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East Bay rising Winemakers find fertile ground in the urban environs of Alameda County

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Forget bucolic hills with neat rows of grapevines and breezy summer days far from traffic. To make wine, you need to buy grapes from Wine Country, but you don't have to live there.

Go south from Napa County across San Pablo Bay and you leave behind the precious tasting rooms and the landed gentry who have \$150 Cabernets made in their names. Instead you'll find unpretentious city dwellers getting their hands dirty making wine. There's a bustling urban wine scene developing in the East Bay, with wineries nestled into warehouses beside factories and tasting rooms accessible by BART and commuter ferry.

Winemakers Kent Rosenblum of Rosenblum Cellars and Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St. John have been in the East Bay for two decades, but until recently they were nearly alone. Not anymore: There's now a fledgling East Bay Vintner's Alliance with 13 members, more than half of which are wineries formed in the last five years. Rosenblum Cellars dwarfs the other wineries, producing 195,000 cases a year of wine on the former Alameda Naval Air Base -- more than eight times the 23,450 cases produced by the rest of the group.

To put the size of the scene in perspective, the East Bay vintners -- including Rosenblum -- still produce only a little more than half as much wine as Wente Vineyards in nearby Livermore -- and Wente is only the 26th largest U.S. wine company, according to Wine Business Insider.

It may be a small scene, but it's a unique one with some exciting small-production wines (see "Flavors of the East Bay," Page F5).

Most of the East Bay Vintners are young, idealistic folks. A Donkey and Goat owners Tracey Brandt, 35, and Jared Brandt, 36, prefer highly acidic wine, even though that's not the fashion; they even pick some grapes extra early to make sure the wines are tart enough. Blacksmith Cellars founder Matt Smith, 35, sold his beloved 1966 Mustang in 2002 to buy two barrels, saying, "I could buy another '66 Mustang down the line." Periscope Cellars owner Brendan Eliason, 31, says he's "violently against" charging customers tasting

room fees. Eliason will have a chance to test his principles after the city of Emeryville approves zoning for his tasting room and crowds start arriving.

At the tasting rooms that are already open (see "East Bay tasting rooms," Page F5), the vibe is very different than the pricey, patrician atmosphere on Highway 29 in Napa Valley. Rosenblum draws a down-to-earth urban crowd, many of whom are repeat customers. And the new joint Dashe Cellars/JC Cellars tasting room is smack-dab in the production part of the winery, giving it a real workaday atmosphere that matches its Oakland home and which many Napa Valley wineries strive to avoid.

That urban atmosphere is a huge draw for the East Bay vintners. Most say they like the restaurants and cultural opportunities. Warehouse space is relatively cheap, and areas close to the bay are naturally cool most of the year, an important factor for wine production.

Winemakers can also live near where they work.

"I don't make enough money to live in Wine Country," Eliason says.

Equipment like pressure washers and industrial services like repairs are cheaper than in Napa by as much as 25 percent, Tracey Brandt says. And then there's the volunteer labor from neighbors who drop in -- many more so than in Napa, where the wine industry doesn't have the same curiosity factor. In the Brandts' case, owners of two Chinese herb import companies in their Berkeley industrial park brought their kids to help during crush.

"Restaurant people come in here according to their schedules -- bartenders, waitresses, people interested in wine," Brandt says. "One of the people helping us works in a biochemistry firm. We have scientists, tech people."

The chumminess of the vintner's group is also a big draw. People freely lend equipment to one another. "It's like borrowing your neighbor's lawn mower," says Eno Wines owner Sasha Versage, 33.

Most of the smaller wineries have space-sharing arrangements. Dashe Cellars, JC Cellars and Blacksmith Cellars are in the same building in Oakland's Jack London Square district. Aubin Cellars and Tayerle share a West Oakland warehouse; Eno and Harrington Wines share a Berkeley warehouse once used by Edmunds. Eliason is sharing his space with two small wineries, Urbano Cellars and Andrew Lane Wines, which is moving its operations here from St. Helena.

Younger winemakers often consult with elder statesmen Rosenblum, Edmunds and former Rosenblum winemaker Jeff Cohn, who quit his full-time job at Rosenblum in February to focus on JC Cellars, though he still consults at Rosenblum.

"It's different in Napa," says Blacksmith Cellars' Smith, who did lab work at Beaulieu Vineyard in Rutherford for three years. "Everyone's secretive. People want to ask, 'Are you good enough to be here?'"

It's not like that here. I borrowed a little basket press from (Oakland's) Lost Canyon a couple weeks ago, but I don't owe them anything. It's a community. I love it here."

Now 62, and still taking a few shifts a year in his other career as a veterinarian, Kent Rosenblum is still at the center of the scene that he started when he moved to the Alameda air base in 1987.

"Rosenblum did it. They're in the middle of nowhere. But they did it," Smith says. "That really opened the door. He showed everyone, if you're going to open a winery and you like living here, go ahead and open it here."

So many of the East Bay winemakers have worked for Rosenblum, or at his winery, that Broc Cellars owner Chris Brockway -- who quit a lucrative career in Los Angeles as an editor of TV pilots to become a winemaker -- says: "It's almost like six degrees of Kent Rosenblum."

Want the Rosenblum connections? Hang on, it's complicated.

Tayerle winery owner Loren Tayerle -- a professional musician who has played French horn with Rod Stewart and Frank Zappa and is also chef Paul Bertolli's brother-in-law -- worked several jobs in Rosenblum's cellar. Tayerle is now making both his own wines and those of Aubin Cellars.

Jeff Cohn of JC Cellars was Rosenblum's winemaker. Broc Cellars' Brockway was Cohn's assistant winemaker for JC Cellars, so he worked in Rosenblum's building.

Michael and Anne Dashe of Dashe Cellars rented space from Rosenblum, thus also working in his building. Smith says of his time working for Dashe in the Rosenblum building: "I had a great learning curve. (Rosenblum) used every barrel under the sun, every kind of yeast. I could grab a thief (a device to extract barrel samples), a glass and a notebook. I took page upon page of notes. When I went to make my first wine, I didn't have to experiment. I had learned things from Rosenblum."

One of Rosenblum's greatest influences on the East Bay gang is his propensity to make many different kinds of wine in many different ways. "We're not resting on our laurels," he says. "We experiment every year with our barrel program or our yeasts or whatever."

Rosenblum makes more than 50 wines, with a concentration on Zinfandel, and many of the younger vintners have followed suit with multiple offerings of tiny lots of wine. Cohn, who now has 15 wines of his own, including one single-vineyard Syrah of which he makes just 39 cases, calls it "Rosenblumitis."

But while Rosenblum's own style of winemaking -- voluptuous fruit with very high alcohol and smooth tannins -- is instantly recognizable, the East Bay vintners are forging their own distinctive styles. Even Cohn, who was Rosenblum's right-hand man for 10 years, uses different methods now to achieve a different, more structured, less ripe taste profile that he says, "Kent would call more French in style."

Part of the reason is that there's a significant French influence counterweighting the ripe California fruit that the winemakers buy from all over Northern California.

The Brandts spent a year in the Rhone Valley learning to make wine from Eric Texier; upon return, they taught Michael Brill, founder of San Francisco's Crushpad, to make wine before forging out on their own. They took their French poodle Gibson to France and there learned that the dog has an aversion to pesticides because he quickly ran from vineyards that used them. They now bring Gibson along whenever they're scouting new vineyards.

Aubin Cellars owner Jerome Aubin, 39, is a Burgundy native whose main business is importing French barrels to small American wineries; naturally he likes his wines in the French style.

Anne Dashe has an enology degree from University of Bordeaux, balancing Michael Dashe's enology degree from UC Davis. Davis is commuting distance from Oakland, yet Dashe is the only member of the East Bay Vintners with a degree from there.

Edmunds, 59, is an Oakland native, but his style is nonetheless very French. He's been a one-man show since 1985, when he quit being a mailman to found Edmunds St. John (St. John is his wife Cornelia's last name), and he was making wines with the grapes and style of France's Rhone Valley when practically nobody in the state had even heard of Syrah.

Edmunds decided Rhone grapes would be his focus because that region produced his favorite wines available at Berkeley's Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant shop.

"I kept going back to them and saying, 'This is what moves me,' " he says.

In 1991, when only 413 acres of Syrah were planted in all of California, according to the California Agricultural Statistics Service, Edmunds could sell his 3,000 cases of wine easily because he had little competition. Today, there are more than 18,000 acres of Syrah, and the competition in the Rhone varietal category is intense enough that even though Edmunds' wines are still excellent, he has drastically cut his production because he has an unsold backlog.

But rather than go mainstream, his response has been typically East Bay: to forge into another unappreciated area, Gamay Noir, the main grape of Beaujolais.

"Beaujolais to me seemed like the most dangerous wine there is," he says.

Edmunds makes what may now be California's best Gamay Noir -- proof that great wines can emanate from the East Bay.

Oakland may even have its own terroir. The building shared by Dashe, JC Cellars and Blacksmith in Oakland's Jack London Square district is in front of a Peerless Coffee factory.

"Periodically they'll empty out their roaster and it changes the entire aromatic profile of the winery," Smith says. "Sometimes it smells like dark roast, sometimes like light roast. I guess we'll have to watch for coffee character in the wines."

Michael Dashe says, "It'll be like the eucalyptus character in the Heitz (Cellars) wines."

Forget Rutherford Dust -- the hot new wine flavor is Oakland Dark Roast.

East Bay tasting rooms

Rosenblum Cellars' tasting room in Alameda is within walking distance of the ferry from San Francisco. Dashe and JC Cellars' shared tasting room is within three blocks of the Lake Merritt BART station.

On Saturday and Sunday, Rosenblum Cellars will hold an open house noon to 5 p.m. at which it will pour more than 40 of its wines, and will also give barrel samples and tours. Admission is \$30 and includes a wineglass. Call the winery for information.

For the small wineries that do not have tasting rooms, check with East Bay wine shops or contact the wineries directly to ask about purchasing the wines.

Dashe Cellars & JC Cellars Open noon-5 p.m. Thursday-Monday. 55 Fourth St. (near Oak), Oakland; (510) 452-1800, dashecellars.com.

Lost Canyon Open noon to 5 p.m. Friday and Saturday and by appointment. 2102-A Dennison St. (near Kennedy), Oakland; (510) 534-9314, lostcanyonwinery.com.

Rosenblum Cellars 11 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. 2900 Main St., Suite 1100 (near Singleton), Alameda; (510) 865-7007, www.rosenblumcellars.com.

-- W. Blake Gray

Flavors of the East Bay

Whites

2004 Blacksmith Monterey Chenin Blanc (\$15) After aromas of peach, pear and lettuce, the strong grapefruit flavor of this wine is a surprise; it finishes with a little ripe peach and white pepper. Friendly to a wide variety of foods, this wine is a viticultural oddity because the grapevines are planted in sandy soil on their own true Chenin Blanc rootstock, rather than being grafted onto phylloxera-resistant rootstock like almost every other wine grape in the world.

2004 A Donkey and Goat Brosseau Vineyard Chalone Chardonnay (\$40) This very well-balanced wine is

both food-friendly and interesting, with initial Meyer lemon flavors that segue into buttered toast. There's even a hint of cherry -- yes, in a white wine -- on the long finish. It was aged nearly a year on its lees to develop that complexity, and has a bit of Chardonnay verjus blended in to boost the acidity.

2005 JC Cellars The First Date California Blend (\$28) This extremely spicy, peppery wine is a blend of two Rhone grapes: 75 percent Roussanne and 25 percent Marsanne. You taste the lemon in it only after your tongue adjusts to the spice.

Reds

2004 Broc Cellars Dry Stack Vineyard Bennett Valley Grenache (\$35) This wine is hot (14.8 percent alcohol) and tight, yet dense with blackberry, black licorice and allspice. The fruit gets riper on the medium-long finish. It tastes as though it will reward a few years of cellaring.

2003 Casa Vinicola Il Trovatore Ranchita Canyon Vineyard Paso Robles Red Wine (\$18) This likable quaffer from Tayerle winery tastes of black currant initially, and then unfolds into riper black cherry on the medium-long finish. It's a blend of 77 percent Sangiovese with 20 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 3 percent Petite Sirah.

2003 Dashe Louvau Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$28) After John Louvau bought his vineyard in 1989, he discovered some 50-year-old Zinfandel vines hidden beneath weeds and blackberry bushes that had grown over them. Louvau nursed the Zinfandel back to health and this wine is the result. It's very spicy, with lots of black pepper and some cumin, and blackberry fruit underneath.

2004 Edmunds St. John Bone-Jolly Witters Vineyard El Dorado County Gamay Noir (\$17) Made from the main grape of France's Beaujolais region, this is what Beaujolais should taste like and often doesn't: Bright, ripe raspberry and cherry flavors are backed up by chewy tannins. The medium-light body makes it work with many traditional white-wine foods, and just as with Beaujolais, you could chill it on a hot day.

2001 Edmunds St. John Wylie-Fenaughty El Dorado County Syrah (\$30) Wylie and Fenaughty are two different vineyards on opposite sides of the American River canyon. The fruit from them combines to create a wine that tastes very French, with raspberry, cinnamon, floral and earthy flavors. It's spicy on the medium-long finish. Many East Bay wineries make Syrah; this is the best Syrah of the current releases.

2004 Eno The Matriarch Las Madres Vineyard Carneros Syrah (\$35) At 15.6 percent alcohol, it's hot, but this microproduction (70 cases) wine delivers rich, ripe blackberry and blueberry flavors with a little violet on the finish.

2004 Harrington Birkmyer Vineyard Wild Horse Valley Pinot Noir (\$25) Lots of cherry and raspberry fruit emerge from this wine made from fruit from a 1,400-foot elevation vineyard just east of the city of Napa. A hint of herbaceousness adds interest to the persistent cherry on the medium-long finish. Though it's 15

percent alcohol, it doesn't taste hot.

2004 JC Cellars Arrowhead Mountain Vineyard Sonoma Valley Zinfandel (\$35) This complex wine tastes like it's from old vines, but the vineyard was planted in 1996. It tastes of black cherry, dried herbs and red licorice, with the fruit shifting to red berries on the midpalate. It's 15.3 percent alcohol and the finish is a bit hot.

2004 Periscope Cellars California Red Wine Blend (\$16) Periscope Cellars owner/winemaker Brendan Eliason made just 50 cases of this kitchen-sink blend of eight different red grapes. Zinfandel (35 percent) is the main grape here, and the wine reflects that, with flavors of red currant, raspberry, chile and some black fruit on the midpalate. It's food-friendly, complex and easy to drink.

2004 Rosenblum Cellars Carla's Vineyard San Francisco Bay Zinfandel (\$25) This wine comes from vines more than 100 years old in Contra Costa County just south of the Antioch Bridge. It's rich and enticing, like blackberry pie filling with a little bit of earth and vanilla; you'd never guess that it's 16.1 percent alcohol.

2004 Rosenblum Cellars Harris Kratka Vineyard Alexander Valley Zinfandel (\$30) It's hard to pick just two wines from Rosenblum's lineup of about 50. This one comes from 50-year-old vines just east of the Russian River. It's a little hot at 16.5 percent alcohol, but it delivers blackberry fruit and bramble flavors so authentic that you feel like you can see the berries.

2003 Tayerle Las Brisas Vineyard Carneros Pinot Noir (\$25) An interesting wine, complex and fruity, with flavors of cranberry, raspberry, graham cracker and soy sauce.

2004 Verve Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$30) From Aubin Cellars, the best current-release Pinot Noir from the East Bay wineries delivers plenty of bright cranberry and raspberry fruit, yet it has an elegant mouthfeel and a light-medium body. There's a hint of soy sauce on the medium-long finish.

2004 Verve Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$24) Initial cranberry flavor is joined by a prickle of black pepper that intensifies on the midpalate; soy sauce also joins in on the finish here. Both of the 2004 Verve wines were made by Fred Scherrer of Scherrer Winery in Sebastopol; Loren Tayerle took over as winemaker with the 2005 vintage.

Dessert

2005 Dashe Dry Creek Valley Late Harvest Zinfandel (\$24 for 375 ml) The Dashes let some grapes from the Bella Winery estate hang for more than a month after the rest of the grapes in the vineyard were picked. The result is a wine with 9 percent residual sugar that tastes quite sweet, like cherry candy, yet not cloying; the flavor turns more toward cherry fruit on the finish.

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