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California
Winery of the Month

Getting Off the Train

Hobo Wine Company



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The son of an immigrant father, Kenny Likitprakong plunged into the American experience early on. "When I was 17, I started traveling around, listening to Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen and the likes, seeing different parts of the country and other countries, writing in journals and taking photos.... An updated Huck Finn, Kenny spent a fair amount of his youth skateboarding, snowboarding, and ocean surfing and visiting places where he could do that, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Lake Tahoe, Mexico and then went on to Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Graceland in Tennessee, and the East Coast. His artistic side drove him to stints in the Theater Arts Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz and the Creative Writing Department at San Francisco State University. But that was then. He was born and grew up in a Sonoma vineyard at Domaine St. George in Healdsburg where his father has been General Manager for 40 years. Ultimately, his dreams took shape around that terrain, growing grapes and making wine. "It's something I enjoy doing," Kenny says. "I could do other things, I suppose."

Despite early wandering, Kenny Likitprakong didn't miss a beat. He graduated in his early 20s with the most prestigious viticulture and enology degree in the country from the University of California, Davis, and according to the chronology on his website, his travels became more focused on wine country in South America and Eastern and Western Europe, a global hobo, hitchhiking with a credit card and a few dollars in his pocket. Between voyages, he worked at Alderbrook in the Dry Creek Valley, at Winters Winery in Yolo County, Hallcrest in Santa Cruz, and Moshin Vineyards in the Russian River Valley. At the same time, he was developing Hobo Wine Company and making wine for his own labels, which now include Hobo, Banyan, Folk Machine, MakeWork, The Guardian, and the new one Ghost Rider, not to mention Le Clochard, the French Hobo, a non-vintage table wine that Kenny imports from France. Each label represents a different category of wines, most all of them made in very small quantities, some as small as 35 cases.

Some might say that so many labels confuse Hobo Wine Company's identity. A friend

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with a public relations firm in San Francisco tells Kenny that he's not following the rules for branding his business. Kenny's response is "Oh, I think it's fun. All the wines are really different, so they deserve their own identities rather than being all lumped together. I try to give them their own little lives, I guess." And it works for him. His production now ranges between 7,000 to 9,000 cases a year and has a devoted following. But even consumers who might not recognize the company, could easily reach for the quirky labels that they see on a shelf, including fanciful names and illustrations with boats, bones, and bright colors.

Kenny can produce many different wines because he doesn't own a vineyard and instead purchases grapes from different growers, although he sometimes farms vineyards from which he buys fruit. He has recently taken the next step and now leases three different vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, a total of 11.5 acres, whose wines will be bottled with the Ghost Rider label. "I used to farm a Dry Creek Valley Zin vineyard for a couple of years. We still farm another small vineyard in the Russian River Valley, but the primary farming energy we put into Santa Cruz now." The vineyards are in a cool climate area and produce Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Unlike the ripe Pinot and Chardonnay of warmer Santa Lucia Highlands, Ghost Rider wines will be more restrained, "more similar to Oregon wines," Kenny says. "They're still fruit forward, but there is a leanness that's not typically Russian River or Anderson Valley."

Kenny remembers working in Santa Cruz in 2000/2001 and being envious of the

success that riper Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir was enjoying. He tried to emulate those wines without success until he realized that he envied their success more than he liked the wines. "In the Santa Cruz Mountains, you're always going to be making wines that are lower in alcohol and higher in acidity. I started to develop a taste for that type of wine. Prior to even going to Davis, I had worked for an import marketing company that was based in San Francisco and at that time almost exclusively drank French wines. That was my introduction to that style of wine. I was a kid, not a whole lot of money, and those French wines were the cheapest wines I could drink. Their food friendliness I took for granted at that time, but when you start to drink California wines that are 15 or 16 percent alcohol, you see the contrast pretty quickly."

In fact, what distinguishes Kenny's wines from many others in California is that they seem more "natural," a label that describes a movement among some younger winemakers toward lower alcohol wines that preserve balance to the extent that winemakers don't need to add acid, tannin, and other ingredients as is sometimes necessary when fruit is picked at high sugar levels. "We believe in unforced wines," Kenny says on the website. But he's reticent to claim membership in the "natural wine" group. "We sort of operate on the fringe of it I think. I don't know if I consider myself part of the movement. We've always made wines from well farmed, sustainably farmed vineyards, not organically farmed necessarily, but we've tried to let

the wines stand up on their own. I've always worried about falling into a niche and having a customer be drinking the wine because of a certain trend or a certain niche. I'd rather build a brand and have people follow it because they like the wine, not because they're made from native yeast or organic grapes. I think all those things are important and there's an ethical reason for doing those things, but I've always had that stand apart from what we do to build the brand."

Kenny has been making his own wine for ten years and working entirely for himself for just two. To have built his production to 9,000 cases testifies to his energy, dedication, and the quality of Hobo wines. He's currently making his wine at Domaine St. George, but he's purchasing some of his own equipment. "I guess we're trying to become more independent, more in control of our production," although Kenny adds that he's not ready to take on the expense or responsibility of owning a winery facility.

Hobo seems to be getting off the train and settling down a bit. Love may be in part responsible. "I have a one year old and a four year old, Edith and Ida Mae Rose. They spend quite a bit of time in the vineyards and in the winery. They're pretty involved. They're around a lot. It's definitely a family business. Their mother is fully involved, does a lot of compliance work and some of the sales stuff, book-keeping stuff. She's not spending a lot of time in the cellar, but I value her opinion when it comes to the final product. She's got a good palate."

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