

Taking it to the streets

• Urban wineries show soul, not soil

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Article Launched:09/19/2007 03:07:02 AM PDT

They pick at night, when the grapes are at their prime -- crisp and filled with flavor. The rolling fog tickles the trellised vines, and by twilight they are bare. Back at the estate, a large staff grooms the harvest before destemming the grapes and pumping them into steel tanks. The winery dog licks up scrap skins, charming fanny-packed customers who've stolen a peek from the mahogany-walled tasting room.

Romantic, yes, but for winemaker Jeff Cohn, it was the sweet roar of traffic that signaled "crush" on a recent Monday afternoon. A truckload of premium Petite Sirah grapes pulls into JC Cellars in downtown Oakland. Accompanied by two assistants -- the only visible staff -- Cohn grabs a tight cluster and pulls a grape to his lips. "How beautiful is that?" he says.

They may be 100 miles from Napa, Sonoma or Mendocino, but Cohn and other urban winemakers are producing some of the state's most exciting wines -- in small storefronts and industrial warehouses tucked in Berkeley, Oakland and Emeryville.

Urban wineries have arrived, and both their spirit and mission evoke old Napa -- a time before urbane conceit and corporate dollars reigned.

Metro East Bay's focused, high-quality winemakers are epitomized by Jeff Cohn of JC Cellars and Mike Dashe of Dashe Cellars. The two share a warehouse winery that -- fittingly -- parallels the 880 freeway in Oakland.

Cohn spent a decade making wine at Rosenblum in Alameda before launching JC Cellars, where he focuses on elegant Northern Rhone style wines. His Syrahs are dark, lush and meaty, softened by hints of lavender. His Zins are lean, not jammy.

And First Date, his blend of Marsanne and Roussanne, will revive white wine drinkers tired of the usual suspects.

When blending, Cohn reaches as far out as France, making wine with his friend Pierre Guillard in the Cote Rotie. "A lot of wineries are focused on doing estate or local," Cohn says. "But being here, we can have our pick of the best vineyard sources." The pair's Pourquoi Pas is a blend of Cohn's Rockpile Syrah and Guillard's Cote Rozier -- an herby cassis-meets-game innovation worth its \$135 sticker.

Dashe, whose resume includes Ridge and Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, offers just as broad a portfolio. He started Dashe Cellars in 1996 with his wife, Anne, who trained and worked in Bordeaux. Together they make wines of exceptional complexity from top Sonoma vineyards. They are also graduates of Rosenblum, and it's evident in their Zinfandels, which also nix jam in favor of spicy minerality.

Dashe's artistic lineup also includes whites: his dry, Alsatian-style Riesling is an up-and-coming star.

"We weren't interested in making Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc," Dashe says. "We wanted to make something with unusual character and bigger acidity."

Something different, much like the urban landscape where he makes his wines.

"It's a vibrant scene being near all the restaurants and retailers," Dashe says. "Napa and Sonoma are beautiful, but there we'd be one of many. Here, we're unique."

Along with long-established Rosenblum, Dashe and JC Cellars anchor the East Bay Vintners Alliance, now 15 wineries strong, and growing.

Below are profiles of some of the newer wineries, run by industry veterans, former garagistes and celebrated sommeliers. Learn why they chose the East Bay (cheap rent), what their secret is (small lots) and where they put their money (premium fruit).

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose muscular style nicely reflects the no-nonsense spirit of urban wineries, declared September California Wine Month. I think we can all agree that they make city life just a little juicier.

The Blender

Winemaker: Brendan Eliason.

Winery: Periscope Cellars, Emeryville.

What he makes: 1,200 cases of Syrah and Zinfandel-based blends, and Chardonnay. He's also wild about Portuguese varietals.

That space: It's an old submarine repair facility. Urbano Cellars also makes their wine there.

Before Periscope: Eliason earned a degree in viticulture from Cal Poly, did research for Gallo, then landed the co-winemaker gig at David Coffaro Winery in Dry Creek Valley. He was there for 10 years. Leaving was not easy. "They were family," he says. "But I had to leave the nest eventually. I wanted to do my own thing."

Why blend: "Blending gives you the ability to make the most interesting wines possible," Eliason says. "I'm not much of a traditionalist. I want to push the boundaries as much as possible."

What else he "blends": His experience as a wine buyer and director. He was the former wine manager for the Santa Maria Hilton's Vintner's Bar & Grill, and now, Walnut Creek's Va de Vi. He tastes every vintage of every varietal from every country. Under Eliason, sales tripled at the Vintner's Bar & Grill. He featured every Central Coast wine on its list -- that's 200 wines by the glass.

Why Emeryville: "I wanted my winery to be in my community," says Eliason, who's lived in West Oakland for nearly a decade. "I want my customers to know me and I want to know my customers. I always found it really strange that I used to spend an hour and a half driving to make wine."

Why not wine country: "Grapes care a lot about where they're grown, but grapes don't care at all where they're made into wine," he says. "Nobody in my business can afford to compete with venture capitalists. There's nothing you can do in Napa to improve the quality of your wine that you can't do in Emeryville."

The Pinot Painter

Winemaker: Bryan Harrington.

Winery: Harrington Pinot, Berkeley.

What he makes: 1,200 cases of five Pinot Noirs from vineyards in Russian River, Sonoma Coast and Carneros.

Background: An artist, Harrington holds a degree in painting from UC Santa Cruz. In the early '90s, he started messing around with Cabernet and Zinfandel in his San Francisco studio, until he found out it was illegal.

Light bulb moment: A mid-'90s barrel tasting of Chalone Pinot Noir. "I couldn't believe the structure and depth straight out of the barrel. I decided I had to get some."

Vineyard junkie: "I've got five pushers," he says. "Each vineyard offers such diverse flavors, so you get really curious and addicted to working with new ones. And you really have to audition for some of these vineyards."

Auditioning for David Hirsch: "His Sonoma Coast is one of the top three Pinot vineyards in California," Harrington says. "Nobody would tell me where it was, so I just drove every back road finding it." He did, and spent the entire day with Hirsch and his wife, who is also an artist. They hit it off, and Harrington got his fix.

California Pinot vs. Burgundy: "The only downside is the (lack of) complexity of nose," he says of California's version. "Burgundy's limestone gives so much of that. California's great, but the difference is phenomenal."

On pinot and painting: Like oil painting, making Pinot Noir is all about building layers. "You find a focus point and build a composition out of flavors and aromatics," he says.

Sensory evaluation: "When you look at a painting, you are drawn into it," he says. "You move around it and find some resolve. Same with wine. You have a nose that pulls you in, and a definite attack that brings you in deeper. The mid-palate is where things begin to evolve, and then the finish leaves you hooked."

Why Berkeley: "Cheap rent," Harrington says. "And I'm dead center between Anderson Valley and Monterey."

The Chemist

Winemaker: Matt Smith.

Winery: Blacksmith Cellars, Alameda.

What he makes: 1,000 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chenin Blanc.

Before Blacksmith: A chemistry grad, his first job was in a lab "sampling smelly water." After five months, he scored a job with Beaulieu Vineyards in Napa. Hooked, he went back to school at Fresno State for a degree in enology.

His romance with Beaulieu: "There was a bit of that," Smith admits. "Hundred-year-old winery. Stone walls. Oak barrels." From the lab, Smith moved into the tasting room and eventually into the cellar, where he monitored barrel fermentation.

Alumni connection: Nearing graduation, Smith organized an alumni Christmas party at Fresno State. He needed a job. In walked Jeff Cohn, then winemaker of Rosenblum Cellars, looking to hire. Smith became Cohn's enologist at JC Cellars and Mike Dashe's assistant winemaker at Dashe Cellars. Both were renting space from Rosenblum at the time. Smith says the situation was ideal. "I figured I had Jeff who went to Fresno State, Mike who went to UC Davis, and (Mike's wife) Anne who went to the University of Bordeaux, all rolled inside of Rosenblum," he says. "It was a great opportunity." Plus, they let him make his own wine.

That first bottle: A 2001 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. A superb expression of that famed vintage, it was a wine Smith made from start to finish: tending the grapes, hand-sorting and crushing, pressing, blending and bottling. "I wanted my first wine to be a top-quality, uncompromising Cabernet," he says. "I achieved that."

Best thing about being in the East Bay: No expectations, at least not varietally. "If you're a winery in Carneros, you're expected to grow Pinot," Smith says. "If you're a winery in Stags Leap, you're expected to make Cabernet. In the East Bay, you can do whatever you want."

His hope: "In some ways, I hope as time goes on the (urban wineries) stay exactly the same," he says. "Small and humble, with a healthy exchange of ideas and pleasantries. Good scores will follow, but nobody's really that full of themselves yet. I hope they don't lose that cohesiveness."

The Naturalists

Winery: A Donkey and Goat, Berkeley.

Winemakers: Jared and Tracey Brandt, husband and wife.

What they make: About 1,300 cases of Rhone varietals and Chardonnay.

Old World education: The Brandts left their tech jobs in 2001 and headed to France to study winemaking for a year under Eric Texier, a Rhone and Macon area winemaker. A few classes at UC Davis filled in the blanks.

Crushpad co-founder: Upon their return, Tracey and her former colleague Michael Brill launched Crushpad, a San Francisco custom crush facility. She and Jared made wine there before launching A Donkey and Goat in 2004.

That name: In Cote Rotie, donkeys are used for organic weed control. After a long day in the vineyard, they become noticeably cranky. So winemakers bring in goats at night to keep them company and soothe them. According to the Brandts, the pairing dates back to 345 A.D.

Their pairing: Many wives focus on the books and marketing side of operating a winery, but Tracey is adamant about sharing the dirty work with Jared. "I lift as many if not more barrels than Jared," she says.

Texier tutelage: In the Rhone, the Brandts followed the principles of biodynamic and traditional farming, and have incorporated some of these older and sustainable practices into their winemaking. They rarely inoculate their wines with yeast. For their Chardonnay, they pick twice, once in July and again in August, to utilize that early natural acid and avoid adding artificial acid later.

Happy feet: Like famous Burgundian wineries, the Brandts practice pigeage a pied, or foot stomping. "We sterilize the feet first," Jared says. "They are a nice vehicle to crush because the pad is too soft to crush seeds." They swear the results are better than that of even the gentlest machine crusher.

Why the East Bay: "Because we can afford to do what we want to do," Jared says. "We can take more risks. If we don't like the results, we don't sell the wine."

The Educators

Winemakers: Jack States and Randy Kentworth.

Winery: Lost Canyon Winery, Oakland.

What they make: 3,000 cases of vineyard-designed Pinot Noir and Syrah from Sonoma County. Wine & Spirits voted their Pinot one of the 10 best of 2005.

Day jobs: States and Kentworth run a special-education foundation full time, complete with summits that draw national attention. So a large winery staff wouldn't have made sense. "We didn't want that," States says. "We didn't want to do custom crush or hire a famous winemaker, either. They have an assistant winemaker, a harvest intern and a sales manager. Everyone else who chips in is family or a wine club member."

Home winemakers: States and Kentworth started making wine in 1978. They launched Lost Canyon Winery in 2001. Their first crush was that same year, and they moved into their custom-built Dennison Street winery in 2005.

Learning curve: Going from home-winemaking to a commercial operation was a bit daunting. "Volume was the biggest change for me," States says. "My experience with oak and barrels was limited to what would fit in my garage." So he called upon Matt Smith at Blacksmith Cellars for advice. "If it wasn't for Matt, life would've been a lot tougher for us."

3,000 and growing: States sees their production growing to a potential 5,000 cases. They've gone from hand-sorting to a custom-built sorter; hand-bottling to machine-bottling. "It's always a juggling act, increasing volume and maintaining quality," he says.

Why wine is better than teaching: "Because at the end of the day, you can hold a bottle and say 'I did this,'" States says.

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URBAN TASTING ROOMS

The East Bay Vintners Alliance, which formed last year and holds its annual Urban Wine Experience at Rosenblum Cellars in August, is home to 15 premium wineries. Some have tasting rooms and regular hours. Others offer tastings by appointment. Call for more information:

- A Donkey and Goat: 2323 B 4th St., Berkeley. 510-868-9174, <http://www.adonkeyandgoat.com>.
- Andrew Lane Wines: 742 Sunnyside Road, St. Helena. 707-815-3501, <http://www.andrewlanewines.com>. Wines can be tasted at Periscope Cellars.
- Aubin Cellars: 6050 Colton Blvd., Oakland. 510-339-0170, <http://www.aubincellars.com>.
- Blacksmith Cellars: 218 Haight Ave., Alameda. 510-917-0537, <http://www.blacksmithcellars.com>.
- Dashe Cellars: 55 4th St., Oakland. 510-452-1800, <http://www.dashecellars.com>.

- Edmunds St. John. Contact Steve Edmunds. 510-981-1510, <http://www.edmundsstjohn.com>.
- Eno Wines, 805 Camelia St., Berkeley. 415-515-7227, <http://www.enowines.com>.
- Harrington Wines, 805 Camelia St., Berkeley. 510-527-1305, <http://www.harringtonwine.com>. Co-op (Harrington and Eno are moving to Sonoma Grange across from Gloria Ferrer in Sonoma. It opens mid-October.
- JC Cellars, 55 4th St., Oakland. 510-465-5900, <http://www.jccellars.com>.
- Lost Canyon, 2102 Dennison St., Suite A, Oakland. 510-534-9314, <http://www.lostcanyonwinery.com>.
- Periscope Cellars, 1410 62nd St., Suite B, Emeryville. 510-655-7827. <http://www.periscopecellars.com>.
- Prospect, 772 Wine Company, 15 Berneves Court, Oakland. 510-531-2274, <http://www.prospect772.com>.
- Rosenblum Cellars, 2900 Main St., Suite 1100, Alameda. 510-865-7007, <http://www.rosenblumcellars.com>.
- Tayerle, 2311 Magnolia St., Oakland. 877-894-3118, <http://www.tayerle.net>.
- Urbano Cellars, 1410 62nd St., Suite B, Emeryville. 415-806-7155, <http://www.urbanocellars.com>.

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