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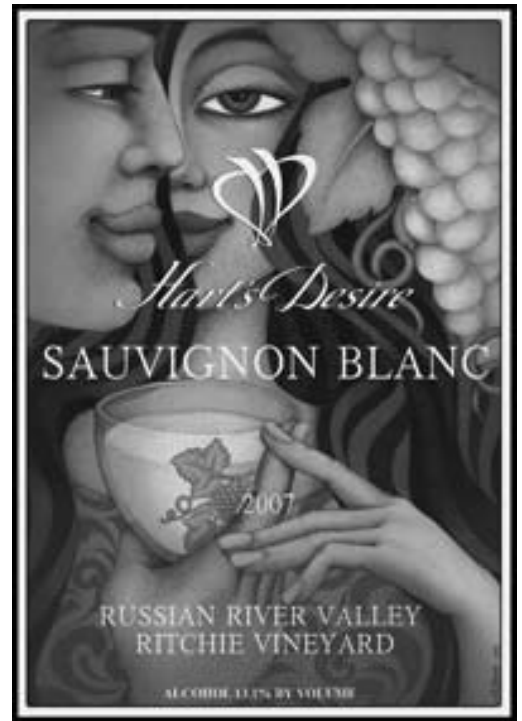
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California

*Winery of the Month*

## Living His Hart's Desire

*Hart's Desire Wines*



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John Hart has come a long way from the microbiologist he once was, designing safety systems for mass-produced foods. His goal then was to tightly control the production system in order to standardize the product and eliminate contamination. While science is also an important part of winemaking and allows winemakers to understand the underlying chemistry that governs the process, ultimately winemakers rely heavily on sensory, tactile, and intuitive information just as they always have way before chemistry was a human concept. Premium winemaking is not a cookie-cutter exercise, like churning out packaged food. It avoids standardization and aims for unique expression, each bottle reflecting the grape and soils where the vine grows.

Today when John makes Pinot Noir, he steps into clean boots, climbs into a stainless steel tank and walks on the grape clusters that he dumped there, gently breaking the skins while the wine ferments. He's making Pinot Noir like some Burgundian winemakers are still doing in

France where the varietal reaches its highest expression. Certainly Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay is not made by this method. Mass produced wine, like industrial food production, needs to be controlled and predictable. It's made by machines, not people. But the goal of the winemaker, making small lots of premium wine, is to carefully deliver the taste of singular fruit growing in particular places. John makes about 2000 cases a year of 16 different wines that never exceed 350 cases each. He buys his grapes mostly from prestigious Sonoma vineyards although he's discovered a spectacular vineyard in Il Dorado County that he says he can't resist.

John's recipe for Pinot Noir is as follows: "We fill the bottom of a stainless steel tank with dry ice. Then on top, we'll throw whole clusters of grapes. There's no water in dry ice, just CO2, which protects the juice from oxidation or other organisms that might enter. Once the fruit warms up to 60 degrees, fermentation will start on its own. After four or five days,

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## WINERY OF THE MONTH



### WINERY from cover

we'll get in and tread on it, actually step on the fruit and walk around on it. We do that twice a day every other day two or three times. And that's it. That's the whole process. Then we press off the wine into barrels. What you get is a really soft, voluptuous wine, easy to drink. And the perfume is really strong. It's really fragrant, super fragrant. In other words, there's no manipulation and extremely gentle treatment." Clearly, the recipe wouldn't work with larger quantities. But with the small amounts that John makes, he can use this old method that is especially suited to delicate Pinot Noir fruit.

John shares a tasting room in Healdsburg just outside of town in Sonoma County's famed Dry Creek appellation. The building name is Old Roma Station, which was a large winery in the early 1900s. Old Roma Station is located on a railroad line, now defunct, that will be rebuilt to connect Marin County north of San Francisco with Sonoma, all the way up to Willits in Mendocino County. The winery filled rail cars with grapes destined for Chicago and the East Coast, throw some yeast inside of the car, and cover it with a tarp, John recounts. The fruit would ferment along the way, and by the time the train arrived in Chicago, the grapes had become wine, which was then drained out into containers that people brought to the station. John equates this story with the simple way that he makes his Pinot Noir, although the wine that drained from the rail car would not begin to compare with the quality that emerges from John's tank. Old

Roma Station is now a big complex that houses 12 different tasting rooms. "So you could actually go to this one location and taste anything you want right there, all little artisan wineries like us."

John makes his wines a few miles up the road in Geyserville, at the center of Alexander Valley, another prestigious Sonoma County appellation. Like the tasting room, the winery is located in another cooperative venue. Six different wineries share the premises, which in the 1950s and 60s had been a Portobello mushroom factory. The building had been insulated and air-conditioned, so was perfect for making and storing wine. "We have a big knowledge base there, more than a hundred years of winemaking experience among just three of us. If we have a problem or a question, we have great winemakers there, who have answers. Some have been making wine for a lot longer than I have."

John says that his goal has always been to sell his wine within 30 miles of his own house. But with 200 wineries in Sonoma County, the competition would be fierce. "I've had to step out a little bit," he smiles, "but still I don't rely on sales in Southern California." He sells 35 percent of his production direct to customers and sells through distributors in several different states. He delivers the rest to local restaurants, wine shops, and high-end, specialty grocery stores.

Big names and big wine estates may be highly conspicuous in California, but for every big name, there are hundreds of

smaller ones, winemakers who dedicate themselves to their craft, who bring their own creative sensibilities to winemaking, and who do so on a scale that permits innovation. Constellation Brands Inc., the largest wine company in the world, having surpassed Gallo, has made news lately because in this economy, it hasn't made the profits that it requires and is selling an 80 percent stake in its Australian and British wine business to an Australian private equity firm for about \$230 million. In California, the company owns Robert Mondavi, Ravens Wood, Clos du Bois, Blackstone, Estancia, and Franciscan among others.

The way John Hart sees his situation is that the wine business is slow like most other businesses, and competition is stiff because many new wineries have come on line even in this economy. "The space on the shelf is not any larger, but there are a lot more players trying to get it. With the large amounts of wine on the market too, there's cost cutting and deals being made, and the big guys have a lot more leeway." But he's also looking forward to celebrating the winery's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. During these years, not only has he built a business that he loves, but he and his wife have raised two daughters who both graduated from college, one of whom is working with him. You get the feeling from John that life is good and that neither the up or down cycles in the economy are likely to separate him from his Hart's Desire.

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