

# Q&A: Chris Howell of Cain Vineyard & Winery



Chris Howell by La Piedra | Photograph: Charles O'Rear September 2014

Interview by W. Blake Gray

Posted on [www.Wine-Searcher.com](http://www.Wine-Searcher.com) on January 30, 2015

## **How did you get from Seattle to studying wine in the south of France?**

I studied philosophy at University of Chicago, which has a core base of what they call critical thinking – you try to understand and not judge. I was looking for a job and I thought chemistry was easy compared to what I was doing. So I studied it in my home school in University of Washington [in Seattle].

I got married in 1980. I was 26 years old, she was a French teacher. This was my first marriage; she was Romanian, but she grew up in Geneva. We discovered the world of wine; we visited wineries in France. As a chemist I was exposed to guys who made wine like their fathers had made.

I had read the American textbooks – I wanted a more coherent experience. [Longtime Columbia Winery winemaker] David Lake, who got a degree at Davis, called it “potted knowledge”. When Maynard Amerine was at Davis, he had everybody from around the world talking to each other – Germans talking to French; they don’t usually talk to each other. But, when you read the textbooks, you realize they didn’t make wine, they just made a compendium of information. At Montpellier [University in the south of France], I was taught a coherent body of thought.

## **You spent a year at Mouton Rothschild. What did you learn there?**

Pierre Blondin was an old cellar master who had been put out to pasture. When I was sitting on the bench next to him, he’s there in his blue pants and his beret, and he’s saying: “You young enologists – you’re worried about flawless wine. You need a little volatile acidity in great wine.” That’s a metaphor for almost anything we identify as a flavor. It’s better to ask: When is it not a flaw? I was thinking, as all young people are, “I know everything”. It took me a long time to decide he was right. A little bit of VA gives some lift to the nose and it’s actually very attractive.

About cheese you can ask do you want to have just cottage cheese and Kraft singles? Do we want a wine that’s flawless? Think of classic definitions of beauty. If you have perfect symmetry, you need something that throws it off just a little bit. This is the real tension in winemaking. How much control do you need? The wines that catch us, they go beyond just preserved fruit. How many times do we study jam? I’m interested in wines that go beyond their definition, that become more than their variety.

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## **You have a theory about a popular problem: why people get red-wine headaches, but not from wines from Europe.**

It's not the alcohol [in U.S. wines], but its other compounds created by the yeast that has to deal with all the sugar. I get red-wine headaches. I can smell it right away in the wine, those compounds. Our wines don't have that problem; our wines are meant to go with food. I think most Americans don't agree with that.

When we talk about red wine that goes beyond fruit, there's a sense of fullness without heaviness. The word that chefs understand is "savory", but maybe the word we're talking about is "umami". Anything that sits on its lees has umami.

In France, butter smells like something: like milk, or grass, or something else, partway to cheese. The USDA doesn't like that kind of butter. I don't think it's unfair of me to make an analogy between USDA butter that doesn't smell like anything and the wines that are flawless and smell only of fruit and oak.

## **You are unusual among U.S. winemakers in saying that brett can always have a place in your wines.**

The wines that have interested me most have transcended fruit yet, when we think of wine as a brand, we're thinking of it as a formula. Not everybody likes the wines that we make. And that's fine, we're just a small winery. We don't have to make wine for everybody, but some people respond to it, not knowing that they shouldn't. What I'm interested in is wines that are no longer a formula, and whatever you read on the label is never going to tell you enough about it. If somebody comes to your winery and says: "What barrels do you use?" or "I love this wine because it's biodynamic", they're not really experiencing the wine.

## **How did you get started in Napa Valley?**

My first harvest with any responsibility was in '86, at Clos Pegase. They had a fancy building but they had one of the worst [vineyard] sites in the valley and they didn't know it; it was really shocking. Once they learned it they bought other sites. I met Helen Turley and John Wetlaufer when I first came to Napa Valley in '82. They were so generous. She got a job at Peter Michael, and I came to plant Les Pavots vineyard.

## **Why is your entry-level Cain Cuvée a two-vintage blend?**

I think there's more complexity – I didn't say finesse, I didn't say higher quality – I said more interesting. I had some friends in Bordeaux tell me it's not uncommon, and I should consider the options. We only blend two vintages – it's not a solera. We started in '98, it was a cold, wet year. We blended the '97 with it.

## **Is it more drinkable because it's half Merlot?**

You'd think that, but it's the vinification. Varieties don't define the wine as much as you would think; the place, the winemaking, how much extraction ... The reason there's so much Merlot in this vintage is because I can afford it. I couldn't buy Cabernet from the valley floor that would be half as good.

## **The 2010 Cain Five is very savory. Tell me about it.**

It's one of the coldest vineyards in Napa Valley. The vineyard is in a gap where the cold air flows in from the Pacific. Maybe there's something to the cold, wet, poorly drained soils. For us, there's a very pronounced character of our vineyard. Is it our vineyard or is it the weather?

## **I don't smell brett in it...**

It's loaded with it. But I hope you agree it's not putrid – herbal, savory. I've had people say: "So-and-so thinks their shit smells like perfume"; there's something to that – fecal and perfume, they're close.