

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

ta Maria Valley, which is a very windy spot and very influenced by off-shore air-flow coming off of San Luis Bay. It's still windy, but less obnoxiously windy there." Ken cultivates four acres of Wente clone Chardonnay at the winery, one of many different Chardonnays that he produces. He calls the estate Chardonnay a "landscape vineyard," because of its small size but says that it makes a fine wine. Because the winery is located in Santa Maria Valley, Ken allocates 65 percent of his production to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, which thrive in cool climates.

Ken leases an additional 18 acres from Dana Merrill, the proprietor of Lamar Junction Winery. "I've done business with Dana for over 20 years, and when he was developing that vineyard, I came to an agreement with him to custom plant and farm for me various varieties that most people wouldn't necessarily plant as a first choice, like Verdelho, Tempranillo, Aglianico, Cunois, and several superior clones of Merlot. Ken also purchases grapes from some of Santa Barbara County's most notable vineyards, among them Sierra Madre, Bien Nacido, Solomon Hills, Garey Ranch and the historic Nielsen Vineyard. From the warmer Paso Robles area in San Luis Obispo County, he purchases Zinfandel, Cabernet Franc, and Mourvedre.

With a case production of 23,000, Ken makes over 40 different wines and is especially passionate about what he calls "heirloom varieties." He points out that more than 3,000 winegrape varieties exist but that the wine industry concentrates on a tiny number of them. "I enjoy working with different varieties.... I make more esoteric varieties than almost anybody on the Central Coast. The hardest thing that I've tried to do is get people to think in terms of having some of these varieties on a regular basis rather than just as a novelty. Sometimes, people will enjoy them but then go back to their Cabernet or Chardonnay, the chocolate-vanilla varieties." Ken says that he's had great success with Negrette, a wine that

he describes as having characteristics of both Pinot Noir and Syrah with an exceedingly silky texture. He also praises Malvasia Bianca, which he makes in a dry style.

Iberian varieties are some of his favorites now. "Spain has a long tradition of winemaking, but from the standpoint of market share, it's really boomed in the last few years. It also has some of the best values, which is driving a good portion of the sales." Ken observes that the Central Coast of California is geographically more like Spain than Italy or France in terms of rainfall and soil types. He expects the wines to grow in popularity.

Ken Volk is fascinated with viticulture here in California and elsewhere in the world and dedicates himself to educating his customers to the big range of flavors that wine can express through different grape varieties. He says that he makes more esoteric wines than almost anyone on the Central coast. But he's more conservative with his winemaking procedures. Especially in the last 15 years, technology has introduced a lot of new equipment and materials to the winemaking process, so much that there seems to be a backlash taking place now. Many winemakers are reverting to what they call "natural winemaking," and part of that movement is to use only the yeasts in the field or the winery to ferment the grapes so that the wines develop a more unique or localized character. But Ken eschews localized yeasts and is happy to choose from the large number that are now available if he feels that any particular yeast will impart better flavor and texture to a wine.

Ken has been called an "innovative traditionalist" with his winemaking in the sense that he's not adverse to the technology that most winemakers have come to rely on. "We take a lot of traditional methodologies and then modernize them to a point where they're more efficient." For instance, he employs the OXO barrel

rel rack system, which provides four wheels under each barrel so that the barrels can be easily rotated. The rotation serves to mix the lees, the spent yeast and fruit particles, with the wine instead of pulling the bung and reaching into the barrel to stir by hand. "A white wine in new wood barrels tends to pick up that oak flavor very aggressively, and it's usually not very well integrated. But if you're keeping the lees in suspension by rotating the barrel through the majority of the wine's cellar life, it tends to allow some very nice textural elements in the wine. It's a great example of a simple solution to a major problem." He goes on to explain, "There's a lot of logistical work in lees stirring in the barrel. This roller system makes it so easy." Ken says that the wine also undergoes less oxidation with the roller method because they're not pulling the bung from the barrel and creating a vortex in the wine as they stir the lees. "We have better tools than what existed in the past to perform some of the same operations."

With a smaller winery, Ken is now able to devote more time to multiple interests, especially to the Cal Poly State University Viticulture and Enology program. "I'm trying to make Cal Poly one of the top viticultural schools in the world. We have a very rounded program and more undergrads than at the University of California, Davis. It's one of the bigger programs in the world with 300 students." He says that the State of California is cutting funding for graduate and minor programs, so the University has had to curtail growth in that area. But he has a master plan for a new facility for enology, viticulture, and wine marketing and expects to fund it with contributions. "We have an experimental winery on campus, but we're looking to take it to a whole new level." The project is an apt metaphor for Ken Volk's life. He tends to take his projects to a whole new level. Although his plan for Kenneth Volk Vineyards is to keep the winery small, even reduce the current case production, we'll see if he can resist raising the project to a whole new level.



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California

Winery of the Month



Champion of Heirloom Varieties Kenneth Volk Vineyards

Kenneth Volk has earned many achievement awards, such as Wine & Spirits Magazine "Winemaker of the Year" in 1990, Cal Poly State University "Agriculturalist of the Year" in 1999, Paso Robles Vintners and Growers Association "Wine Industry Person of the Year" in 2001 to name just a few. Still, you may not be familiar with his name, but you've certainly seen the Wild Horse Winery label, a white horse seemingly levitating in mid gallop, mane flying, against a solid background of color. In 1981, Ken Volk founded Wild Horse Winery in Paso Robles, and over the 23 years that he owned it together with his family, he increased the initial case production from 600 to 300,000 cases a year, a notable accomplishment. At the same time, he served as chairman and president of various professional and civic organizations, and today he is the Chair of the Cal Poly State University Enology, Viticulture, and Wine Marketing program. After selling Wild Horse in 2003, he founded another winery in Santa Barbara County, Kenneth Volk Vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley, 75 miles south of Wild Horse in Paso Robles. Clearly, Kenneth Volk is a man with high energy levels and formidable organizational skills, which he now divides mainly between the new winery, the university, and breeding plants,

especially tomatoes, an enthusiasm that harks back to his degree in fruit science.

So why does someone sell a highly successful winery and then develop a new one? Ken Volk explains that the sale resolved some difficult inheritance issues, and it also gave him the opportunity to get back to what he enjoyed, what got him into the wine business in the beginning. He could once again spend time in the cellar and the vineyards of his smaller winery instead of devoting himself to administration and sales, which obligated him at Wild Horse. "Basically, I wanted to do a small, efficient winery in Santa Maria Valley that I could run with minimal personnel."

Ken purchased the original Byron property, a 12-acre parcel with a defunct winery, from Robert Mondavi Corporation, while Mondavi was selling off some of its assets in the area before the final sale to Constellation Brands. Ken points out that he purchased just the real estate and that Kendall-Jackson owns the Byron label. Located in Santa Barbara County on the Santa Maria Mesa, the property is in the Tepusquet Canyon, a cool weather area. "The nice thing about being up the Canyon a little bit is that I'm somewhat out of the wind tunnel of the San-

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