

THE HEAVEN AND HELL OF JONATA

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Understanding Santa Barbara County's Most Expensive and Exacting Winery

ABOUT a decade ago, a trio of wealthy men brought one of France's most renowned wine experts to a sandy patch of land in the middle of the Santa Ynez Valley. With wine grapes on their mind, they asked the man which ones they should grow and where. After scouring the 600-acre property off of Ballard Canyon Road, Château Latour's Frédéric Engerer located a scant five acres where grapes might work.

And what about the other 595 acres, the men asked? "Asparagus," he replied, dead serious, knowing the pointy crop would be far more lucrative than grapes on such a dry, infertile landscape. "I think you're better off planting asparagus."

The trio — millionaire money manager/Montecito resident Charles Banks, Israeli-born Hollywood producer billionaire Arnon Milchan, and media mogul billionaire Gerald Levin — were natural risk takers, and they didn't listen. Instead, they took a shotgun approach and planted about 80 acres with 10 different grape types to see what would work, ranging from traditional Bordeaux varietals of cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, cabernet franc, sémillon, petit verdot, and merlot to the Rhône Valley's syrah, viognier, and grenache to Italy's famed sangiovese. It was a very grand, very expensive experiment, and the plan was to take out the grapes that failed to grow properly. But none did.

"It wasn't rocket science," said Matt Dees, who was hired in June 2004 as the first full-time winemaker for this ambitious vineyard project, which is known simply as Jonata (pronounced ho-na-ta), a Chumash word for "live oak." "The property just worked. Every grape works out here. It's a good problem to have."

The 33-year-old resident of Santa Barbara's Westside is being modest, however, for the land can only take so much credit. Equally as important to the success of

Jonata — which hugely influential wine critic Robert Parker once proclaimed one of the state's "most exciting new wineries" and one that had "set a new qualitative benchmark" for what Santa Barbara can produce — are people such as Dees, vineyard manager Ruben Solorzano, and general manager Armand de Maigret. Together, they oversee what's probably the most painstaking and pricey agricultural exercise on California's Central Coast.

That goes from the grape-growing — "We manicure every single shoot and every single cluster," said Solorzano, who usually inspects the vineyard twice a day — down to the winemaking, in which Dees will put 150 or so different lots from distinct parts of the vineyard in separate oak barrels and steel tanks before mixing them together into a balanced blend. Then French wine expert Michel Rolland — who is arguably the best Bordeaux consultant money can buy — is called in to gauge aging potential before the final bottling decisions are made. Even after all that, if a particular vintage of a particular grape makes for wine that is anything less than perfect, they may opt to skip that bottling, as they did for the merlot and petit verdot in 2009, as well as the cabernet franc in 2010.

"In the next three vintages, there will be one of their wines that won't be produced because they don't feel it's up to snuff," said Nuri Monahan, who distributes Jonata locally through his Monahan & Cooper brokerage and is a veteran of the Santa Barbara hospitality industry, these days serving at Cielito. "That, financially, is a frickin' nightmare for them. But that's a testament to their level of commitment to only producing things that are truly excellent."

Which also means that, upon release, Jonata's slate of wines typically demand the highest prices in Santa Barbara County, with the recently released cab, cab

franc, and syrah bottlings of 2009 fetching \$125 from club members, who are only allocated a certain amount of each. It's not quite the \$750 that Screaming Eagle, its sister winery in the Napa Valley, goes for, but there was plenty of industry grumbling in Santa Barbara when this untested winery busted through the gates in 2007 charging more than double what other top wineries were asking for their best juice.

"There was no reference point for that. It was a bold move," said The Winehound's Bob Wesley, who's been selling wines in Santa Barbara for more than a decade. "But if you're delivering good wines and the wines express as much as they do and compete with similarly priced wines, that's what matters. Jonata achieves all that."

Thanks to such accolades — and, perhaps more so, to the down-home friendliness of Dees and company — Jonata seems to have found relative peace and respect in the region after its controversial start. And the sole owner of the property today, billionaire sports-team and real estate tycoon Stan Kroenke, who took complete control in 2009, seems content, continuing to proudly count it among his cache of high-profile businesses, including the cult winery Screaming Eagle, the NFL's St. Louis Rams, the NBA's Denver Nuggets, and the English soccer club Arsenal. And Jonata continues to lure the wine industry's top talent, such as Maigret, who had reached a happily self-employed status after a flourishing career but was sucked into the full-time job by the project's magic.

"It was born for all the wrong reasons, born through a series of mistakes, and I don't think anyone with a sane mind would have planted the grapes we have now," explained Maigret. "The estate has nothing to say it will work, but it is working. It touches art, where art is born in chaos."



JONATA CONT'D



MEET THE PEOPLE

As a kid growing up in Kansas City, Matt Dees was “a bug kid, a dirt geek,” and he first learned about the pleasures of wine during the Midwest’s freezing winters. During college, he studied soil science at the University of Vermont, even planting a vineyard in the late 1990s before he was old enough to drink. During a trip to New York City, Dees was blown away by a 1995 bottle from Staglin Family Vineyard. He sent an impassioned letter to the Napa Valley winery and, upon graduation, occupied their front porch, leaving them, as he says, “no option but to hire me.”

Andy Erickson, who took over as Staglin’s winemaker in 2001, recalled seeing Dees’s letter and laughed aloud about the Vermont vineyard. “That is the craziest, most ridiculous thing ever,” Erickson had thought. “I have got to meet this guy!” Dees’s career in the wine biz began immediately, and he dove in deep, working three harvests in New Zealand along with his Napa gigs.

In the spring of 2003, despite being swamped with many other projects, Erickson became a consultant for Jonata, as then-co-owner Charles Banks shared a powerful passion for making only the best. “This was going to be something real special,” said Erickson, who suggested to Banks that Dees be hired as full-time winemaker, despite the gamble of hiring someone so young.

They took the bet, and ever since, Dees’s general direction from ownership has been: “Do whatever you need; just don’t fuck it up.” Like many successful companies, the owners of Jonata hire well and then give their employees the freedom to operate. For a young winemaker, said Dees, “That was really a dream situation.” Erickson — whose tenure at Screaming Eagle from 2006 to 2011 is what brought the wine to the \$750-per-bottle level and who continued as a Jonata consultant until 2009 — confirms that the wager is paying off. “The place had potential,” said Erickson, “and he’s shown that and more.”

But Dees doesn’t just have the support of his mentor — every single one of the dozen or so critics, journalists, retailers, winemakers, distributors, and others contacted for this story gushed about Dees’s talents, even when they weren’t prompted. But few appreciate Dees more than general manager Armand de Maigret, who was born in Morocco, raised in France, and came to the States 22 years ago for a vacation and never left, eventually working in all aspects of the wine business before getting lured to Jonata. “He’s an artist more than winemaker,” said Maigret, whose job consists of dealing with what Dees doesn’t want to handle (from distribution management to brand marketing) and vice versa. “He has technical knowledge to do whatever he wants, but he has an approach that’s more of a feel than a recipe.”

“Feel” also describes the work of Ruben Solorzano, the jolly-faced vineyard manager originally from Jalisco, Mexico, who might as well be called the “grape whisperer.” Arriving in the Santa Ynez Valley 23 years ago, Solorzano steadily climbed the wine-country ladder to become co-owner of Coastal Vineyard Care, which tends to most of the vineyards in the region. He lives with his family one hill away from Jonata at Stolpman Vineyards, where he also works, and he is widely regarded as the best vine man in the business. He started at Jonata in 2003 and oversaw the property’s first harvest in 2004.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Almost every day, Matt Dees drives from his West-side Santa Barbara home to the Jonata production facility, which is inside a nondescript Buellton building. Goats, Berkshire pigs crossbred with wild boar, and a two-acre organic farm are part of Jonata’s quest for diversifying the ranch.



“There’s nobody else on Earth quite like Ruben Solorzano,” said Dees, who’s watched Solorzano literally listen to the grapevine leaves rustle to determine when it’s time to water. “He’s unbelievable.”

SENSE OF PLACE

On a sunny Friday in May, Dees, Solorzano, assistant winemaker Drew Pickering, the farm crew, and assorted friends and families of Jonata were gathered in the shade of the ranch’s old barn, huddled around the dwindling carcass of a roasted goat, eating messy, salsa-topped tacos, and sipping petit verdot (which sells for \$85) from little paper water cups. An hour later, they’d be ripping out the remaining parsnips from the two-acre garden nearby and planting the next round of peppers, as pygmy goats and hybrid boar-Berkshire pigs looked on.

“This is what makes this so special,” said Dees of the property, which is farmed with all the aspects of organics and biodynamics in mind. “Our goal initially was to diversify the ranch,” said Dees, noting that, for instance, there is no input or output of nitrogen. “Diversifying properties is so important, but it’s something that people have lost. That’s a shame.”

In addition to the grapes, garden, and aforementioned assortment of livestock, Jonata is home to olive trees that are sourced for olive oil called La Paz; a gaggle of heritage turkeys (“They’re like lizards with wings,” said Dees); a flock of weed-eating sheep and normal-sized goats, which actually raise some of the lambs (“You learn something new out here every day”); a couple hundred or so chickens, which eat bugs and aerate the vineyard soils (“They got out of hand pretty quickly—we have so many eggs we don’t know what to do with them”); a shaggy black llama (“The world’s most haggard llama—it just showed up one day”); a 57-tree orchard (“It’s got about every fruit and nut I’ve seen on Earth”); and rows of hops for making beer that Pickering planted. Altogether, save for grains, an entire meal can be made from Jonata’s offerings, which they do for special farm-to-table dinners every so often. Said Dees, “This is just the way it’s supposed to be done.”



JONATA CONT'D



ABOVE: Vineyard manager Ruben Solorzano might as well be called the “grape whisperer” for his intuition and skill with the vines.

LEFT: Jonata’s classic bottlings include El Desafio de Jonata (cabernet sauvignon), La Sangre de Jonata (syrah), and El Alma de Jonata (cabernet franc).

Of course, the ranch revolves around the grapes, which are perched on 82.13 acres of the choicest hill-sides, including a little petite sirah that was added after the first round of plantings. “We lovingly refer to it as the sand pit,” said Dees, explaining the soil is almost as fine as beach sand. “It gives us very small yields with tiny berries.” That combo packs a punch: low yields mean that the vine’s full energy is going into a concentrated amount of fruit, and the tiny berries mean that the skin-to-water ratio is high, ensuring that the skin’s tannins and flavors are powerfully presented.

But the natural setting is enhanced by the work of Solorzano and his crew, who have been on the job for years because Jonata treats them well, including the chance to buy cheap lambs and goats every year. “We tie each individual shoot so they grow vertical and don’t cross,” explained Solorzano, who also uses very little irrigation. “We leave one cluster per shoot on everything, and we make sure those clusters are the same height.”

For that reason, Jonata reaps less than two pounds per plant whereas other vineyards might shoot for more like 20 pounds per plant. “The vines can ripen,” said Dees, explaining that such labor-intensive, focused farming allows grape types that might not otherwise mature in the relatively cool climate to reach their desired state before the winter rains set in. “The canopy can deal with the load.”

To offset that money-losing equation, Jonata was planted with vines spaced very tightly, with as many as 3,600 plants per acre rather than the traditional 600 to 900 plants. So while the per-plant ratio is 10 times less,

the tonnage only tends to be three times lower, with one or two tons coming from the cabernet sauvignon, for instance, whereas most places seek closer to six tons of that grape. Such spacing is evidence that, as Dees explained, “The place has been run since day one with that same attention to detail.”

Once the grapes begin to ripen, the level of attention only intensifies, as the crews may be asked to pick the same sections of the vineyard repeatedly so that the resulting wines will possess a balanced average of grapes that have been harvested just before, immediately during, and just after perfect ripeness. One recent sauvignon blanc harvest required 13 pass-throughs, for instance. “They were picking only stuff that was ripe,” said Monahan, the distributor. “Even for what they’re charging [which is \$60 upon release, a lot for a white wine], they most likely lost money on that sauvignon blanc.”

ROCKIN’ BOATS, KICKIN’ BUTTS

The Jonata team knew that, when the first release came out in 2007, there would likely be some blowback from the Central Coast wine industry, which wasn’t accustomed to \$100-plus bottles and saw the project as the work of billionaires with overpriced Napa Valley tastes bringing their big egos to town. “There was the projection that we were Goliath coming down and bullying,” admitted Dees. “But I know our team, and it couldn’t be further from the truth.”

Instead, the price point was based on the costs of farming, as well as comparative tastings. “We found where we thought it fit in the world of wine,” said Dees, explaining that they didn’t want to come out low and quickly raise the price. “We had total faith in the property and the project.”

Maigret, however, believes that Jonata pushed the region’s boundaries like never before and that the brief rebellion was in response to such groundbreaking work. “The terroir was underutilized,” he said. “We put in their face that some of them were not very good farmers. The establishment got a little bit scared. We were a kick in the butt.”

Despite the initial sticker shock, Jonata was quickly embraced near and far, even in New York City, >>

JONATA CONT'D

where Enrique Ibañez sells mostly Old World bottles via his IPO Wines. “When you’re looking at quality, the wines are very reasonably priced,” explained Ibañez, who only sells about 15 or so California wineries.

In the meantime, Jonata developed The Hilt, which is allowing the team to focus on pinot noir and chardonnay that they buy from other vineyards, and The Paring, originally a cheaper brand for restaurants but now also sold in stores. “Those wines have sold tremendously well for us,” said The Winehound’s Wesley of The Paring red blend. “It’s the best-selling Meritage blend in the store by a factor of 20.”

Today, even Jonata’s priciest bottlings are guzzled down locally. “It’s probably the easiest thing to sell of anything, regardless of the higher price point, now that the demand is there,” said Monahan, the distributor.

But don’t just believe people who profit from selling Jonata. Take it from critic and journalist Josh Reynolds, who works for Stephen Tanzer’s International Wine Cellar. “They’ve been vindicated: The quality is there . . . and there is a finesse to the wine that’s rare anywhere, frankly,” he explained. “The people I know who buy Jonata are the people who buy high in Napa, and they’re very happy with them, extremely happy.”

WHY PAY THE PRICE?

If you’re not an aficionado, you probably still have no idea why anyone would pay more than \$10 for a bottle of fermented grape juice; even wine lovers often wonder how much is too much for a few glasses of vino. So in reporting this story, I posed such sentiments and found a couple of responses especially insightful.

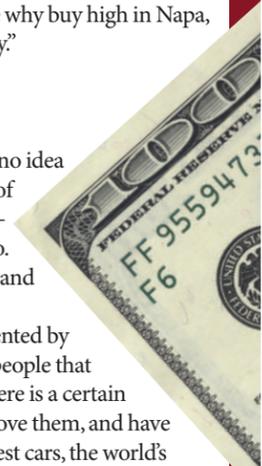
There’s the artistic appreciation argument, presented by Maigret. “There are a few things that are made by people that are so unique, so labor-intensive, so special, and there is a certain class of people who have the means to find them, love them, and have them,” he explained. “It’s the same for the world’s best cars, the world’s best watches, the world’s best paintings. For me, wines at that level are exactly the same. There is an element of uniqueness that is from the place it’s made that cannot be duplicated anywhere else.”

And then there’s the comparative approach, described best by Reynolds. “Friends of mine who laugh at me for buying expensive wine typically are the people who have no problem spending \$250 for a ticket to a Mets game,” he said, adding that he wouldn’t pay \$50 for a World Series ticket whereas baseball nuts might mortgage their homes. “It’s a question of where your passion is.” But even someone who doesn’t like basketball might enjoy watching Michael Jordan play, much in the same way that a neophyte might appreciate a fine wine. “When you get a chance to experience anything at that level, I’m not sure how you put a price on it,” said Reynolds. “What is the price of a long-lasting memory?”

THE PROMISE

This year’s harvest (which is happening currently) has come earlier than usual at Jonata, but Dees reports that the “quality is stunning so far.” As the years go on, the property will continue to evolve, and as the vines find balance with the landscape, they’ll start to auto-regulate and become easier to tend over time. Only then will the lasting impact of Jonata on the wine-making world be truly known, said Maigret. “A vineyard is like a little kid,” he explained. “You start to see how well the upbringing was by the time they’re a teenager.”

Until that day, the Jonata team continues to struggle with how to best present the wines in a context that can be properly appreciated and expanding the distribution around the world. “I don’t think Jonata can be understood if it’s only sold in the U.S.” said Maigret with confidence. “The competition is not Napa. The competition is Bordeaux. The competition is the Rhône. The competition is Northern Italy. I truly believe Jonata is beyond this market.”



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Come taste all the wineries of the Santa Barbara County Vintners’ Association at the **CELEBRATION OF HARVEST** this **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1-4 P.M.**, at Rancho Sisquoc Winery in the Santa Maria Valley. See sbcountywines.com or call 688-0881 for tickets and info.