

GOOD VITIS™

SPECIAL EDITION . , CALIFORNIA GRAPES



Spring/Summer 2024

Special Edition: California Grapes

This spring, one of my best friends and I spent 10 days in California. The trip was almost entirely about tasting great wine, but we also spent a few days hiking. We visited wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County as well as the Santa Lucia Highlands. In those ten days we drove more than 1,200 miles. The itinerary was full of high quality producers, and helped me check one winery off my bucket list: Diamond Creek. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones.

As you're about to read, the trip was a success. It also solidified my belief that *terroir* is more than nature's influence on wine. You'll read about that if you muscle through this entire report (or skip to it).

Two important notes to make. The first is that there are no scores for wines covered in this report. This is because my focus was on experiencing for myself and capturing for readers the essence of each winery I felt while visiting. This takes more attention and thought

than one might expect (at least for me). I do, however, provide honest opinions, recommendations, and suggested aging data points. Thankfully, there's only one wine covered which I don't recommend spending money on, and uncoincidentally it comes from the fire-plagued 2020 vintage.

The second note is on the buddy comedy/adventure images included in this report. My trip companion and I go back to high school, and lived together in college. We've spent time together in Spain, England, France, Israel, Jordan, the Republic of Georgia, as well as all over the USA, including driving across it twice. We know how to have fun together, and on that note the images are inspired by our relationship.

-Aaron Menenberg, Good Vitis Editor-in-Chief



Hey, you guys ready to let the grapes out?

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Sonoma

The sun goes up, the sun goes down. Ripening occurs, just like you said.



Figuring Out Stonestreet



I'll admit to knowing little about Stonestreet going into our visit other than it was a winery started by Jess Stonestreet Jackson of the Jackson Family (along with his wife, Barbara Banke). That was it. I had to look up its location, and was unaware it was in Alexander Valley. I'd never had any of its wines.

When a visit became a possibility, I went to the webpage, saw the picture of a beautiful mountain covered with vineyards, and confirmed my interest. Now, this is a Jackson Family Wines estate, and that right there goes a long way with me because I tend to like the wineries they own and appreciate how they empower each winery's team to do their best work in a unique way. But the website picture's caption, "high elevation wines," is a trigger phrase for me. It triggered a "yes."

Stonestreet's winemaker, Kristina Shideler, was our host. She met us out front of the winery, walking up to us as we approached the entrance, directing us straight to the car for the drive up to the vineyards. Straight to the mountain we went.

On the drive up, which took a considerable amount of time despite the close proximity, we got to know each other a bit. As we climbed higher and higher, turning onto smaller and smaller roads,

transitioning from pavement to dirt, the Alexander Valley floor below became something we couldn't see much anymore. The slopes we were climbing were draped mostly in a lush green blanket of grass, spotted with vineyards starting at 400 feet above sea level and topping out at 2,400 feet. The entire estate, located in the Mayacamas Mountains, is 5,500 acres and it is a stunner.

The scope of Stonestreet's vineyards offers not just a dramatic setting on a mountain exposed to powerful winds, but also a diverse range of what Kristina describes as mesoclimates in which to site vines. A mesoclimate is viticultural term meaning the climate specific to a particular vineyard, and in the case of the Stonestreet estate vineyards this means some vineyards are in valleys, others on peaks, and some perched on ledges. With each mesoclimate vine offering a unique assortment of spices for Kristina and her team, Stonestreet aims to spotlight each through vineyard-designate wines.

Kristina's past experiences make her a natural to lead the winery's efforts. She got her winemaking start in Missouri and has international experience in New Zealand, Portugal, and Argentina. She joined the Stonestreet team in 2012, but left for a stint at Vérité and then nearby Arrowood Winery where she

took over winemaking duties after Richard Arrowood retired. She returned to Stonestreet in 2020 to lead winemaking, and is the first to admit that mastering Stonestreet's estate vineyards will be a forever challenge give the dynamism of the property and its vineyard diversity.

We made a few stops on our way to the highest vineyard, checking out different vineyards and other spots, like Jess Jackson's burial site, along the route. With the views and conversation, the experience was not only good for the soul, but very informative when it came to tasting the wine upon our return to the winery.

Stonestreet's vineyards are certified sustainable, and located in the proposed Pocket Peak American Viticultural Area, or AVA (the application was filed in 2022). If approved it would be an AVA within an AVA (Alexander Valley), which falls within Sonoma County. The AVA would cover about 30,000 acres of which nearly 3,000 are currently planted to wine grapes.

Pocket Peak would be quite a hilly AVA, which according to its website features slopes that "consistently exceed 10 percent grade and are more commonly above 20 percent." The petition is supported by Stonestreet as well as Aperture



Previous page: An estate Stonestreet vineyard.

Cellars, Foley Family Wines, Reynoso Family Vineyards, Rodney Strong Vineyards, Skipstone, and Wilson Artisan Wineries.

AVAs are pursued because of real distinctions and, increasingly, for marketing purposes. However, based on the tour of Stonestreet I can understand why Pocket Peak deserves its own recognition. Most of the slopes in Alexander Valley are not nearly as steep as those in what would be Pocket Peak, nor are the elevations nearly as high. These two characteristics alone, slope and elevation, can have dramatic effects on the wine outcomes; think radiant energy, water drainage, acids, and weather. Add to that any differences in soil types that likely exist, and discerning Pocket Peak wines from those in the broader Alexander Valley should be relatively easy.

Back at the winery, we sat down to try six wines divided equally between chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. The selection was thoughtful in two ways: Vineyard and vintage comparisons, beginning with the chardonnay, with which Kristina is trying different winemaking techniques (think amphora, tank finishes, etc.) to “push the vineyards in the

winery,” meaning accentuate their characteristics in the finished wine. We tasted the current 2021 releases of the Broken Road and Upper Barn single vineyard bottlings as well as the 2014 Upper Barn.

The 2021 Broken Road chardonnay offers a boisterous nose and a full body showing sweet stone fruit, Opal apple, pear, and caramel. Showing a higher barrel toast level than the Upper Barn, it is creamy and mostly smooth on the palate, though it gets a little gritty on the finish to provide some add texture to a great mouthfeel.

The 2021 Upper Barn is similarly full bodied, offering more butter notes on the nose than the Broken Road as well as more dynamic acid on the palate, where it's lighter in weight and driven more by citrus and mineral flavors (although there are stone fruits showing through as well).

The decade of age on the 2014 Upper Barn has had a mellowing effect that's deepened the wine's complexity. The citrus has settled into a limey profile and the stone fruit has turned more yellow than orange. There's a wonderful white pepper note along with orchid and some orange blossom.

While both 2021s are quite enjoyable in their youth,

the additional bottle age on the 2014 has made it a more dynamic wine and helped it develop a more Burgundian texture and level of complexity. This library vintage was not a special pull for us, but rather part of a standard library program that releases a decade-old vintage along with the new release of select chardonnays and cabernet sauvignons.

Moving to the cabernet, we started with the current release Monolith and Rockfall single vineyards, both from the 2019 vintage. The Monolith vineyard, which the winery calls its “wildest and most powerful” cabernet offering, is fermented in oak upright tanks of which 30-40% are new depending on the year. On the nose it has a strong savory quality consisting of iron and crushed rock, which pairs nicely with black fruit and fig. Dense, finely grained tannin is balanced nicely by the acid, delivering a somewhat sweet palate of black fruit, olive, and pink peppercorns.

The Rockfall Vineyard sits above the fog line, and the 2019 cabernet sauvignon coming exclusively from this vineyard, which is aged half in new oak, shows a reticent nose of blue and black fruit, violet, menthol, and a bit of greenness. The seamless mouthfeel is very elegant with superfine tannin and



Previous page: Another Stonestreet estate vineyard.

a very pretty lift. It's less tannic at this stage than the monolith, and more savory.

The 2014 vintage of Rockfall, the last wine we tasted, was one of my favorite wines of this entire trip. It offers dried blueberry and violet, baking spicy, deeply saturated cherry, and some black tea that emerges from the smooth, fine tannin. A nice juicy acid sweetness the fruit and spice notes. It's ten years young structurally, and is one I think will continue to evolve positively for at least another half decade.

These six wines were of fantastic introduction to Stonestreet and its estate program, and just that, an introduction. Given the acreage of vines and diversity among them, it is the kind of portfolio that requires a good deal of exploration and study to wrap one's head around. I'm not there yet, but my interest is piqued and I hope I'll have opportunity and cause to dig deeper in the future. It is a must-visit for anyone venturing to Alexander Valley.



Terroir

Note: Everyone I mention in this section is in my life because of our mutual love for wine and all that it encapsulates. As I wrote in the 2024 Riesling Special Edition:

I admire wine's ability to bring people together. Not through inebriation, but rather by the way it stops you mid-thought, refocuses your mind on the present moment, and inspires you to look across the table and connect with the other person over the shared experience. Once that happens, your time together is likely to be more meaningful and memorable. A bond is formed.



No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the wine, take the ride...and if the tannin occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced consciousness expansion: Tune in, freak out, get beaten.



Previous page: Myself with Stu Smith (Smith-Madrone) and my friend, Jesse. I'm holding a birth year 1983 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon.

I believe in the concept of *terroir*, which is a French term for how the particular climate, soil, and terrain of a region affect the structure, aroma, and flavor of wine. I say “believe” but science has thus far been unable to prove its reality. Yet, the wine profession by-and-large has fully bought in. *Terroir*-specific winemaking, which is something touted by every winery in this *California Grapes Special Edition* and well beyond, pursues a process that attempts to avoid altering and/or accentuate the *terroir's* particular characteristics in each wine.

Terroir is the main driver behind the practice of legally defining specific areas of wine grape growing. In the US we call these regions American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, and they require an application to and approval by the federal government. In my experience, most of the time these regions are sufficiently different from others in terms of *terroir* characteristics that their unique distinction makes sense.

As winemaking has proliferated around the world, I'd argue that the average quality of wine is better

than it's ever been in my drinking lifetime, even if there has also been a homogenization of some styles (which many would attribute to Robert Parker and the wider wine media). This burden of plenty creates a challenge for which us wine lovers are very fortunate: How do we choose among the numerous high quality wines to purchase?

Increasingly, the customer's guide to answering that question is 'what's their story?', meaning, 'I'd like to understand not just the *terroir*, but also the particulars of winemaker's role in harnessing it.' Often, a winery's ethos is also considered. Providing information to answer these questions is the main purpose of *Good Vitis*.

Over the years I've come to realize that there is more to wine than vineyards and crush pads and tanks and cellars. It may seem obvious, but those sacred places and things, left to themselves, don't complete the personality on a wine - it is how people animate them that ultimately determines how people experience the wine.

Good wine can come from great grapes and average winemakers. Great wine only comes from great winemakers, even if they only have good grapes. We can't help but manipulate *terroir* at least



a little simply by doing the bare minimum in the winemaking process. And, we should hope for masterful manipulation, regardless of what entails, because that is how we end up with the best wine.

So, the recipe for great wine is great *terroir* and great human intervention and manipulation (to whatever extent the situation determines). Yet when most in the industry talk of *terroir*-driven wine as the gold standard, they are often purposefully implying that human intervention and manipulation reduces the ultimate impressiveness of the wine. The issue with this presentation is that while *terroir* is presented as the determining factor of a wine, equally if not more determinant is the ethos of the people who manage those natural influences. A more complete vision of *terroir*, then, has to include the human element.

The greatest pleasure and privilege of writing *Good Vitis* is I have an excuse to spend time with the people who grow grapes and make and promote wine. They educate me, they inspire me, and some of them have stuck in my life and become good friends. It is these experiences that have led me to the conclusion that *terroir* is human.

When I think back on our visit to Smith-Madrone on 26

this trip, I don't think first about the incredible 1988 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon that we had the privilege of consuming. My first memory is descending into the winery's cellar with Stu Smith on a mission to find a few good old bottles to pull. Our mutual excitement combined with the room that opened up at the bottom of the stairs to reveal the autobiography of the Smith brothers' lives' work was a heart-touching and heartwarming moment.

I've known Stu for eight years, spending time with him in Washington, DC, where I used to live, and in Napa both at his winery and his home. We've shared many a bottle together over a big range of conversation. We've spent a few hours driving around his property several times on his ATV, and shared meals at several locations around the estate. I think we've probably spent several factors more time talking about forest management than vineyard management, and we've dedicated far more time talking about local and national politics and the wine industry than Stu's winemaking approach.

I like Stu more than I like his wines, and I like his wines a lot. I like his wine most when I drink it with him. But regardless of whether I'm pulling the cork with or without him, I'm experiencing an intimate



Previous page: Sneak peaking the 2022 Rombauer Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir with Rombauer consulting winemaker Adam Lee and David Zinni, National Sales Manager for Miramar Estate.

expression of who he and his brother are as people. While I'd be curious what another Napa cab winemaker would do with a Smith-Madrone's Cook's Flat Vineyard harvest, even if they meticulously followed the Smith brothers' recipe, the experience of drinking that wine would be different for me. The Brothers Smith planted that vineyard decades ago; they are its parent and as such it and its bounty behave certain ways unique to their rearing.

If you find this vision of *terroir* overly romantic or, perhaps like the science surrounding the concept of *terroir*, unbelievable because it's unproven, let me point you to the example of making a beloved grandmother's recipe. It's not exactly a one-to-one comparison because, unlike the Cook's Flat Vineyard one, ingredients can vary. However, like any good relative of a grandparent, you know that even with the best of ingredients you'll always be lacking that one irreplaceable one: Grandma's love.

This doesn't mean the new wine would not or could not be as good. Rather, it means that it will be

THE COUNCIL
SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Pinot Noir

VINTAGE 2019

Rosella's Vineyard 34%
Garys' Vineyard 34%
Pisoni Vineyard 32%

THE COUNCIL

The Council was created in July of 2005 in the caves at Pisoni vineyard. The resulting wine within this bottle represents the collective efforts of James Varner, Jerry Yang, Kyle Ditzler, Paul Brown, Bob Varner, Kevin Sawyer, Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Garys' and Pisoni Vineyards were blended in proportions determined by The Council to allow each vineyard to express its distinct personality.



124 cases produced

ALCOHOL 14.2% BY VOLUME

Previous two pages: A bottle of The Council we enjoyed on the trip.

different. And that's exactly my point: The human element is every bit a part of a wine's DNA as the natural ones. *Terroir* is inherently and vibrantly human, and the exclusion of the human element obscures the existence and importance of a hugely determinant factor of wine.

A fantastic case study for this is the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), which has been profiled in this *Good Vitis* issue. As I discussed there, the SLH has a handful of what many would describe as the AVA's grand cru vineyards. Most of them exist in this world because of one, or both, of two families: the Pisonis and the Francionis.

For or a variety of reasons, a relative many wineries get to make wines from this small set of vineyards. Pick any vintage and line up several wineries' Gary's Vineyard or Rosella's Vineyard pinot noirs and you'll get an equal number of divergent wines. In this scenario, because these are growers who prize both quality and customer service, many grape buyers get to set their pick dates, and that means there will be differences in chemistry between the sets of raw materials. This is just one of numerous human

elements involved in the winemaking process.

The person who introduced me to the SLH was Adam Lee, co-founder of Siduri Winery who, after selling it to Jackson Family Wines, started a winery called Clarice Wine Company that makes three different SLH pinot noirs each vintage. He's extremely close with the family of SLH producers and growers, and intimately involved in the trade association group that represents the AVA. He also consults for a number of wineries, some of whom purchase SLH fruit.

The Clarice pinot noirs are extremely good wines. Each year's release includes single vineyard designates from Gary's and Rosella's Vineyards and an SLH AVA blend. In each of the vintages I've tried, I've preferred the Gary's to the Rosella's four out of five times. The one year when that wasn't true was the same year that I found the same preference between those two vineyard designate expressions made by the Franscioni's ROAR winery. Yet the Clarice and ROAR wines from the same vintages and vineyards are very different wines. I'd wager that many sommeliers presented with the 2021 Clarice and ROAR Gary's and Rosella's pinots would have a hard time pairing them appropriately based on vineyard, let alone call their vineyard or even AVA



024

MORET
PN 114

Previous page: One of Morét Brealynn's rows of pinot noir at Lakeview Vineyard.

among a wider selection of even just California pinots from the same vintage.

You could argue that I'm right for different reasons. I could see many argue that this result would occur because the SLH is not a widely studied AVA among sommeliers, and that would be true if I had not limited my hypothetical to a comparison of two vineyards produced by two wineries. Reading this, Gary Francioni and Adam Lee might point out that their respective blocks produce different chemistry and that their irrigation regimes were different and that their pick dates were different (I know all of these things to be true). But, I'd wager that they'd agree that these differences only exist because of the human element.

To appropriate a James Blunt quote from his *Top Gear* appearance, winemakers "are like arseholes, everyone has one." There's a small vineyard in Sonoma County called Lakeview. A number of wineries source from it, but only Morét Brealynn is using it to make a vineyard designate wine. The inaugural release in 2021 came ripping out of the gates, but in 2022 Morét produced something truly

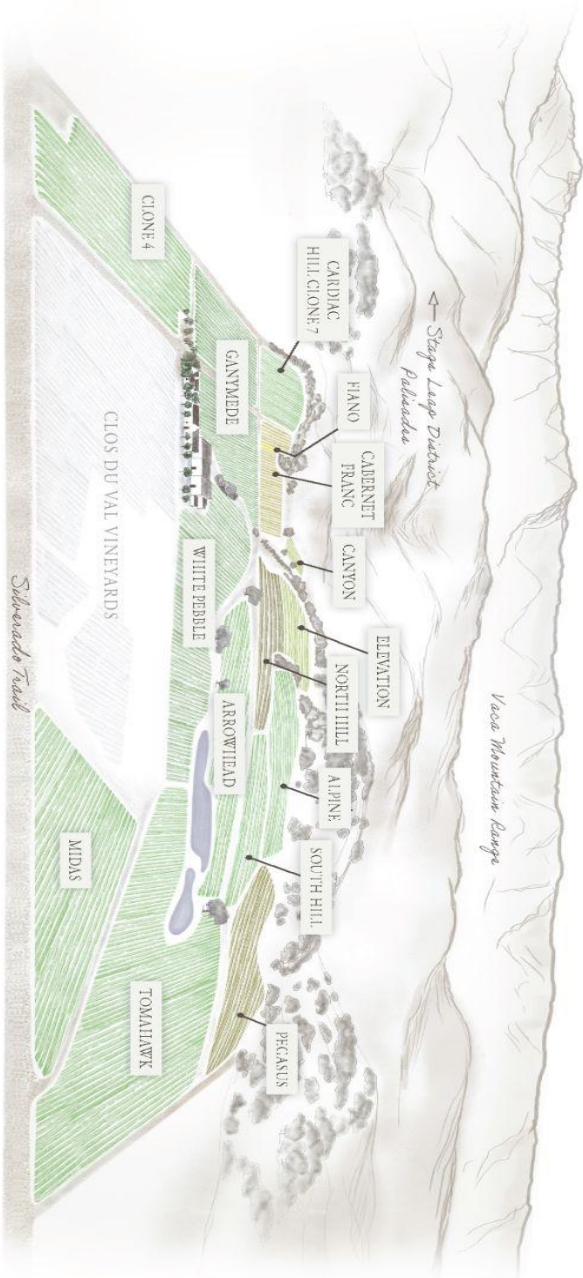
special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

Unlike the Gary's and Rosella's, it has no comparison because, as I said, Morét is the only one doing a vineyard designate. And that, in its own way, is a statement about human *terroir*. While rows and blocks within a vineyard can differ, with a vineyard as small as Lakeview, it still takes the attention and dedication of the people working it to turn it into a wine worthy of its own bottling. If I'm Jeff Mangahas at Williams-Selyem, and I'm looking for a new vineyard, and I'm tasting Morét's Lakeview, I'm inquiring about getting my own rows.

Another winemaker whose talents I've come to greatly respect is Elizabeth Vianna, head winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery since 2005. Located in the Stag's Leap AVA and farming 28 blocks on 119 acres of estate vineyards, Chimney Rock is one of Napa's cabernet producers that best demonstrate the veracity of my concept of *terroir*; there are many Stags Leaps cabs out there, but Chimney Rock distinguishes itself in a blind line up of its peers. This is because different growing circumstances do not equal different wines without a highly skilled human touch, and that is exactly what winemaker Elizabeth and her team bring to the winery.

Chimney Rock

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
NAPA VALLEY



CABERNET SAUVIGNON
VINEYARDS: Clone 4, Midsas, Ganymede, White Pebble, Tomahawk, South Hill Alpine, Cardiac Hill Clone 7



MERLOT
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus



PETT VERDOT
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon



FIANO
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)



CABERNET FRANC
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Over the last year I've had the pleasure of tasting wines from across Chimney Rock's vineyards, some of them with Elizabeth. Each one embraces the natural power and acidity of Stags Leap while achieving refinement and elegance rarely seen in American wine. Most Napa winemakers would be lucky to occasionally achieve the Chimney Rock profile that Elizabeth and her team have made routine more than a few times in their careers, although the current release 2021 vintage seems to be extra special.

Watching contestants of Netflix show Barbeque Showdown react when they arrive at the "barbeque compound" in episode 1 of each season reminds me of how Elizabeth talks about Chimney Rock's vineyards: There are so many great things to play with in the pursuit of making the best product possible. The vineyard map on the previous page, courtesy of Chimney Rock, will give you a visual of one version of a winemaker's paradise playground.

Elizabeth geeks out in the pursuit of figuring out how to maximize the potential of each vineyard, of each block, each varietal, and each clone, every vintage. Equally, she geeks out talking about and tasting the differences and finding out which single vineyard wines people prefer.



In the fall of 2023, Chimney Rock sent me a preview of some of its 2021 releases pulled from the southern end of the property. On this trip, Elizabeth and Megghan Driscoll, VP of Communications at parent company Terlato Wines, brought a selection of 2021s from the northern part of the property to dinner.

Even though it wasn't present at dinner, I had to tell Elizabeth that one of my absolute favorite white wines in the world is Chimney Rock's Elevage Blanc, which is a blend of sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. I've had them with as much as twelve years of age, and am convinced the wine is both one of America's most under-the-radar white wines as well as one of its very best. As part of the 2021 vintage release, it continues that streak.

Elizabeth was keen to find out how I thought the northern end Ganymede Vineyard cabernet sauvignon compared to the southern end Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon. Representing two of the winery's flagship single vineyard cabernets, Elizabeth said that most people have a preference they hang on to. While both are outstanding, determine a preference was easy for me: It's the Tomahawk, I told her. The first sip of the 2021 brought deafening silence to my world, and I don't remember the last time I was so sad to finish a

bottle.

I have also never had an American Bordeaux-style blend that reminded me so much of old school Bordeaux as the 2021 Elevage rouge, which in this vintage is comprised of 55% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon, 14% petit verdot, and 3% malbec. It's a particular blend that, when made as it has been, can only be downgraded from a perfect critique because of its youth. I'd rather judge a wine at its peak, and like the Tomahawk I imagine both could have a run-in with perfection.

What I love so much about the Elevage Blanc, Rouge, and Tomahawk is that they give you the best of Stags Leap while reminding you so clearly of the old world style of Bordeaux that no longer exists, really, even in Bordeaux. They are a fusion of Stags Leap and early 1980s Bordeaux in the best way possible, and that makes them stand out so clearly from other Stags Leaps wines.

Certainly a bit of nature plays a role, but Elizabeth's nearly 20 years of experience with this plot of land has helped her refine and hone in on how to get the most from the vines. I've had numerous winemakers tell me how long they think it takes to really learn a vineyard, and it's always a double-digit number. This 41

makes it all the more important to recognize the irreplaceable and very perceptible role that humans play in *terroir*-driven wine. Chimney Rock is proof.

As I said at the head of this article, I admire wine's ability to bring people together. What I did not say then is that a major reason that I believe wine does this is because it is made by humans as an interpretation of something we can all see, smell, touch, and taste. It's not all that different to me than painting: Grapes, instead of paint, is the raw material and a winery, instead of a canvas, is the place where it is created. Some artists prize certain paints because of their ingredients, as do winemakers with vineyard sourcing.

Art is in the eye of the beholder just as wine is in the palate of the drinker. Yet, we don't place the origin of the paint at the center of the discussion like we do *terroir*. And in doing that, we miss an incredibly important part of wine appreciation.



It was an awakening. That 83' Smith-Madrone reminded me that I was alive, that I was a man full of energy, love, and passion. It was like being young again.



