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Barrel Fever

A burgeoning East Bay winemaking scene separates the *vin* from the vineyard.

By Jonathan Kauffman

Brendan Eliason, owner and winemaker of Periscope Cellars — its only employee, truth be told — is bottling his 2005 rosé. He has blended Petite Verdot and Syrah, with a little Chardonnay for good luck, to make a casual, fruity summer wine. Sporting a polo shirt, jeans, and waterproof boots, he's busy wiping bottles while two friends siphon pink fluid from a stainless-steel carboy into 175-millimeter bottles — just over one wineglass worth — while a reporter pitches in by squeezing beer caps onto the bottles. Eliason is still trying to source little silver straws to tape to them, but he's got a few weeks before the rosé has settled enough to sell.

Beer caps? Wine through a straw? That's not the half of it. Check out the scenery: a rented bay in a WWII-era factory a stone's throw from I-80 in Emeryville with cement walls and flaking white paint. A few dozen oak barrels occupy the center of the floor, and boxes of last season's vintages are stacked to one side. There's winemaking apparatus scattered everywhere. Ovens and fridges are lined up for what's to be an events room and tasting room, which Eliason plans to decorate with reproductions of 1940s propaganda posters — his final building and use permits are taking an eternity.

Eliason's peers call him crazy, but always admiringly. He looks like a farmhand and speaks in quickfire bursts. When he starts on a favorite topic — rosé with straws; the sheer idiocy of 750-milliliter bottles and corks — it doesn't take but a few seconds for his contagious enthusiasm to border on the manic. He'll happily admit that some of his ideas are pretty fringe. But the fifteen-year winemaking veteran, who moonlights as the guy behind Va de Vi Restaurant's innovative and highly publicized wine program, is no Don Quixote.

Young Turk is more like it: Eliason is helping to propel a regional trend that flies in the face of traditional wine culture. A smattering of wineries have occupied warehouses in Alameda, Berkeley, Emeryville, and Oakland since the 1970s, but even devoted wine geeks would be amazed to know just how many wineries are now located in the urban East Bay.

Over the past eighteen months, more than a dozen of them have converged to create the East Bay Vintners Association, which may well be the nation's first winemaking association tied to an urban region rather than an agricultural one. These winemakers, some of whom have garnered national acclaim, are basically arguing that they needn't settle in the sticks, or have a vast inheritance, to make really great wines. Leave the \$100,000-an-acre vineyards for the millionaires, they say; we'll make wine from whatever growing regions we like, with whatever grapes we want, and still get to live in the city.

This is a wholesale shift in mindset: locating your winery near your customers, not your grapes. And what that could soon mean for local drinkers is the ability to eschew the Napa Valley Wine Train in favor of tasting tours via BART, bike, or AC Transit.

Building wineries in the middle of the city may sound suspect, but it was the norm a century ago — San Francisco, not Napa, was California's wine center from the 1850s through Prohibition. The standard practice was to truck grapes or freshly fermented wine from all over Northern California and the Central Valley into the city, where they would be crushed or blended, bottled, and then shipped wherever. After the 1906 earthquake and fire, which together destroyed millions of gallons of wine, the California Wine Association, the nation's largest producer, relocated its main facility to Winehaven in Richmond. Much of the CWA wine was cheap, sweet, and fortified (think Wild Irish Rose), but at least it was locally made. Even during Prohibition, delivery trucks would drive door to door around the Bay Area, crushing grapes into whatever vat or barrel a customer provided. Winehaven also would ship blocks of pressed grapes cross-country, which customers would reconstitute with water. What people did with the juice was nobody's business.

Chris Duffey



Stack 'em high: Who says great wine can't be made in a city warehouse?

Chris Duffey



The enabler: Brendan Eliason

Chris Duffey



The first generation of commercial winemakers in the urban East Bay post-Prohibition started up during the 1970s. Among them were Travis Fretter, Rick Dove (Montclair Winery), Davis Bynum, and Channing Rudd. Then, in 1978, after the Alameda City Council refused to let him set up a winery near his house, a veterinarian and enthusiastic home winemaker named Kent Rosenblum took over the Dead End Bar in West Oakland and converted it into a winery. "We had some dairy tanks shipped out from Minnesota, and we'd go at night and make wine," he recalls. "Everyone in the neighborhood thought we were bootleggers."

Rosenblum would become a muse of sorts for the urban wine scene. He and his partners began throwing open houses where people would gather for the music and wine. The crowds followed the vintner to an old particle accelerator in Emeryville in 1982, then in 1987 to its current home in an Alameda Point warehouse. Rosenblum says he and his partners decided not to locate in wine country because they wanted to keep their day jobs. "You need to be real close to wines to tend them," he says. "The grape harvest is once a year — even as it nears, if you look at the grapes once or twice a week, that's fine. But if a barrel is leaking or a bung [plug] pops off, and you don't get to it for a week, then you've lost a barrel of wine."

His winery, Rosenblum Cellars, has become the biggest success story in East Bay wine. Over the past two decades, the winemaker has gone from producing 6,000 cases annually to 170,000 — a figure Rosenblum hopes to expand to 240,000. He estimates his company's wine club has 5,000 members, and its mailing list four times that. He credits some of this success to his early focus on Zinfandels when everyone else had eyes for Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnays. Indeed, the winemaker made his name by scouting out pre-Prohibition vineyards with old Zinfandel vines, a quest that has taken him all over Northern California.

Jeff Cohn, who became Rosenblum's associate winemaker a decade ago, and recently split off to run his own label, JC Cellars, helped add to the mystique. He experimented with different yeast strains and barrels, selecting each type to match the grapes from specific vineyards.

"Our philosophy has been to go to the best vineyard in the region and look at the oldest mountaintop vineyard that produces the smallest berries with the thickest skins," Rosenblum says. "To buy those vineyards would be a problem. To plant a vineyard and wait one hundred years to get the same kinds of grapes would be impossible."

Rosenblum's local influence is indisputable. Just as veteran Chez Panisse staffers have fanned out to establish their own culinary homesteads, Rosenblum Cellars has nurtured a variety of smaller East Bay wineries. From the 1990s up until 2004, it shared warehouse space and equipment with a number of startups, including Dashe Cellars, Cohn's JC Cellars, and St. George Spirits. When Rosenblum Cellars grew too big, it pushed out its warehousemates, who found new spaces in Oakland and Alameda and are now thriving.

But as a spotlight for national acclaim, Rosenblum has served another function: to help mark the East Bay as a winemaking scene to rival its rural counterparts. Two of its vintages made *Wine Spectator's* annual list of "Top 100 Wines for 2005" — its 2003 Rockpile Road Vineyard Zinfandel (from Sonoma's Rockpile appellation) took the No. 3 slot, while its 2003 Richard Sauret Vineyards Zinfandel (from Paso Robles) came in at No. 30. In the accompanying photo, Rosenblum smiles out from the magazine's glossy pages as though he's just won the Tour de France. Cohn stands in the rear, arms akimbo, a cocky challenge gleaming through his sunglasses. In the background, replacing the standard quaint stacks of barrels or trellised grapevines, are the Port of Oakland's shipping cranes.

Take *that*, Napa.

In the offices of JC Cellars' new Jack London Square facility, Jeff Cohn has gathered a bunch of lumpy gray rocks. They come from the different vineyards that supply his grapes, and serve as a talisman for his worship of *terroir*, that indefinable but all-important ability of a wine to express its soil, its sky, its people. "They're what *makes* the wine," he says.

After a decade at Rosenblum, Cohn cast out to focus on the label he's slowly built with his wife, Alexandra, since 1996. JC Cellars' style emulates that of the Northern Rhône Valley, appellations like Côte-Rotie, Condrieu, and Hermitage. "Those wines will take you places you never thought you can go," Cohn says, eyes glazing at the thought. "The lavender, and the game, and the violets, and smells you don't know. You think, 'I would love to make wines like that.' But we're in California. We can't make French wines. God was a Frenchman who loved to vacation in California."

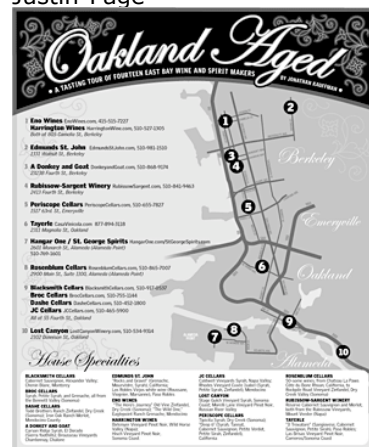
Despite his reputation for playing mad scientist with wood and microbes, Cohn says he's just doing all he can to help the grapes express their *terroir*: "I just babysit these barrels. I coax everything along to make the wine the way I want it to be. If it's not on the vines when I pick it, though, it'll never be there."

Yet for a man obsessed with the provenance of his grapes, Cohn doesn't think it matters where you make the wine. Building a winery next to the vineyard doesn't guarantee a better product, he says. He can truck in grapes from



"Napa and Sonoma are very pretty, but I think everyone who lives there wants to move here," says vintner Jeff Cohn of JC Cellars.

Justin Page



Oakland Aged: An urban wine tour.

Details

Who / What:
Brendan Eliason
East Bay Vintners Association
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Business

Mendocino, Santa Barbara, and Napa, then tend to their fermentation in Oakland. "Napa and Sonoma are very pretty, but I think everyone who lives there wants to move here," he says.

That sentiment is unanimous among members of the East Bay Vintners Association. "A winery is still a warehouse, whether here or in Santa Rosa," says Mike Dashe, who shares space with JC Cellars, "so why not here?"

Indeed, apart from the obvious marketing advantages, why should wineries be located on vineyard estates? The California Wine Institute counts around two thousand commercial wineries in the state, most of which have their own vineyards. But they don't own all 522,000 acres of vineyard land. Far from it. A majority of California wine is made from grapes purchased from independent farmers, says Bill Turrentine, president of Turrentine Brokerage, the nation's largest wine-grape brokerage firm. "There are more than four thousand independent grape growers who sell their grapes to wineries, including some of the most famous vineyards in the state," he says.

Meanwhile, dozens, if not hundreds, of landless wineries are scattered throughout the West Coast wine country. With vineyard land running more than \$100,000 an acre in Napa and Sonoma — not to mention the exorbitant cost to plant top-quality vines — land is a prohibitive investment for a startup.

That's where Turrentine comes in, connecting growers with winemakers. Sometimes it's a one-time buy of, say, a few tons of Merlot grapes to blend with someone's Cabernet; sometimes a long-term relationship where the vintner can specify exactly how vines should be pruned and the Brix (sugar) level at which the grapes should be picked. "Winemaking is a hugely capital-intensive business," the broker notes. "Land and the development of vineyards are expensive. Production facilities for fermenting and aging wines are expensive. Marketing has become very expensive, too. Unless someone has made his first billion elsewhere — and the industry attracts lots of those — it's a more manageable proposition to build your brand and manage your facility, and buy grapes from someone else."

And there, says Brendan Eliason, lies the irony of the old winemaking paradigm: You could work in the wine business, but you couldn't afford to enter it.

Eliason should know. He's setting up Periscope Cellars without the benefit of a dot-com windfall or dozens of investors. What he does have are smarts and energy to a fault.

The winemaker grew up in Humboldt County — his parents worked at Humboldt State — and attended Cal Poly, majoring in industrial technology with an emphasis on plastics and packaging and a minor in graphic design. After a couple of years, he took a wine appreciation course, and became smitten. "Wine is an incredible blend of art and science," Eliason says. "It's just technical enough to keep me interested in it, and yet artistic enough that it's not just engineering, plugging in numbers and formulas."

He quickly switched over to viticulture, alternating two semesters at school with two semesters interning in Sonoma until he received his degree. He then took a job at the David Coffaro Vineyard and Winery in the Dry Creek region of Sonoma. Starting out mixing vineyard management and winemaking, he eventually moved into winemaking full-time, and stayed on as Coffaro's co-winemaker for ten years. He also did a stint as education director for Wine Brats, the wine appreciation-demystification organization aimed at young drinkers, and contributed to *Wine X*, the flip Gen-X wine magazine. He ran into his high school sweetheart, and the two fell in love all over again. To support her career he followed her to the Bay Area, commuting ninety minutes each way to Sonoma.

Somewhere along the way, Eliason came across a Craigslist ad for a part-time wine director position at Va de Vi, a then soon-to-open wine bar and restaurant in Walnut Creek. He charmed and impressed its owners enough to land the gig, and has since compiled a list that ranges from buttery, well-oaked Chardonnays to obscure and oh-so-hip Austrian reds, which he revises constantly to incorporate some of the thousands of wines he tastes each year. The experience has proved formative. "One of the hardest things to protect against as a winemaker is getting tunnel vision," he says. "If you're not drinking your own wine, you're drinking the wines of your friends."

In 2003, Eliason got his hands on some Syrah grapes grown by a friend, who let him pay back most of the debt in wine. Dave Coffaro let his assistant use the winery facilities, slowly taking the crush fee out of Eliason's wages. For year two, he pitched Va de Vi on making a Napa Chardonnay and a red blend — some for his own label, some as the restaurant's house wine.

He also began looking for his own space. A friend came up with the idea of a gallery-nightclub with a tasting room, and before long Eliason was scouting out warehouses around Oakland and Emeryville. Ten months ago, he found it: thousands of dirt-cheap square feet in a former WWII submarine factory. He moved in just in time for the 2005 crush, aptly named his label "Periscope," and began selling off his 2003 Syrah to cover rent and startup costs. "It's been a way of slowly putting money aside over the last three years in the structure of bottled wine," Eliason says. "So I get the savings benefit and the value-added benefit."

His story is emblematic of the creative ways that wine-biz professionals with modest incomes — assistant winemakers at small facilities make \$44,000 to \$70,000 a year, according to a 2005 *Wine Business Monthly* survey — can springboard off their employers to start their own labels. First Jeff Cohn did it with JC Cellars. Now his own assistant, Chris Brockway, is housing his three-year-old Broc Cellars at the JC-Dashe facility. For that matter, so is Dashe assistant winemaker Matt Smith with his Blacksmith Cellars. All four are growing, so Smith and Brockway are scouring the area for a new warehouse winery space to share.

For startup vintners, an urban location also lets them draw a salary by day and tend their barrels by night. Sasha Verhage, who learned his craft at Grapeleaf Cellars before launching Eno Wines in Berkeley, is a senior design manager at Yahoo.

Jack States and Randy Keyworth, winemakers at Lost Canyon Winery, run a nonprofit foundation. Tracey Brandt, of Berkeley's A Donkey and Goat, helped her friend start Crushpad, a San Francisco custom-crush facility for home winemakers, which also served as a place where she and her husband Jared could make their first vintage. Now Tracey oversees day-to-day winery operations while Jared pulls down a stable income from his job at Kodak. "Nirvana for us might be the Anderson Valley," she says. "But while we need a lucrative day job, there's not a lot out there."

On May 20, the Brandts threw a "winery warming" to fete their new Fourth Street digs. They didn't advertise — just sent out notices to their mailing lists, hired a band and some caterers, and crossed their fingers. Close to three hundred people showed up. Across the estuary, more than a thousand people were paying \$25 a glass to swill wines at one of Rosenblum's quarterly parties, which have become a staple of the Alameda social scene.

Public interest, in other words, is high. But until very recently, Rosenblum Cellars was the only local winery open to the public. Most have relied on distributors, brokers, and direct contact with restaurants and wine shops to sell their product. It takes a whole lot of permitting to get bonded as a commercial winery, and even more to host tastings and events. These boutique operations largely lack the sales volume to justify hiring tasting-room staff. Many are so small they share space and equipment with another winery, operating as what the feds call "alternating proprietors."

All over wine country, boutique vintners, idolized by the cognoscenti and invisible to casual drinkers, operate this way. Wineries such as Edmunds St. John and Rubissow-Sargent have established themselves nationally, albeit quietly, over the course of twenty years. They've never hidden their Berkeley location — in fact, Steve Edmunds says it's allowed him to develop longstanding relationships with local restaurants — but they've never had cause to trumpet it.

Attitudes are changing, though. Lost Canyon's Jack States and Randy Keyworth went pro only after they brought on a third partner, Bob Riskin, who'd retired in 1999 after decades in marketing and product development. Looking across the estuary at what the Alameda winemakers were doing, the three saw the potential of an Oakland winery from the get-go. Soon enough, their Pinots Noirs and Syrahs began receiving high marks from the wine press, and when the landlord sold out from under them four years after they'd moved in, the three decided that their new winery would include a full tasting room.

Located a few blocks from its previous space in the shadow of I-880 south of Jack London Square, the new space still feels far from the bustle. But Riskin claims the attractive tasting room gets three to five dozen visitors a day on Saturdays and that people are renting it for events. They're all praying the Jack London Square developers will come through with the Ferry Plaza-style food hall they've promised Oakland.

In the meantime, Dashe and JC Cellars are putting finishing touches to their shared tasting room, which they expect will open to the public sometime next month. The wineries already cohost events, and although they share space, they don't feel like direct rivals. "Our clientele is very different," Cohn says. "Zinnies aren't always Rhonies, though sometimes they meet and talk."

After it fragmented, the group that shared the Rosenblum space agreed to find ways to market themselves together, but startup vintners with young kids don't tend to have much free time. Lost Canyon's founders also chatted up colleagues about joint marketing, but were distracted with the move and the renovations. Almost everyone credits Brendan Eliason as the force who finally brought everyone together. Back when he was checking out warehouse space, he also started checking out local wineries. "I knew a couple of them from before, but not others," he says. "How I met most people is that I just showed up at their front porch and said hi."

As the gregarious winemaker gathered names and numbers, he found that many of the long-timers didn't know one another. Introductions were made. Then, at some point, the idea arose for a formal organization, which led to the East Bay Vintners Association. The group has held three meetings so far, all at Berkeley's Albatross pub, where the winemakers drink — beer, naturally — pick over barbecue from Everett & Jones across the street, and talk shop.

Topping their agenda is a "passport" event in which all of the wineries would open their doors to the public for a day, followed by a more permanent "urban wine route." The former will require a marketing push and a date — the harvest is looming, so it'll have to happen either before the winemakers disappear for three months, or early next year.

The second idea: Well, that might be easier to promote. Eliason sees it as something you might do on a Saturday when you wake up and call a few friends. Hey, you say groggily, want to have brunch and go wine tasting? You drive down the street or across the bridge, and you're back in time for supper — no wading through packs of tourists or dodging CHP officers on the lookout for cars swerving home from Napa. The Dashes note that they're just a few blocks from BART — you'll soon be able to hit Dashe and JC Cellars in one go, then take a sobering two-mile walk to Lost Canyon. Bring a bike and you can ride over to Rosenblum and St. George Spirits, too. Heck, with those distances, you might as well split a cab. And buses run up and down San Pablo Avenue, passing close to several wineries.

If the vintners can snag all the right permits, wine tasters may also be able to roll from Periscope in Emeryville down to A Donkey and Goat and then to Edmunds St. John, which will soon share a space with Rubissow-Sargent. A one-mile stagger north along Fourth Street puts you near Eno/Harrington Cellars, where Bryan Harrington already likes to hang out on Saturday afternoons and chat with anyone who stops by.

Eno's Verhage hopes association members can share resources as well as marketing. "If we wanted to buy a screwcap machine or an ozone machine, those things are tens of thousands of dollars," he says. "It doesn't make sense to have a bottling machine if you only use it once a year. But if I drop a thousand and you drop a thousand, and we just rotate it, it's affordable." Tracey Brandt, meanwhile, is happy to have sympathetic winemakers close by in case critical machinery breaks midharvest, or some tiny part gets lost right when she needs it. Eliason relishes the sense of community. "It's nice

to go grab a beer with a friend and bitch because you've got a stuck fermentation on your Petite Sirah," he says. "The guilty aside part of this was that I just wanted friends to hang out with."

The East Bay Vintners have a long way yet to go. They have no formal incorporation papers, and no joint checking account, although Eliason has set up a Web site at EastBayVintners.com. Lost Canyon's Riskin thinks it's time for a more formal structure. Even so, startup winemakers such as Brockway and Smith can't take advantage of the passport event because they don't yet have a proper space to display their wines, and Verhage lacks the proper permits. And it's unclear whether anyone will have the time to pull these events together, since all work double-overtime already.

Even so, their DIY spirit is infectious. The brave new winemakers, light on cash but heavy on skill, are adopting cooperative business models that seem poised to foster the spread of urban winemaking. And if the East Bay wine trail gets up and running, who knows how many more red-nosed locals will catch the fever?

Brendan Eliason has great hopes for Periscope and Emeryville. "In every town in Europe, you have your local cheesemaker, your local butcher, your local baker, and your local winemaker," he says. "Here we ghettoize all the wine production. Napa is the number-two draw for adults in California, next to Disneyland. And that's really the mentality of it."

In Napa, he continues, "You're not actually in the community with the people who are consuming your product. They have to drive an hour up to you to buy the wine, and then they drive an hour back away. You're not part of the social dynamic." Which is exactly what he wants to be, with regular after-hours tastings for locals; events that combine forces with Paulding & Company, the cooking instructor next door; and maybe even a fill-your-jug setup. Just show up at his front porch and say hi.

SWEET & SOUR GRAPES

For vintners, building an identity around an urban area has its pros and cons.

By Jonathan Kauffman

It makes sense for the East Bay Vintners to market their location to thousands of urban wine lovers who live just minutes away. But market nationally? Maybe not.

Robert Eyler, an economist in Sonoma State's Wine Business Program, thinks building a reputation as an urban vintners' association will be tough. "There are a lot of appellation-based winery associations that are trying to build appellations as brands," he says. "It's tough to imagine that it will be taken lying down."

The wine industry drops serious cash promoting states, counties, and microregions as wine-growing areas. In California, there are 95 approved American Viticultural Areas, the US government's formal name for appellations. AVAs can be as broad as "San Francisco Bay," which covers the Livermore Valley and Santa Cruz, or as specific as Anderson Valley, a section of Mendocino County that at last count had only a few thousand acres of vines.

A wine's AVA is prominently displayed on bottles and highlighted in critics' reviews and retail-store catalogues. "I think the more expensive the wine, the more important the appellation," says Bill Turrentine of Turrentine Brokerage. In other words, *you* may not know that Mount Veeder is a sub-appellation of Napa Valley, but the collector willing to spend \$50 a bottle for a case of Mount Veeder Cabernet? You better believe she does. For a vintner outside Napa, and even inside it, owning a vineyard in an area that secures an AVA is like having your stock split: The land value skyrockets. Not to mention the boost that the region gets from increased wine tourism and tasting-room sales.

Wine marketing and education guru Tim Hanni thinks that an urban winemakers' association like the East Bay Vintners can be a great way to distinguish its members' wines to consumers. And building "story" is the critical struggle for wineries, all of which must entice people to select their products from shelves containing scores of similar ones. But Hanni cautions that appellation is still important for the link between distributors and consumers. "The wine buyer is disproportionately interested in appellation, so if you don't have the origin credentials, it's harder to get your wine placed," he says.

Which is why East Bay wineries haven't spent millions promoting their urban location. Even Rosenblum Cellars makes its AVAs easy to read on the labels of its high-end, vineyard-designated wines. Kent Rosenblum may love to have his picture taken underneath the port cranes, but no one poring over a Cleveland bistro's wine list can see them. Yet just as Rosenblum — and influential winemakers such as Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St. John and Paul Draper of Ridge — have done for decades, today's urban winemakers are trumpeting the fact that they're not tied to any specific plot of land. "I'm not bound to a region," says Matt Smith of Blacksmith Cellars. "It allows me the freedom to go to different appellations to buy the grapes that grow best there. I make Cabernet Sauvignon from Alexander Valley, Chenin Blanc from Monterey."

And with no specific appellation, there are no preconceived notions of how his wines will be. Bryan Harrington of Berkeley's Harrington Wines takes a slightly different tack: He makes Pinot Noir, and only Pinot, but one may be from the Russian River, another from Carneros, a third from Sonoma Coast.

Many of the fourteen East Bay Vintners have made their names or are beginning to stake their reputations on Syrah, a Rhone varietal that more and more vineyards are planting. The wine community already loves it, and someday the public may, too. Who knows? In a decade Syrah could be the next Pinot Noir. Plus its grapes are still affordable, and the wines don't have to compete against Napa — the gold standard in marketing terms — as a Chardonnay or a Cabernet Sauvignon would. Many of the locals also can afford to bet on up-and-coming AVAs such as Lodi, Paso Robles, and Dry Creek,

securing long-term contracts with growers now, and riding, or helping to bolster, each area's rising reputation.

