

50 MOST INFLUENTIAL WINEMAKERS

CALIFORNIA

It was the end of the seventies, and Napa was taking shape. California wines had recently triumphed at the Paris tasting, and the Napa Valley, as envisioned by its high profile players like Robert Mondavi, Joe Phelps and Warren Winiarski, was transforming itself from an agricultural backwater to a leisure destination, a unique amalgam of equal parts cabernet, chardonnay, pastel wallpaper and chintz pillows.

Meanwhile, four hundred miles to the south, an intrepid group of winemakers were camping out in a viticultural area known vaguely as the Central Coast. Back then it didn't resemble what it is today, which is a little bit country, a little bit strip-mall. There were back roads out of Santa Barbara that had more cows than cars.

Nearby in the Santa Ynez Valley, Ken Brown, Jim Clendenen, Bob Lindquist, and Adam Tolmach found themselves making wine together at a bootstrap winery called Zaca Mesa. There were only a handful of wineries back then — Firestone was founded in 1975, Eberle was under-way to the north, and there were a few small ventures in the Edna Valley, so there was very little in the way of experience to draw from — so, conveniently, no one around to say 'you can't do that.'

Eventually, these four winemakers moved on from Zaca Mesa, heading out to more or less define south Central Coast wine — Ken Brown founding Byron, Adam Tolmach heading south and establishing Ojai, and Jim Clendenen and Bob Lindquist establishing their two wineries, Au Bon Climat and Qupé. And each had either Burgundy or the Rhône Valley as his guidepost.

Lindquist's love of the Rhône may have originated in his frequent and expensive visits to Kermit Lynch, the Bay Area wine merchant. There he discovered the kind of syrah he wanted to make. "I tasted those wines — from Hermitage, Côte Rôtie and St-Joseph. I had my first marsanne with those guys. Man, in those early wines from Kermit you could really see the complexity, the balance, the sense of place." A few years later, when he founded Qupé, he devoted his entire output to Rhône varieties, along with some chardonnay.

Clendenen traveled. He got basic nuts and bolts training in the mechanics of a winery in Australia, but it was in 1981, on the first of his 32 trips to Burgundy, that his course was set. Even so, much of his original experience in Burgundian technique grew out of a project assigned to him by importer Becky Wasserman. She hired him to assemble a catalog of all of her producers detailing winemaking practices, fermentation regimes, barrel preferences; it was like a working textbook for Clendenen's future endeavors, and cemented longstanding relationships with producers throughout the Côte d'Or.

Both Clendenen and Lindquist started wineries out of leased spaces — Lindquist, in fact, leased space from Zaca Mesa, though that 'space' tended to change according to his landlord's whims. Clendenen, meanwhile, holed up in an abandoned dairy barn in Los Olivos. Neither was large enough for their plans. Indeed, in 1986 they started a joint wine-

[Bob Lindquist] CENTRAL COAST



[Jim Clendenen] CENTRAL COAST



THE RAMSHACKLE WINERY BUILDING THESE TWO VINTNERS SHARE HAS SERVED AS THE EPICENTER OF THE CENTRAL COAST WINE BOOM.

making venture, Vita Nuovo, out of a love for Italian varieties, then realized they had no room in either place to make wine for it.

Around this time the Miller family, who owned the Bien Nacido Vineyard, approached Lindquist and offered to build a winery for him to lease. After some negotiation, Lindquist and Clendenen decided to build a facility together, surrounded by some of the most dramatic and famous vineyards in the Central Coast.

With its rickety corrugated-metal construction the Au Bon Climat-Qupé facility is arguably one of the homeliest wineries in California. It's also one of the most influential. It often seems as though everyone who comes to visit ends up sufficiently inspired by the ethos inside to go make wine on his (or her) own, even to start wineries. Gray Hartley and Frank Ostini of Hitching Post got their start here, and both Kathy Joseph of Fiddlehead and Adam Tolmach of Ojai have made wine here at one time or another. Former sales director Gary Burk founded Costa de Oro not five miles away, and current general manager Jim Adelman has a label he calls Makor. Even the families have gotten into the act. Clendenen's wife Morgan makes her own wine under the Cold Heaven label, and Lindquist's wife Louisa has started her own label, Verdad. Finally, Lindquist's oldest son, Ethan, has just started his own label.

Most of these winemakers follow the Lindquist/Clendenen example, concentrating on pinot noir, chardonnay and Rhône varieties. All share the de facto sensibility, too, that comes by way of France and is embodied in the lesson Lindquist came away with from his many sojourns to Kermit Lynch. "Most winemakers know that the grapes from a certain vineyard site would give a certain character. Bringing out that character is the job." And that attitude, in a true diaspora, has been disseminated well beyond the boundaries of Bien Nacido, and has come to define the best of the Central Coast. —PATRICK J. COMISKEY