Notes on Sonoma: Old Roots and New Shoots
by Drew Stofflet, Time Out Wine Columnist

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Napa, Calif. – Well, the lifts are closed for the season. What are ya gonna do? Hit up wine country I guess.

I’m on my way through a wine press briefing that led me through the ides of northern Napa County (with a stop to visit our dear Aspen lovely Jennifree in the town of Napa) to a groovy Sonoma County crisscross in search of the noble chardonnay and pinot noir. Come along with me.

Kathleen Inman purchased a vineyard called Olivet Grange along the wide river plain of the Russian River in 2000. Clay, gravel and a mysterious old-growth redwood forest are buried below. Since purchasing this precious 10-acre parcel, Inman’s wines have expressed the essence of this region and why it has such a legacy in the wine world: beautiful, graceful glimpses of minerals along with the feisty acidity and purity of fruit to back it up. Back in the day I carried her pinot gris, maybe circa vintage 2004, on my list in Carbondale and it was my absolute favorite domestic white. Her chardonnay is flinty, lemony, fancy and French, and her pinot shimmers gorgeously like a rockstar in a purple-blue light. And she has a worm farm to make compost tea in the production of biodynamic, natural wine. She picks early by taste, not by sugars. She does cool-temp ferments. She uses screw-caps because she says they work. And she makes the only single-vineyard sparkling pinot noir in the United States. I like her!

A winding country wiggle to Martinelli Lane and two generations of Martinellis await. It was great to see old friends and meet new ones, on a day in the mid-80s and blue as a bell. Summer beckons when this corridor is foggy. Good to be here now. Martinelli. No relation to the apple juice. This is the Martinelli of the old gold and pink label, of the old vine zin nature. Giuseppe Martinelli and his bride eloped in the 1880s from Tuscany to start a winery. Oh boy. Get your gear. They set up on JackAss Hill, which is considered the steepest non-terraced vineyard slope in the world. And called JackAss because his family thought this of him for planting it. No shit. We hiked it, led by Lee Jr. Regina and Julianna, grandchildren of Giuseppe. They shared great stories of tilling this little bump with a tractor. Think winch-cat grooming, without the cable. You can YouTube it and see some cool video. We talked family, more crazy stories and some words about wine, if you can believe it, as we sipped old vine zin amongst these truly otherworldly vines on this wicked steep pitch.

JackAss Hill
I ran below and watched the crew giggle down the precipice (some in heels, some sliding in the deep loam on their butts) like a gaggle of climbers on Everest. We ended this visit with a very nice lunch over more Martinelli chard, pinot and zin at their winery, which is now hosting casual fine dining and wine-country barbecue in the summer months.

Next, we stopped for a chat with Rob Harris, manager of the heavyweight chardonnay site known as the Durrell Vineyard. We sat under the trees on this hot gravel bar talking about trying to keep everyone happy with their contracts, among other things. This river-bottom is known to end up in some of Sonoma’s best bottlings, trademarked with deep tropics and laced with richness, though a little lighter on the acidity compared to those grown in western Sonoma.

And this ties in to the next two stops involving William Price III, a surfer who bought the vineyard from Ed Durrell in 1998. His surfing nickname, "Three Sticks," is the name of his boutique winery project. Durrell and a high mountain vineyard are the cornerstone of these wines, and the builder is Bob Cabral, longtime wizard of Williams Seylem pinot. For this effort, Cabral aims to make the “Best wines of my career.” Oh boy!

We tasted flights of extreme chardonnay and handsome pinot noir in an adobe art house, the "Adobe House" across the street from former General Mariano Vallejo’s mansion in downtown Sonoma. This funky space is gushing with old art, décor, design and archeological findings from the property. Whereas Stony Hill’s Mike Cellini adores the term “delicate power,” at Three Sticks it’s an “iron fist in a velvet glove.”

Onward, on foot, to Portuguese-themed La Salette and a dinner with Sam Spencer, another surfer and wine industry maestro who partners with Price (aka Three Sticks) in a modern marketing project called Head High wines. This is not as serious in terms of single-vineyard wines I’ve been gulping all day, more a regional affair, according to Spencer. “Bigger scope, playful attitude, authentic value-oriented Sonoma Coast pinot and rosé in the under $30 vein,” and a juicy red blend. Head High honors the perfect surf conditions the name evokes, and practices sustainable stewardship of the land and community. For every two bottles sold, Head High donates a dollar to the Sonoma Valley Education Foundation and Sustainable Surf. And Sam is a heck of nice guy!

Well damn, that made me thirsty. Cheers! Remember, wine reveals truth.

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