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PASSIONATE ADVOCATES FOR THE 7 PERCENT

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BY MARCY GORDON

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If you drive across the winegrowing regions of Sonoma County, the majority of vineyards you pass will be planted with Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel and Syrah-Shiraz. According to the Sonoma County Crop Report, these varieties are the most widely planted grapes: roughly 93 percent of the more than 3 million tons harvested in Northern California yearly.

The remaining 7 percent planted are rare and obscure grapes, such as Aglianico, Grenache Blanc, Verdehlo, and Trousseau Gris, grapes that many consumers have never tried or even heard of before. Yet for a small cadre of maverick winemakers, it's that 7 percent, the lesser-planted and uncommon grape varieties, that are most appealing.

Two of the most passionate advocates for the 7 percent grapes in Sonoma are William Allen of Two Shepherds located in Windsor, and Pax Mahle of Wind Gap Wines at the Barlow in Sebastopol.

Chasing the tough-to-grow, hard-to-pronounce, and at-times-persnickety varieties rather than follow the tried-and-true is not necessarily the path to glory. The common denominator among the winemakers is the compulsion to follow their own tastes while pushing the prevailing expectations of what makes wine great.

“We make the wines we want to drink and love first, then find a following,” says Allen of Two Shepherds.

Instead of making wine to fit a business/marketing plan, Allen makes wine to suit his palate. His love for Rhône varieties grew from a hobby into to a full-blown label.

“Our wines are appealing not just because of the variety, but for those seeking wines of restraint, lower alcohol, higher acidity, and finesse over brawn,” Allen says.

Pax Mahle’s focus on wines with a sense of place is reflected in his label name Wind Gap—a reference to the Petaluma Wind Gap, a viticulture sub-region of the Sonoma Coast where the grapes are influenced by cool coastal winds and “...taste like where they are grown.” His old-vine Trousseau Gris, an aromatic delight from Fannucchi-Wood Road Vineyard in the Russian River Valley, fermented in concrete, is one of the signature wines available on tap at his tasting room.

“The lesser-known varieties that the 7 percent is shining a light on are made to be enjoyed with ease and not put on a pedestal,” Mahle says. “Not every obscure variety will become a favorite, but that’s the joy of tasting and experimenting and taking the journey of discovering what you like.”

Both Mahle and Allen adhere to a minimal approach to winemaking using old world-techniques like native yeast, neutral versus new barrel, concrete, no fining or filtering, and picking at lower ripeness levels. Indeed, many of the wines Allen and Mahle make exhibit an inherent lightness

of being, alive with an energy that practically bounce in the glass.

But are the 7 percent destined to become just a passing fashion trend? The equivalent of wide-legged palazzo pants of the late 1960s? One day you're in, the next day you're out. Or will they become generally accepted and long lasting?

“These lesser-known varieties offer wine aficionados a much broader world of possibilities and palate experiences, and a chance to appreciate the benefit of old vines and historic vineyards,” Allen says. He sees it as an opportunity for California to distinguish itself, and believes the number of small wineries producing lesser-known varieties will continue to increase.

Four years ago a tasting event aptly called the 7 Percent Solution was held with a handful of winemakers including Allen and Mahle showcasing their wines from the lesser-planted grape varieties. Now both have tasting rooms where you can explore their wines or find them at this year's 7 Percent Solution in May.

TWO SHEPHERDS

The Two Shepherds micro-winery and tasting room fills 3,600 square feet of a former film studio located on Bell Street in Windsor. A vibrant green paint visible behind a wall of barrels is a remnant the previous tenant used as a background for special effects film work. Now the only special effect is how Allen manages to hold a full-time job and still make his sought-after, small-lot California-grown Rhône's entirely by himself.

The atmosphere at Two Shepherds is welcoming, unpretentious and the head of guest relations —Arya, a one and a half year-old Australian shepherd—confirms it's a 100 percent dog-friendly tasting experience. The working winery backdrop makes it feel as if you are seated at the chef's table inside a restaurant kitchen and the surroundings serve to prompt questions from guests. During my visit another guest noticed a lone barrel marked Pinot Meunier. “What's the story on that?” he asked.

“Acquiring those grapes involved goats (a birthday gift for partner and winery co-conspirator Karen Daenen) and a happy coincidence,” Allen explained. This led to an impromptu barrel tasting and we all agreed the wine is on its way to being something special.

Two Shepherds signature wine is the Grenache Blanc from Saarloos Vineyard, Santa Ynez. The 2013 displays pronounced aromatics and hits all the palate pleasure buttons. The new release 2013 Caties Corner, Russian River, Grenache Blanc is the first harvest ever from the only planting of Grenache Blanc grown in the Russian River Valley AVA. Compared to the Saarloos, Caties Corner is subtler—stony, clean and lean with hints of chamomile flowers and lovely acidity.

Two Shepherds wines are defined by a feminine elegance and tend to the light and pretty side, and two that typify this are the 2012 Pastoral Rouge, Russian River Valley, a red Rhone blend, and the 2013 Grenache Noir—both from Saralee’s Vineyard, Russian River Valley.

Although the space has transitioned from indie filmmaking to indie winemaking, future plans call for movie nights in the summer. Perhaps they should keep that green screen wall after all.

Two Shepherds

Open Saturdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Weekdays by appointment only. Tasting fee \$15 per person, waived with purchase.

7763 Bell Road, Windsor

twoshepherds.com

WIND GAP WINES

It’s all about discovery at the Wind Gap tasting room. Pax Mahle’s wines are terroir-driven and showcase the individual traits of vineyard sites in Sonoma County. Over a dozen wines are available via flights or by the glass with a daily selection on tap.

The grange chic décor at Wind Gap features walls paneled in reclaimed barn siding with seating along the bar and at a cluster of high-top tables. There's also a softly-lit back room arranged with overstuffed couches and armchairs suitable for quiet conversation or merely hanging out with a glass from the tap and your laptop.

Music is a big part of the Wind Gap tasting room experience and the vinyl collection ranges from mellow to metal. You are likely to hear Phish, one of Mahle's favorite bands, bouncing around the room as well.

The best place to start for those new to the wines is with the Featured Flight (\$20), comprised of Trousseau Gris on tap from Fannucchi-Wood Road Vineyard, Pinot Gris Windsor Oaks Vineyard, 2013 Grenache Scales Vineyard, and the immensely compelling SOIF (French word for thirst), an old-vine red made with a mouth-watering blend of Valdiguie, Negroamaro, Syrah, Dolcetto, and Mourvedre. The SOIF is 100 percent carbonic maceration with deep cherry and spice notes and a rich, juicy finish.

Pinotphiles will enjoy the Sonoma Coast Flight (\$38) featuring three vineyard-specific Pinots and a surprisingly crisp and focused Chardonnay from Gaps Crown Vineyard. The Syrah Flight (\$30) offers an outstanding array of wines from vineyards (Majik, Armagh, Nellessen and Sonoma Coast) that reflect the soils of whence they came.

The wines on tap are available by the glass or in refillable growlers. But don't dare leave without trying the Fixie, a 50/50 blend of Syrah and Viognier that is punchy and exotic. A spicy fusion of dragon fruit, guava with hint of cinnamon, Fixie is like a character on "My Little Pony"—snappy and fresh with a bright attitude and harmony. Fixie is Magic!

Wind Gap is an ideal meeting point for a pre-movie glass paired with the in-house cheese and salumi plate. Or settle in and order from local Barlow restaurants such as Vignette for Neapolitan pizza or crepes from Ultra Crepes. Visitors are welcome to bring their own food as well.

Wind Gap Wines

Open Thursday & Sunday, noon-6 p.m.; Friday & Saturday, noon-8 p.m. Private tasting available Monday through Wednesday by reservation.

6780 McKinley Street #170, Sebastopol

windgapwines.com/Tasting-Room

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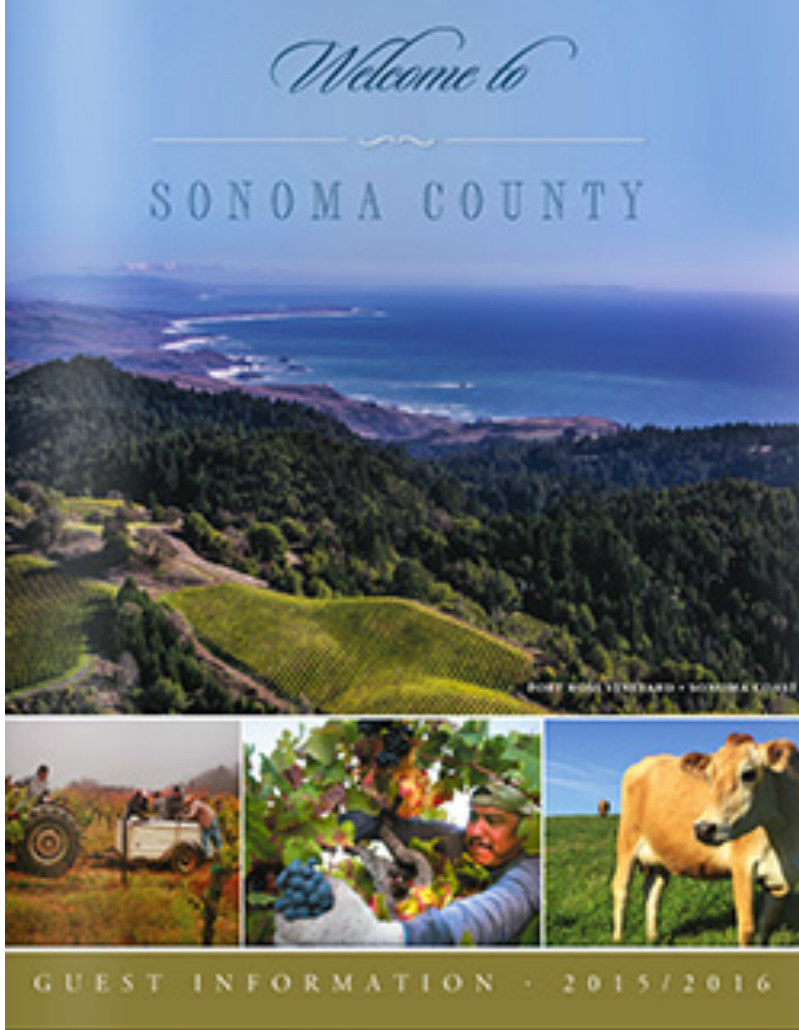
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