

## REGION OF THE MONTH



### WINERY from cover

newspapers, the Chronicle and the Examiner. Along with their professions, they shared winemaking, which they transformed from a hobby to a business in 1994, starting Eric Ross Winery (their middle names) in Occidental, Sonoma County. In the fall of 2005, John Storey accepted a buyout from the San Francisco Chronicle and started his own winery, now making 2000 cases of wine that he sells to restaurants and wine shops mainly located in the San Francisco Bay Area. Since John doesn't own his own vineyard, he is free to roam the state for grapes. "I try to find unique vineyards in unique places in California," he says, which at this point are located between Sonoma County and Paso Robles on the Central Coast. "I use a vineyard up in Occidental for Pinot Noir. Only a ton of grapes come out of there.... I make Petite Sirah from a vineyard over in Solano County from vines that are 50 years old.... The vineyards down in Paso Robles have their own characteristics."

Now that so many wine bottles contain not only the name of a particular appellation within a county, but also the name of the vineyard, winemakers are finding that the less they manipulate the fruit, the more the wine preserves characteristics of the location. "It's hard," John says, "but that's the direction I'm going, less intrusion. Certainly you can do a lot of things to make the wines change characteristics. Between picking and things you do in the cellar, you can really change a wine. But if you put a stamp on a wine, you show that this is what that vineyard tasted like in 2005 and 2006 and 2007. You can see how it changes. I used to make a wine from a Zinfandel vineyard in Santa Rosa, and it had wonderful char-

acteristics, cedar and eucalyptus. There was a eucalyptus grove a quarter mile away, and I swear it influenced the vineyard. Grapes are very sensitive to where they are planted, just like people."

"For the most part, wine is pretty simple. It starts in a vineyard somewhere and comes out in the bottle. I'm trying to get away from doing anything more to wine than I have to. There are people out there who are trying to make wine without sulfur, but it's really risky. Ultimately, it would be great if you could pull it off. If you want to get the purity of the fruit, you try to get away from sulfur. The fact is that you've got to protect the wine some way. But people are going in that direction away from sulfur."

Like sulfur, a certain amount of oak barrel aging benefits wine. Because the wood is porous, red wine undergoes a very gentle oxidation that softens the tannins. But the oak also imparts flavor and in exaggerated amounts can obscure the character of the fruit. "It's very easy to make big, oaky wines. Certain wines lend themselves to more oak, Cabernet and Pinot Noir for example. Oddly enough Pinot Noir can handle a lot of oak because certain varietals just don't take it in. But there are people in Napa, who do 200 percent new oak. They age the wine for a year in new barrels, take it out, and put the wine back into brand new oak barrels again. Those are the wines that are getting big scores. It'll keep going as long as they get big scores and big prices." The corollary is, of course, that the wine has less specificity of place. In other words, all wine that is subjected to extended periods in new oak barrels tastes more like the barrels than the fruit.

Another important trend that John sees is organic and biodynamic farming as consumers become more interested in the nutritional value of their foods and beverages. "I think vineyards are going in the direction of organic, but they won't get there very quickly. It makes sense, really. If you're going to farm for the long term, you want to at least use sustainable methods, but organic makes more sense. It's just better for the land and ultimately for the environment. Mind you, the farmer wants to do whatever it takes to get the crop in and make the most money. But ultimately the consumer is going to make demands, and that's what's going to bring premium prices, organic and biodynamic wines. Wineries will tell farmers, 'this is how we want it done.' This is happening right now, but it's very small scale. The problem is that it's a very expensive process even if you don't get certified because there's a lot more manual labor involved. It's all about labor."

In the end, John says that the trick in the wine business is selling wine, not making it. "Some people are really good at selling things, and other people don't choose to do that. I have to do both, but given the choice, I'd rather just make wine. But that's okay. It's part of the business. I learned the business from the ground up. Somebody told me recently that I'm 'vertically integrated,' which means that I sweep the floors, pay the bills, make the wine, and sell it, what all small business owners do. I'm not unique in that respect."

But whoa, what's happening to the girl in the forest? Did John Storey send her a text message in time to solve the riddle and save her from hedge fund hell? Please stay tuned until I figure it out.



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## California Winery of the Month



## A Story Within a Storey

J.R. Storey



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A beautiful young maid is lost in a dark forest. An ugly gnome darts from behind a tree and pops a question. "What do a photo and a glass of wine have in common?" If the beautiful young maid solves the riddle, she will be rescued by a Credit Default Swap. If she doesn't, she will remain in the forest forever, trapped in a Hedge Fund. Meanwhile, John Storey sits in his office in Sausalito, California. He knows the answer to the riddle because he is both a photographer and a winemaker. How will he transmit info to the young maid and transform her life from misery to euphoria? Read on. But first a most serious answer to the riddle:

Photography requires nuanced attention to detail, framing the subject, choosing a certain distance from the focus of attention, regulating light, enhancing texture, using color, choosing appropriate equipment for a desired result, which ultimately evokes the feelings and ideas that will captivate the viewer. Instead of visual attention, winemaking requires nuanced savory

attention that begins in the vineyard, picking the fruit at a particular time for different flavors, selecting fermentation yeasts that complement certain grapes, adding just the right amount of sulfur, extracting specific flavors, texture, and color from the solids, transferring the wine to particular barrels for various lengths of time, regulating its various stages. Simultaneously, the winemaker projects how current flavors will modify over time, intervening to prevent undesired results and supporting desired ones, which all contribute to satisfaction in the glass. "You know what you like and try to achieve that. But winemaking is not a perfect science just like photography. You're always trying to be more creative," John says. And this is just the short explanation, which may or may not rescue the girl.

This winemaking-photography connection started when long time friends, John Storey and Eric Luse were both award-winning photojournalists, working for San Francisco daily

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