

ENJOYING THE JOURNEY

A Grand Tour of Sextant Wines

*By Ted Contreras
Photography by Jay Cabiero*

Napa Valley has traditionally been California's premiere destination for wine tasting, but there is no longer a reason for Valley residents to travel so far north. San Luis Obispo County, which is only a quick two-hour drive away, boasts over 170 wineries, many with tasting rooms. The area is the fastest growing American Viticultural area in California, with 26,000 acres planted.

Covers Magazine staff spent a weekend in Paso Robles, visiting wineries throughout the county. Ted Contreras, our resident sommelier, highlights one of his personal favorites.

With blueprints and barrel samples in hand, Craig and Nancy Stoller, owners of Sextant Wines, led Covers Magazine staff to a vista in the foothills of San Luis Obispo. We had the privilege of visiting the exact longitude and latitude of Sextant Wines' future location for a new winery and tasting room. We hiked up a dirt road that will soon become a curving entranceway to the area's newest and perhaps most intriguing wine tasting destination.

Once we reached the promontory at which picture windows will frame the vineyard below and the rustic landscape beyond, Craig and Nancy insisted on two things. First, Craig unrolled the blueprints to show us the site plan in order to explain how the architecture would blend into the surroundings while still maintaining a few features to attract the eye — a balance that the Stollers insisted upon. Second, they

offered a toast to "new friends" with barrel samples of their soon-to-be-released chardonnay. The toast echoed the sentiment of the moment, because the promise of a good vintage is akin to the general promise of good things to come.

When visitors arrive at their current temporary location at a commercial park in the town of San Luis Obispo, it is immediately apparent that





the proprietors want them to feel welcomed. The knowledgeable staff is in no hurry as they perhaps feel confident that each wine encountered will be faithful to the user-friendly tasting notes and that the array of wines poured will leave an impression. Their two basic labels play upon a seafaring theme. When asked about the process of coming up with the monikers, Craig was delighted to give me an account. He and Nancy certainly have a passion for gourmet food, wine, and sailing. But it was the sailing that triggered the thought. The first label, "Sextant," is a nautical navigational device, but as a word contains some interesting elements. The second label of "10 Knots" is also a nautical term but requires a bit of explanation. A "kamal" is an older device that was used in the 18th century for celestial navigation. It is a rectangular wooden card often decorated with intricate carvings. A rope with ten knots that are equally spaced is threaded through the center of the device. At equatorial latitudes, the kamal is used to approximate location and speed as well as distance to land. But not only are the two labels thematic in terms of celestial navigation, they also share a fun and nifty connotation. Making the connection requires the following steps: 1) Sound out the first syllable of the first label, 2) Use your playful imagination to associate it with the name of the second label, and 3) Consider the taglines:

Sextant: Navigate...Explore...Discover...

10 Knots: Enjoy the Journey...

Wine has a romantic appeal in the first place, so why not think of labels that can grab attention while at the same time invoke one's passions in a bit of word play?

Not only are the two basic labels intriguing, they also function as inventive means towards classifying their stable of wines. The "Sextant" line is for blends weighted towards Bordeaux varietals and Zinfandel. The "10 Knots" line is for blends tended on Rhone or Burgundy varietals. My two favorites are the refreshing 10 Knots Beachcomber 2006 and the seductive Sextant Kamal 2005. With the generous help of the tasting notes that were provided, I offer my take on these two wines.

Ted Contreras is a certified sommelier and a member of the International Sommelier Guild. He is active in wine consulting and wine education.

Recently, he was a guest judge at the 2007 Long Beach Grand Cru Wine Competition.

The 10 Knots Beachcomber 2006 is a white Rhone varietal blend. Viognier and Rousanne make up most of the blend while a dab of Marsanne rounds it out. It starts with a bouquet of almonds and apricot, then the citrus notes take effect. Lemon is complimented with coconuts, pear, and papaya. The finish lingers just enough with a snap of ginger. It will remind you of an afternoon walk on the beach. As the waves break in the distance, the crash gets your attention, then the ocean



spray wafts its way to you as the rolling wave dissipates into the sand at your ankles.

The Stollers consider their Sextant Kamal 2005 as their "opus," which begins to describe the symphonic effect of the blend. It is Bordeaux-like in the inclusion of Merlot (23%), Cabernet Sauvignon (21%), Cabernet Franc (19%), and Petit Verdot (7%). Then it takes a tack towards the Rhone varietals with Syrah (13%), Mourvedre (9%), and Petite Sirah (8%). This amalgam combines for a velvety effect. Because there are no gaps in the delivery to the palette, it seduces. It begins with a hint of lavender on the nose. A few swirls release vanilla, rosemary, and spearmint. Uncooked French bread and Rainier Cherries continue the barrage. Although fairly young, the Sextant Kamal 2005 brings what the nose promises. The mid-palette experiences notes of sesame and chewy figs. The cherries, plum, and vanilla come through again on the finish because this wine is so balanced. If the 10 Knots Beachcomber is a refreshing afternoon walk on the beach, the Sextant Kamal is a midnight stroll with a loved one on that same beach. But as the evening cools, the ocean becomes iridescent as it reflects a quarter moon that hangs just above the horizon. Stars are out, availing themselves both for celestial navigation and for romantic gazing.

The Wines

Sextant Kamal 2005

Bordeaux Blend with Rhone Varietals

Sextant Genoa 2005

Zinfandel with Syrah and Petite Sirah

Sextant Night Watch (NV)

Old Vine Zinfandel with Petite Syrah and Syrah

Sextant Holystone 2005

Zinfandel with Syrah and Mourvedre

Sextant Wheelhouse 2006

Zinfandel (Primitivo Clone) with Petite Sirah

Sextant Chardonnay 2006

Chardonnay (Santa Lucia Highlands)

10 Knots Beachcomber 2006

Viognier and Roussanne with Marsanne

10 Knots Atlantis 2005

Syrah with Zinfandel, Mourvedre, and Grenache

10 Knots Moonraker 2005

Mourvedre with Syrah and Grenache

10 Knots Chardonnay 2006

Chardonnay (Santa Barbara Country)

A sextant is a nautical device used to find directional coordinates while at sea, but the instrument has also been used as the name of a special endeavor on land. The warmth of Craig and Nancy Stoller along with the kindness of the Sextant Wines staff was evident from the beginning. We met them at a specific longitude and latitude, at an intersection where we enjoyed great wines with great company.

As we stood on that hillside on that spring morning, there was a sense of discovery appropriate to the Sextant Wines tag line: Navigate...Explore...Discover... It has much to do not only with finding one's way, but just as much with the connection people make by sharing a glass of wine.

The Vineyards

Sextant Wines draws from three vineyards, each from a different American Viticultural Area (AVA). (Source: SextantWines.com)

RBZ Vineyards

Templeton, San Luis Obispo, California, Paso Robles AVA

Developed with Sunridge Nurseries Inc., in which Craig Stoller is the CEO and was founded by Craig's parents Glen and Terrie Stoller, RBZ Vineyards is the only commercial vineyard in the Paso Robles AVA that is also a State of California registered and certified nursery block. Material planted includes the highest quality UC Davis clones and many imported selections from the French Entav-Intra program. All Entav vine selections can be traced back to a single original mother plant in France. The site benefits from the state's largest diurnal temperature

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MacGregor Vineyards
San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo County, California, Edna Valley AVA

One of the oldest Edna Valley vineyards, the historic MacGregor Vineyards was planted in 1975 by Andy MacGregor. At this point in time there was a very limited selection of wine varieties or rootstock available. Mr. MacGregor purchased “certified nursery stock” from a nursery which was going out of business and planted 26 acres of Pinot Noir. By 1978 there was an overwhelming demand for the ever-popular Chardonnay fruit, while Pinot Noir was still a relatively unheard of variety. That same spring, all but 8 to 12 rows were converted to the “Wente” clone of Chardonnay. This particular selection is a small berry producing clone, rich in fruit-forward flavors that thrive in the cool climate of the Edna Valley AVA. The climate is tempered by marine air flowing directly into the valley from the Pacific Ocean. This cooling influence creates an unusually long growing season resulting in greatly intensified varietal flavors. The soils are dominated by marine deposits left millions of years ago when the valleys were under water. Loam and clay topsoil overlay calcareous marine deposits promoting complex flavors.

The Winemaker
Sextant Wines Winemaker, Kevin Riley, graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a degree in Agriculture Business and has spent 10 years in the Paso Robles region in the effort to perfect the art of winemaking.

The Proprietors
Craig and Nancy Stoller were born and raised in Bakersfield, California. They have three beautiful daughters, Maya Katherine, Gianna Christina, and Ella Marseille. Craig is the CEO of Sunridge Nurseries Incorporated, a company founded by Craig’s parents, Glen and Terrie Stoller. Craig is a graduate of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo where he studied horticulture. Nancy is involved in philanthropic work throughout Kern County. Both Nancy and Craig consider the raising of their children as their foremost passion.

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swings. Linne calado topsoils paired with diablo limestone subsoils are similar to the soils in much of France. Grapes planted here fully ripen with balanced sugar and acid flavors

Chalk Knoll Vineyards
San Ardo, Monterey County, California, San Lucas AVA

The Chalk Knoll Vineyard is located in Southern Monterey County just north of Paso Robles and encompasses 320-acres. Unlike other AVAs in Monterey County, San Lucas is much less affected by costal breezes from Monterey Bay. This results in a warmer overall climate during the daytime and temperatures that often fluctuate as much as 40 degrees during the summer day to night. This temperature swing is one of the contributing factors to the longer growing season, giving the fruit time to develop a full body and flavor. The vineyard is planted with mostly Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot for contracted production but also includes Syrah and Zinfandel, including the “Primitivo” clone of Zinfandel. Planted on the highest peak in the area, the intense chalk and limestone soil produces fruit of intense flavors with elegant mineral qualities unique to the Central Coast of California.

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