanding as he was, in the morning I'd walk in, and he'd say, 'Hi Ken, how are you doing? How's Evelyn? How was your weekend? Did you see your folks this weekend?' My Mom passed away in the third year that I worked there. God, the way he reacted you'd think it was his Mother who died. I felt like part of the family." Ken learned a lot from Joe Heitz, he says, "things to look for, how to run the cellar, how to pay attention. Joe made me do everything. I chopped poison oak, changed the oil in his car, mowed his lawn, and stacked his firewood. Joe believed that if you worked for him, you did everything. But no matter what you were doing, he could never walk by without telling you that you were doing something a little bit wrong." Joe Heitz had three

children, who all joined the business during the time that Ken worked there, and clearly those children had priority over his tenure. After four years, he could see that he'd have to leave if he wanted greater winemaking freedom and responsibility.

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Enjoying the satisfaction

At Flora Springs, Ken has enjoyed an experience and satisfaction that is similar to ownership, in that he has participated in building a successful business that was a start-up when he joined the company. In 1977, Jerry and Flora Komes purchased what had been the old Louis Martini homestead just outside of St. Helena, and the 350-acre estate was in serious decline. Recently retired as president of Bechtel Corporation, Jerry had plenty of experience with construction and began to renovate the property as an investment. As he began the project, his children became enamored with the estate, so much so that they dropped their careers to live there and build a wine business, at which point Jerry and Flora relinquished the project to them. Son John Komes was a general contractor and took over the renovation of buildings on the property, 50 acres of which were planted with neglected vineyards. His sister Julie Komes Garvey, a teacher, handled public relations and marketing, and her husband Pat Garvey, a college administrator, got busy in the vineyards. Initially, they hired vine-



Ken Deis, winemaker

yard manager Jim Lider, who became Pat's mentor until Pat could take full responsibility.

That's why I've stayed

After three years, they hired Ken as winemaker. Ken was, of course, fully prepared for his job while John, Julie, and Pat struggled with the learning curve. "I worked with John to set up the winery for the first commercial production in 1980. I was the only employee for the first three years that I worked here. They were my crew. During the harvest, if we had more than a couple of tons of grapes coming in, I had to crush on Friday and Saturdays because those were the only days they could help me. They all had other careers going at the beginning. If I had bottling, I had to wait for them to come around. For the first couple of years, Julie used to help me foil bottles, and I'd do all the labeling. Then I got my first assistant. As the winery grew, I got more and more help. Now for the harvest, I have ten people working for me. Over the years, John and I have not agreed on everything, but we've become friends. We have a certain respect for each other. And the same is true with Julie. She and I can sit down and talk just about anything or nothing. Julie's son Sean, who's 28, wasn't even three years old when I started here. I watched him grow up. If it weren't for the fact that he has such great parents, he'd be my kid. He grew up with my two boys, and I was there when their youngest son Joe was born. John's two sons

were 11 and eight when I started here. I've watched these kids grow up. I feel part of their lives, and they feel part of mine. That's why I've stayed."

All the rope that I want

Along with his attachment to the family, Ken remains at the winery because he enjoys the success that the wines have had in the marketplace. Today, the winery is best known for Trilogy, one of the first California Meritage wines, which is a blend of estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc. "They've given me all the rope that I want, to do the things that I want to do, yet within their stylistic boundaries. Fortunately, we get along as far as that's concerned." The "stylistic boundaries" that he refers to are the ones that are widely accepted among California winemakers as well as among other new world winemakers, especially the Australians and Chileans. Winemakers are aiming for rich, ripe flavors, dark color, and soft tannins, which they feel the market is demanding now instead of lighter wines. But what goes along with that definition is also higher alcohol content than wines made in the past. "To get those flavors, those

characteristics, we have to wait for the grapes to get to a certain maturity level. We can't worry about the alcohol"

Driven by cult wines

"The market, at least to me, is driven by cult wines. They're the ones that are up there in the 14.8/15% alcohol. Look on a label of Kistler Chardonnay and try to find one that's under 15% alcohol, and if it is, it's 14.8%. My friend Ed Sbraga over at Beringer, I tasted a wine of his one day and asked what the alcohol was. He said it was 15.8%. That's damn near Port. I didn't even taste the alcohol, maybe because I'm just used to high alcohol wines." He goes on to say that when Chardonnay is fermented in barrels, it's harder for alcohol vapors to escape, unlike Cabernet Sauvignon and other red grapes, which are fermented in open-top tanks where a certain amount of volatile alcohol can escape. He says also that today's more efficient yeasts, the catalyst for fermentation, are converting every single molecule of sugar into alcohol whereas yeasts that winemakers used in the past didn't perform as well. "It bothers me sometimes that we're being criticized for high alcohols by the same



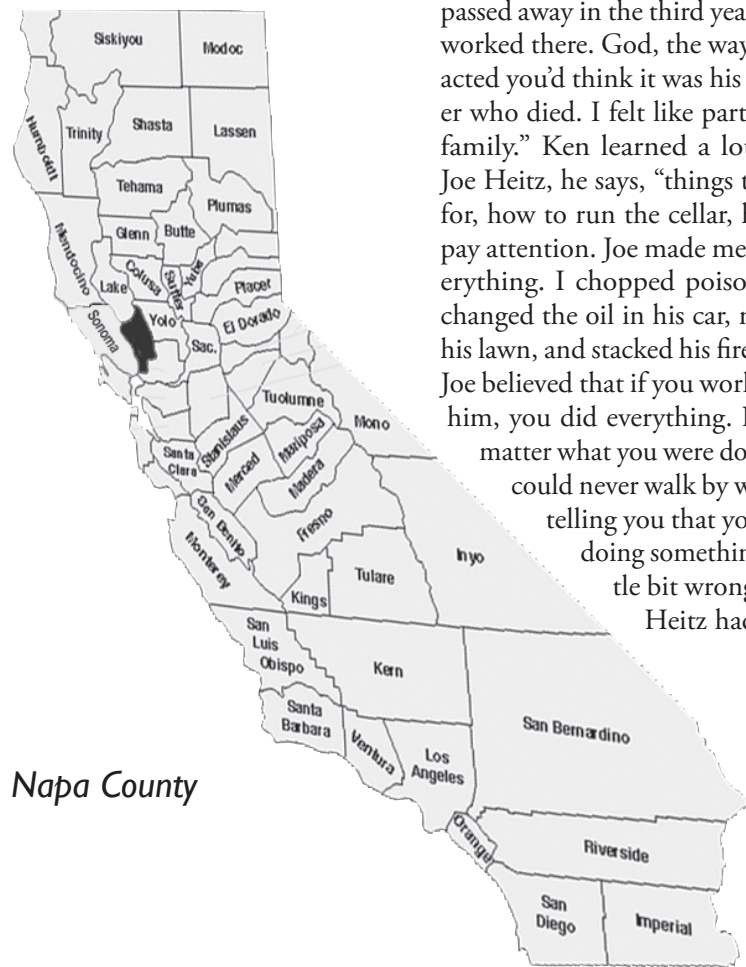
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