

LUCKY PEACH

A Fruitless Endeavor

BY PATRICK COMISKEY | JUNE 26, 2015



Like most California winemakers, Christopher Howell of Cain Vineyard & Winery in the Napa Valley, learned fastidious winemaking in classes that emphasized precision, hygiene, and technical training. When he visited French wineries after graduating, Howell got a real look at traditional winemaking: an unkempt, often grungy affair, conducted in cellar rooms dank with mold, teeming with organisms that inevitably contributed to final blend.

This is how he describes his visit to the winery of the late Jacques Reynaud, the revered patriarch of Château Rayas, the most legendary property in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. What he saw there shocked him. “The cellar was a dirt floor,” he says. “There were puddles of liquid, fruit flies hovering, foam forming around the barrels all stacked higgledy-piggledy. It was really not good.” Reynaud’s barrel samples smelled of vinegar, sour yeast, and even putrefaction; sometimes amerde-like funk hovered over the glass, a gaseous vestige of fermentation. But as the wine reached Howell’s lips, none of this mattered. “The wine was magic, alive,” he says, “It never tasted tired or dirty. It just tasted like grenache—full, vibrant grenache.”

Call this the first moment of an aesthetic education. Howell returned to the States and made wine at other Napa wineries, but the lessons from his European sojourn were never far from his mind. He came to realize that his idea of beauty and harmony in winemaking would always be rooted in the sort of dissonance he experienced in France. “I came to

believe in the role of the flaw,” he says, “that even the most beautiful wines had to have some element of imperfection.”

In California, flirting with this sort of imperfection borders on sacrilege. The state’s temperate climate, ample sunshine, and long growing season more or less guarantee fresh, vibrant wines, marked by an effortless purity. In modern winemaking, fussily sorted fruit samples are vinified in squeaky clean cellars into wines of seamless elegance, influenced in part by the autocratic and antiseptic predilections of Robert Parker, the influential critic who has privileged fruit above all other elements. The result is an industry defined by homogeneity at the expense of funk.

And yet for a small but growing number of California winemakers, mere fruit is not enough. “It’s the one thing we have too much of,” says Kevin Kelley of Salinia Wine Company, in Santa Rosa. “I’m much more interested in minerality, in salinity; those things are hard to find in fruit-forward wines.” Abe Schoener of the Scholium Project speaks pugilistically about the process, of “beating the fruit out of the wine.” Howell is more philosophical. “We’re not doing this to preserve fruit,” he says, “we want to transform it.”

For these winemakers, the excitement lies primarily in the mysteries of fermentation, where the pristine is transmuted by mold, bacteria, yeast, and other unseemly catalysts into something less pure but more complex. The sound is made unsound, and the sweet converts to stink. And in cheese, sauerkraut, beer, kefir, vinegar, natto, and kombucha, what’s revered is the stink.

Wines, of course, aren’t known for their stink. But there is a growing category of American wine where funk plays a role—where sourness guides fruit, where earth undergirds it, where the flavors are driven by the oddly savory, weird, shrill, even jarring side routes of flavor, colliding into the fruit like a fly into the ointment.

Howell is thin, wiry, tonsured. When he talks, it’s clear he’s thinking far faster than his mouth will allow him to speak. He’s been making the wines at Cain since 1990, and the winery’s style has come to resemble his own. When you speak with him about winemaking, conversations drift off-topic toward more esoteric realms, like wabi-sabi, the Japanese aesthetic that embraces the transient, the imperfect, the irregular. When Howell was first hired, he didn’t know how to bring these elements to his winemaking. The answer, in the end, was Brett.

Brett is *Brettanomyces*, a yeast that routinely inhabits wines, wine bottles, and winery surfaces all over the world. It is distinct from *Saccharomyces*, the family of yeasts that convert sugar to alcohol, and yields as a byproduct a number of aromas that might be construed as “anti-fruit”—they can resemble barnyard, leather, or animal hide in their less than fetching iterations.

Howell began to introduce homeopathic levels of Brett in his top wine, Cain Five, in the mid-nineties, monitoring its fermentation cycle to see how far it could go and how far he could let it go. He cultivated an environment for this rogue microbe in barrels, tanks, and

winery surfaces the way you made your kitchen safe for a wild animal. He has come to know its fermentation patterns, and how to tease out its milder savory character. Cain Five is structured, tannic, dense, with powerfully dark fruit from Spring Mountain, but Howell's microbiological supplements inevitably contribute additional, lower-register savory notes of mushroom, humus, and loamy soil, all of which serve as a counterpoint for the fruit. Where others seek to eradicate Brett as a flaw, Howell has, in effect, domesticated it.

"Brett is not a single note," he points out. "It's a spectrum, an array of possible notes. Sure, that includes manure and barnyard. There are points in the fermentation when the whole thing smells like shit, and you think, This is a disaster. I'm going to get fired. But the spectrum also includes flowers—roses and jasmine—leathery notes, spice. Clearly humans can find some of these scents intriguing. It's my job to be there when the expression has moved from the visceral to the ethereal."

Kevin Kelley's interest in working against fruit also originates in France, elaborated during a stage with Domaine Méo-Camuzet in Vosne-Romanée, holy ground for pinot noir. It instilled in him a love for cool-climate pinot noir and the inherent minerality that comes with being on the climatological edge. In 2003 he started the Salinia Wine Company with the express purpose of pursuing minerality in his winemaking—a thing, he says, that California wines don't often reveal. "If you ripen grapes too much, you'll ripen the minerality out of them," he explains. He seeks out extremely cool sites to limit ripe flavors, and accentuates this effect with some nifty cellar tricks, like those used for his 2011 Chalk Hill pinot gris from Sonoma County.

This is what's sometimes called an orange wine, wherein a white variety (or gris, in this case) ferments on the skins like a red wine, taking on a darker hue—not white, not red, somewhere in between. This nether-wine then spends thirty months in old oak barrels (about three times longer than most white wines). But Kelley's gris undergoes an additional indignity: he leaves space in the barrel where air can come in contact with the wine; before long, a film of milky yeast culture, called flor, begins to form on the surface.

This, you might say, is the opposite of pristine, and it changes the wine irrevocably, vanquishing any trace of fruit character. It's the process that gives Spanish sherries their peculiar eccentricity, and in Kelley's wine the flavors have taken on a subtle, mineral savor, with elements of dried blood orange, rosewater, and a tense, granitic salinity.

Even these displays of winemaking derring-do cannot match the intestinal fortitude of Abe Schoener of the Scholium Project, just outside of Napa. A former professor of philosophy at St. John's University, Schoener has approached winemaking platonically for the better part of two decades, and remains one of the most iconoclastic and polarizing winemakers in California today.

After leaving academia, Schoener made wine conventionally in the Napa Valley at Luna Vineyards, first as an intern, then as an acolyte, for John Kongsgaard. By the time Kongsgaard pushed him out of the nest, Schoener had become fascinated with fermentation: the Scholium Project became his laboratory to explore it fully.

Schoener addresses the problem of fruit in a multitude of ways; he maintains his winery, for starters, in an almost defiantly untidy state, eschewing the use of soaps or solvents—even hot water is used as a last resort. The hope is that the walls and the tanks and barrels will all support an active population of microflorae which will contribute to the wine's flavors.

If a wine is showing an inordinate amount of primary fruitiness, he'll try and manipulate it into something else. "The molecules that produce fruitiness, I want those in my wine," he says. "But I want something to happen to them." So he'll extract to extreme levels (think of steeping tea), or he'll expose the wine to more oxygen than is typical, so that those fruit flavors morph into something more savory—toward mushrooms, tobacco, and other articulations of umami.

Volatile acidity is usually one of the byproducts of such willful disregard. VA takes a number of forms, but its most telltale marker is a vinegary or nail polish scent (caused by acetic acid or ethyl acetate, respectively). Either form delivers a sharp aromatic top note, often clashing with whatever fruit remains. As such, it's officially frowned upon in the winemaker's code of proper hygiene. And yet traces of VA are common in a great many wines, where it lends an inimitable high note to big fruity reds—a thing they frequently need. In Schoener's wines, VA is a central part of the experience. "These are flavors too," he maintains. "They're part of the biology of the wine, the byproduct of all that activity."

Tasting these wines is a unique form of disorientation. VA is like the vinous equivalent of smelling salts—an upside-the-head slap to your olfactory nerve endings. Frequently, when tasting Schoener's wines—the 2013 Gardens of Babylon, for example, a dark red blend of Cabernet, Petite Sirah, and Syrah, and probably his largest production wine—I experience simultaneous contradictory impulses: the fruit in the glass brings me in as the high note repels me: I lean in, jerk my head back, and lean in again, trying to work my nose beneath the vinaigrous haze, hoping that somewhere in this thicket of ornery sensations, pleasure will take hold.

But maybe it doesn't matter. They've already disrupted whatever assumptions reside in you about what is sound or wholesome. Like sauerkraut, sour beer, natto, and kimchi, they are an acquired taste. But like other fermentations, to quote Michael Pollan's book *Cooked*, such processes are, like other distinctive fermented products, somehow essential, "a way of inflecting nature, of bringing forth from it, above and beyond our sustenance, some precious increment of meaning."