

# RIPE FOR Resurgence

## LIVERMORE VALLEY'S NEW WAVE OF WORLD-CLASS WINES & VINEYARDS

story and photos by Randy Caparoso

There are reasons why the Livermore Valley Viticultural Area was once the hotbed of innovation in the California wine industry. It is a fog-influenced coastal region, to begin with, its western edges a scant 25 miles from the southern reaches of the San Francisco Bay (hence its inclusion in the San Francisco Bay AVA).

Like the appellations of Santa Barbara to the south, Livermore Valley runs in an east-west direction, making for a classic Mediterranean climate—cold, wet winters and warm, dry summers, with average daily high/low temperatures at the peak of growing seasons as wide as 36° degrees (diurnal swings strikingly similar to mid-Napa Valley and most of Sonoma County).

Which is why, when a rancher named Robert Livermore first purchased most of the valley in 1839 (through Spanish partners, since Anglo-Saxons could not legally buy land in California prior to the Mexican Cession in 1848), it made sense to plant wine grapes along with other crops.

Some 40 years later, in 1882, Charles Wetmore pioneered California Sauvignon Blanc with selections sourced directly from Château d'Yquem, while James Concannon planted his first Cabernet Sauvignon with cuttings from Château Margaux (a handful of these

*The Steven Kent Winery's Ghilmetti Estate Vineyard near Livermore Valley's Altamont Pass.*

"Mother Vines" are still cultivated by Concannon Vineyard). A year later, Carl Wente established his vineyard estate, initiating work with cultivars of Chardonnay still considered, after more than 100 years, the best-adapted to California terroirs.

Wherefore, when *The Somm Journal* and the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association conduct their three-day Livermore Valley SOMM CAMP on October 9–11, the focus will be on the historic attributes of Livermore Valley as well as the recent resurgence, only within the past 20 years or so, of ultra-premium winegrowing in the region.

What is fueling Livermore Valley's current quality push? Apart from the moderate climate, the early pioneers were drawn to Livermore Valley's well-drained, gravelly/silty riverbed soils, famously compared to Bordeaux's Graves region. Today, however, we are seeing markedly more concentrated, focused wines, much of this attributed to movement into shallower hillside soils, where constant wind also becomes a key factor, making an impact on the higher-quality clones (particularly Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties) at growers' disposal.

In the course of plotting out our Livermore Valley SOMM CAMP itinerary, I seized the opportunity to query four of Livermore Valley's leading modern-day producers about what makes their region special, and why their wines are more suitable than ever to the needs of today's sommeliers.



## Steven Kent Mirassou

**Owner/Grower/Winemaker, The Steven Kent Winery**

When establishing The Steven Kent Winery in 1996, Steven Kent Mirassou rang in Livermore Valley's new wave as an unrepentant proselytizer. He has brazenly, for instance, presented his Steven Kent Lineage—a \$165 blend of Livermore Valley-grown Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and (occasionally) Malbec—in double-blind tastings alongside the likes of Opus One, Harlan, Joseph Phelps Insignia and Bordeaux Grand Crus, and the wine has fared favorably. It belongs.

Confidence comes with the territory. Mirassou represents, after all, the sixth generation of a family that has been farming wine grapes in California since 1854 (originally in Santa Clara Valley and later in Monterey County). They knew the legendary figures: Wetmore, James Concannon, the original Carl Wente.

But that wine savvy is also based upon the stunning success of plantings, crowned, without a doubt, by Steven

Kent's Ghielmetti Estate Vineyard: a 64-acre site planted in 2001–2002 in the far eastern corner of the appellation near the Altamont Pass, where slopes of high luminosity range from 500 to 1,000 feet and the valley narrows to heighten the impact of daily winds.

Explains Mirassou, "In the 1950s, U.C. Davis advised Bordeaux varieties in Livermore's flat gravel beds, and slopes were not planted. So when the '60s came and regions like Napa Valley exploded, Livermore sort of stood still and got left behind. When we got started, we could see there were sites replete with well-drained loamy sand and clay soils—much more conducive to intensity and acid retention—and that's the big difference today."

While Mirassou produces outstanding varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, it is his Bordeaux inspired blend that rules. The **Steven Kent 2012 Lineage** (72% Cabernet Sauvignon with Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot), for instance, is gloriously rich yet almost incomparably refined: cedar, cigar box, black cherry/cassis and slivers of sweet herbiness tucked neatly into a silken, moderately weighted body, bright with acidity and impeccably polished tannins.

**The Steven Kent Lineage is one of Livermore Valley's most ambitious wines.**

"What Lineage shows," says Mirassou, "is how distinct we can be, compared to Napa Valley or Médoc. Cabernet Sauvignon grown here gives more of a lean, elegant skeletal structure. Cabernet Franc can be its nervous system, illuminating it with electricity. Our Merlot is typically fleshy, while grapes like Petit Verdot add the exotic feathers that really make you sit up and pay attention."

"Personally," adds Mirassou, "my ambition has been to be the first to make world-class wine from Bordeaux varieties, but I can see the valley not being driven by just one or two wine types. The region will expand, like ripples from little pebbles dropped in a pond, because a lot of grapes grow well here, not just the major ones. There will be plenty for connoisseurs to latch on to."



Steven Kent Mirassou with a barrel of his Lineage blend.



## Julian Halasz

### *Winemaker, Darcie Kent Vineyards*

Darcie Kent is more than a painter-turned-vintner, although wine runs through her veins as well (her great-grandfather founded a Missouri winery in 1883 that was operated by her family until 1945). Kent established her Livermore Valley estate in 1996 after purchasing a home on a six-acre vineyard—part of a cluster of properties collectively known as Crane Ridge—from which her Hungarian-born winemaker, Julian Halasz, hand-crafts most of his single-vineyard bottlings.

For Livermore Valley, Chardonnay is a heritage grape. This is where it all started, with Wente field selections as well as single-clone cultivars that now dominate at least 75% of Chardonnay plantings in California. In a tasting room that also serves as an art gallery for Kent's works—featured on the Darcie Kent bottle labels as well as on other Livermore Valley bottlings—Halasz talked about their Chardonnay program, which wins most of their accolades.

"Livermore Valley has always been ideal for Chardonnay because of its east-west orientation and cool nights," explains Halasz, "especially Crane Ridge, which is mostly on north-facing slopes. July and August days can hit 90°, but consistently drop down to 52° or 53° every night. This is ideal for Chardonnay—and, incidentally, for Cabernet Sauvignon as well."

Halasz adds, "We produce four different Chardonnays from Crane Ridge, from different vineyards demonstrating the grape's site-specific sensitivity." The **Darcie Kent 2014**



The Darcie Kent Hoffman Vineyard Chardonnay is one of the winery's four vineyard-designated Chards.

**De Mayo Vineyard Chardonnay** is classically (for California) tropical (pineapple-towards-guava), with creamy aromas of barrel-fermentation heightening almost spicy, white flower fragrances. The **Darcie Kent 2014 Hoffman Vineyard Chardonnay** is also French oak-fermented, only with more new oak (80%) to accentuate fleshier texturing, higher acidity and deeper fruit tones.

According to Halasz, "The De Mayo and Hoffman Vineyards are next to each other, both originally planted by the Wentes in 1992 to Chardonnay Clone 04. In 2012, however, the Hoffman Vineyard started to show some Eutypa (aka dead-arm disease), and so we cut off the bilateral arms and converted it to cane pruning, whereas the De Mayo is still spur-pruned on cordons. What we found with the cane pruning, when the fruit zone moves up higher into the canopy, is that cluster and berry sizes became smaller and the fruit profile shifted from less tropical, like the Hoffman, and

more towards the apple/pear spectrum of the grape. This style responds better to new French oak."

There is also a 100% stainless steel-fermented Chardonnay from Pistachio Lane Vineyard, picked at lower Brix for higher, Chablis-like acid ("a big hit with restaurants" according to Halasz), plus an entry-level "Tesla Neighbors" bottling that combined barrel- and steel-fermented fruit.

Says Halasz, "The big advantage we've always had in Livermore Valley is that we stand on the shoulders of Wentes and Concannons, benefitting from all that knowledge and experience. Now it's a matter of exploring the possible diversity—going deeper into Bordeaux and Rhône varieties, or even Grüner Veltliner, which we also produce."



Winemaker Julian Halasz of Darcie Kent Vineyards.

## Heather McGrail and Mark Clarin

### *Manager and Winemaker, McGrail Vineyards & Winery*

Epitomizing the latest generation of artisanal Livermore Valley producers, McGrail Vineyards was founded by a retired police officer named Jim McGrail (now an attorney), who originally purchased his 16.4-acre hillside property towards the east side of Livermore Valley as an investment.

Jim and Ginger McGrail's daughter Heather, who manages the winery as a partner, tells her family's story: "Because the property sits on such ideal land for a vineyard, Phil Wente kept encouraging my dad to plant grapes. He would say, 'No way. I like to drink wine, not grow it.' But in 1999 he was finally persuaded. He planted the vineyard entirely to his favorite grape, Cabernet Sauvignon, with Phil's help as well as advice from Steven Kent, who bought all the grapes in the beginning."



Mark Clarin and Heather McGrail in the McGrail Vineyards barrel room.

"One thing led to another. In 2005 we produced a few gallons of our own. My parents talked me into moving up from Southern California to help, and Mark Clarin, who later became our winemaker [in 2009], began consulting with us. We went commercial and production increased, making it necessary to build a winery in 2008, followed by a tasting room. Then in the 2012 *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition our Cabernet Sauvignon won the Sweepstakes award, as the best of all American red wines entered that year. Suddenly, we're famous. And so today, we keep all the fruit from our home estate for ourselves, and we are planting another 12 acres of new vineyards."

Like the brash, young upstart that it is, there is nothing quiet about the McGrail Cabernet. The currently released **McGrail 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve** wears its regal black-purplish robe extremely well; oodles of luxuriously dark fruit, veering towards framboise, penetrate the nose and occupy a big, dense, meaty body; its cup runneth over with concentrated fruit and man-sized tannin.

"It's partially house style and partially site," says Clarin, whose winemaking career began 1989 with stints at Wente, Tamas and Bonny Doon. "I like a bigger style than, say, Steven Kent. But I also like that the move to hillsides has made such a big impact on Livermore Valley over the past 20 years. These sites can produce sturdier, more structured wines, and so that's what we're doing."



The McGrail Vineyards tasting room.

## Rhonda Wood

**Owner/Winemaker, Wood Family Vineyards**

Before falling under the spell of wine grapes, Rhonda Wood enjoyed an 18-year career as a commercial pilot for U.S. Airways. She has ridden the wind, seen the world through grains of sand and has even hung ten alongside Chelsey "Sully" Sullenberger. Now she makes wine.

Like other fairly recent arrivals to Livermore Valley, Wood was prompted by the acquisition, in 1996, of a Crane Ridge property that came with grapes, originally planted in 1992. After taking classes at U.C. Davis and working in a few cellars, she produced her first barrel (25 cases) of Merlot in 1998. She quickly expanded her portfolio to multiple 100-percent varietals—she prefers the focus of pure grape expressions—and today Wood Family Vineyards is up to 5,000 cases, while occasional flights are done in a 1940s-era Cessna.

"I consider Zinfandel a specialty," says Wood, "because not a lot of it is made in the valley. When I first started, I was one of the few to do Grenache, Malbec and Cabernet Franc as varietals."

Wood has been a big part of the trend making Livermore Valley more relevant to today's tastes for balance and diversity. She also finds irony in some of the changing attitudes from the outside, sharing this story: "At a winemakers-only technical tasting during a recent Chardonnay Symposium, my wine was one of 20 Chardonnays presented blind. A couple of winemakers commented on one wine showing lots of citrus complexity and balance, saying, 'This is definitely cool-climate Chardonnay.' Of course, it was my wine. Livermore Valley may not be perceived as a cold-climate region, but we're certainly capable of wines of that style."

Indeed, the **Wood Family 2015 Para Mas Amigas Chardonnay** is compact, citrusy, toasty with barrel-fermented aromas, yet sleek and minerally on the palate. In dramatic contrast, the **Wood Family 2014 Big Wood Zin Zinfandel** is a brazen cacophony of Bing cherry and cranberry-ish pop—yet nothing raisiny, and cunningly free of oak crutches—filling out an uncut, badda-bing (16% alcohol) body, brimming with bright, upbeat sensations. "To make a Zinfandel like this, you can't be afraid of high pH or ripeness—as long as the acid is there, you're going to get a balanced mouthfeel," says Wood.

"Livermore Valley wines have been winning their share of golds in competitions, and when that happens it's still a big surprise. We have the quality vineyards, and we've always had people with vision and capability. For myself, I always say winemaking is like flying an airplane. You have to pre-plan carefully before leaving the ground, and when you're harvesting and crushing, it's like taking off—one big high. Then when you finally get it in the bottle, it's like landing the plane, and everyone's clapping!"



Rhonda Wood of Wood Family Vineyards.

Look for our Livermore Valley SOMM CAMP story in the February-March 2017 issue.