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what to do. It's part of the education process. I experimented with extended maceration, with native yeasts, with everything I could get my hands on, which was very limited from a home winemaker perspective. Still, I tried. That was my education.

Actually, this is a good market to be starting out in. It's very competitive, but you can buy good grapes at a good price before your own vineyards mature.

And it's beneficial to be in an area with a lot of new vineyards. The older vines up here are typically planted on St. George rootstock or AXR1, which is a highly vigorous rootstock, and in a hot region, you have insane vegetative growth. So the canopy is harder to control, and the quality of the fruit is not as good as some that's grown on newer rootstocks. And plus, we have newer clones of grapes. So what's happening is that the newer vineyards are planting premium clones on a more scientific study of rootstock, and we're getting vines that are more balanced. We're starting to taste it in the quality of the fruit that's coming in.

What newer technology are you using?

The nineties were definitely a revolution for winemaking. As much as I am proud not to be a U.C. Davis winemaker, in the nineties the university came up with so much more knowledge about grapes and wine fermentation. There are better yeast strains now, so many of them. I use specific yeast strains for white wines, and we have strains for reds that

produce less tannin and others that produce more. You have yeasts that produce certain esters that create more fruit aromas in the wine. I clean barrels to get rid of bacteria with an ozonator that disinfects with ozone. We can use less sulfur dioxide in the wine, because we have the ability to keep the winery cleaner. If you add sulfur to the wine in high quantities, it prevents the wine from going through its oxidation process, and wine in barrel is supposed to oxidize. That's one of the reasons it's in barrels in the first place. Barrels are porous, and some of the alcohol evaporates out. Some of the water evaporates out. It's kind of like cooking a nice sauce. You want to reduce it and concentrate and focus the flavors. Same concept with barrels. There's a lot of benefit for the right amount of slow oxidation, but when you have SO2 above 30 parts per million, it slows down the wine's ability to oxidize. For the old school, 50 parts per million was standard. But now, we add 20 to 30 at crush. I think it's important to have some SO2 during fermentation, because you can eliminate certain bacteria, and you can prevent a lot of volatile acidity from forming. But with only a little SO2, you don't form sulfur compounds in the wine, which smell like garlic or burnt flavors. But basically, I'm doing just straight-up, old school winemaking. The grapes come in. I crush them very gently, trying not to break the skins up too much. My goal is to express as much of the fruit and the terroir that the vines have underneath them as possible. And I think that Fair Play is one of the best appellations for that result, because of the climate and the high quality soils up here. ■



California

Winery of the Month



On top of the world Mount Aukum Winery



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Anna Maria Knapp, Owner
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July 2005

Standing outside of the Mount Aukum tasting room leaves visitors breathless, whether from astounding views or 100-degree summer temperatures with breezes that slap the heat around the mountaintop. At an elevation of 2,615 feet, visitors see the Sacramento skyline to the west, the Foothills to the north, and the majestic Sierra Nevadas to the east. Happily for people and vineyards alike, cold air drains down from the mountains and refreshes summer evenings and nights in much the same way that ocean breezes cool the coastal regions. The appellation here is Fair Play, a sub-zone of El Dorado county, and its history is typical of the whole Foothill area. Originally a mining camp during the Gold Rush, the first settlers built shelters and planted seeds at the same time, so agriculture flourished and survived even after the Gold Bust, although Prohibition eventually put an end to vineyards. The old timers in the area are those who began to replant vineyards in the 1960s. But the newcomers, who are responsible for the more recent increase in vineyard plantings and wineries, migrated here in the last ten to 15 years, lured by the history of grape cultivation and prices per acre that were a fraction of those in coastal appellations. Currently, total vineyard acreage in Fair Play alone is 350 with 22 wineries, growing fast although not yet surpassing what was there during the Gold Rush. ➤

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First cousins Lance Campbell, Scott Betton, and Kevin Hoelscher together own the 80-acre Mount Aukum Winery estate and are fairly typical of the eclectic population that gravitates to the wine business. All 30-something, they were each called to other professions, which they soon dropped to follow the river of wine that has bathed Californians since they first wandered into the territory. Kevin, an architect with a background in finance, manages the business. Scott, a chemical engineer, handles sales, and Lance, with a degree in philosophy from the University of Dallas, is the winemaker. His favorite philosopher is Kierkegaard, the father of Existentialism, who was troubled by the apathy of his time and bemoaned the lack of passion in people's lives, which doesn't appear to be a problem for the cousins. All three are passionately at work in Fair Play and keenly aware

of the challenges of being new guys in what can be called a new appellation as it expands into different areas with different grape varieties and recent technology. My conversation with Lance is slightly edited for clarity.

Which grapes do you think do best here in Fair Play?

We have five and a half acres under vine now and could comfortably plant ten more even though most of the land here is steep. We have a block of Cabernet Sauvignon, a small block of Petite Verdot, and some Petite Syrah and Zinfandel. We planted with the intention of making a more coastal style of wine, but we realized that the Rhone varieties are really awesome up here. Syrah is just amazing and complements the soil. The berries come in really tiny, so the wine is black and concentrated and tannic. It's unlike any Syrah that you taste from California. The Mourvedre is doing very well. The Viognier is phenomenal, and we also do a Rousanne and Marsanne as well. We actually did a Grenache Blanc this year, so we have all four of the Rhone white varieties. We didn't really choose to go there, but we realized that's where the quality was.

How many other wineries are around here?

There are 22. We're on the southwest corner of the Fair Play appellation. Not all of them are new. Some are vineyards that the University of California, Davis



"I'm having fun with blending."
—Lance Campbell, winemaker

began planting about 30 years ago. Actually more vineyards were planted before Prohibition. Fair Play was a big mining town with a population of about 10,000 people here in the late 1800s, and they had planted all sorts of vineyards. Barbera was a big grape back then. One of the beautiful things about being in a newer wine appellation is that experimentation is going on. You've got some wineries specializing in Cabernet and the Bordeaux varieties, and you've got other wineries that are going Rhone, and some that are going Italian. So there's a lot of diversity and less of a consensus about what does well here.

Some people are going to get lucky and some aren't.

You might be right about that. There's some really good Sangiovese up here. We've got some that we blend with Cabernet, so we are making a Super Tuscan, which I think turns out to be a wonderful wine. I'm into blending quite a bit. It's a direction that I see myself going in. Actually, I think the whole California wine world will go in that direction for quality improvement. If you taste a lot of blends, they taste better than varietals alone. Now people want to buy the name of the grape, but I think in time that's going to change

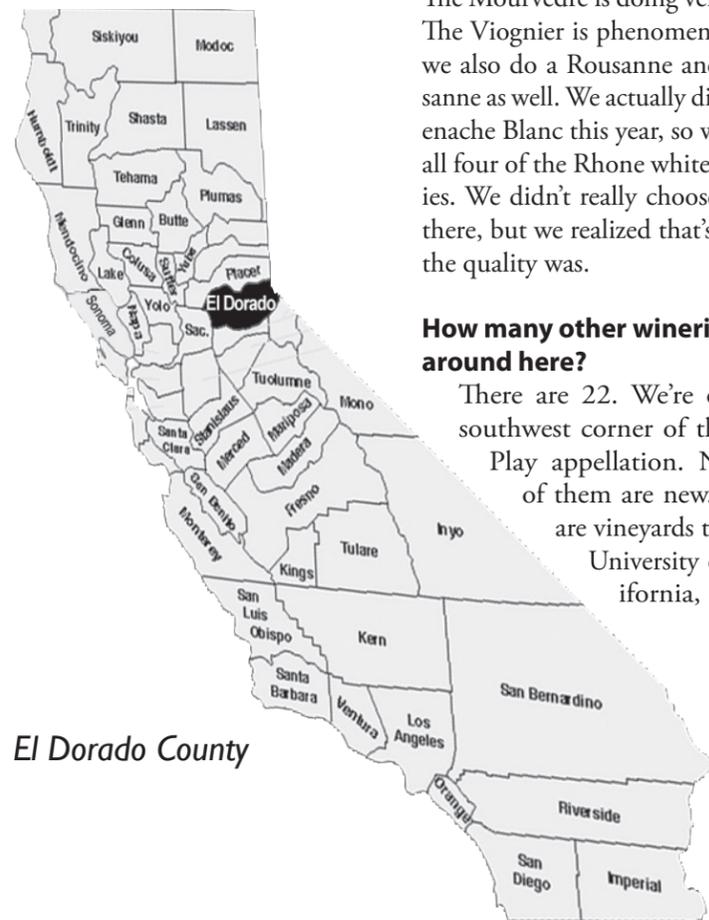
if people want finer wine. It's already started. You see a lot of people doing Super Tuscan now, and obviously the Bordeaux blends have been around for a long time over here. Rhone blends are becoming very popular. In fact, the Roho is one of our best selling wines. It's a blend of Mourvedre, Syrah, and Petite Sirah, so it comes off really nice on the palate and scores really well in competitions. We're not really reinventing the blend. We're taking grapes that are commonly blended and following the old models. They're not in our portfolio yet, because I just started making them. I'm also staying varietal, because varietals are where the market is now. But I'm having fun with blending. You take a really good Syrah, and you put a really good Cab Franc with it. It's got that spicy note from the Cab Franc, and it's got that depth from the Syrah, and the two together make a wine that is superior to either one of them. People who really enjoy wine and have tasted different things are attracted to blends, although right now it's one percent of one percent of the market.

Do you have a formal wine education?

I have a non-formal education. I'm a non University of California, Davis student and a non Fresno State University student. I became passionate about wine when I was living in San Francisco, working at restaurants. I had wine wholesalers

coming in all the time, and over a period of time, it happened. It was a discovery, the sense of smell for the wine. That's what led me down the road. Before that, I was drinking bottles of Merlot and \$10 Cabernets that were less exciting. But I started watching it and looking at the fingers in the glass and studying the wine empirically. I wanted to know more. That's when I started opening books and reading. I started off with *Connoisseur Guide*, what vintages were great, what varieties were what, just basic educational stuff. We cousins were born and raised in Texas, and we didn't drink a lot of wine there. But Texas now is a really good wine market, parts of it are, the parts that aren't dry. So I took a job at Chateau St. Jean in Sonoma. They put me on with their cellar masters, and that's how I learned all the cellar work, from hands-on experience. Chateau St. Jean wouldn't hire anybody from U.C. Davis in the cellar. A college kid would come out there, and either they knew too much and wanted to work in the lab, or they had too many opinions. Whatever the problem was, they found students not to be good employees. They preferred to train some guy who's ready to work and get things done. It was a good experience for me. That's basically where I learned the trade. So I was a cellar rat there, the guy who carries the hose around. But I eventually graduated to more important roles, like racking the wine from

barrel to barrel, and taking care of the white wine.
So you went from being a cellar rat to what?
I went to Seghesio Winery, where I had my next wine experience. Scott got a job there too. We had just bought the property here at Mount Aukum before we started working at Seghesio and were coming up here periodically, trying to clear the land and then driving back over to do the crush there. It was back and forth a lot. I was a cellar rat there too but was educating myself about wine. The benefit of being there was having Ted Seghesio around. He was easy to talk to, a great guy, and he offered me a lot of information about wine. So I learned from the school of hard knocks, from the ground up. I put myself in places where I could ask the winemaker questions. Steve Rieder at St. Jean was a little less accessible, but at the same time, whenever I could catch him, he'd talk to me. Margo was also friendly, and the whole lab team at St. Jean was great. When you put yourself in an environment where you can learn, the education is pretty affordable. At the same time, Scott and I were making wine at the house. We were making wine to understand it. I was experimenting with yeast and not using yeast. I was working at the winery and doing things their way and was trying to find out what would happen if I did things differently. I really learned what not to do more than I learned



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