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EXPLORING THE WILD, WILD WEST THROUGH **CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAYS**

by Christopher Sawyer / photos by Jeremy Ball

IN MAY, THE success of exciting new styles of global Chardonnay and the growing awareness of some of the more classic California brands was celebrated by an impressive mixture of star sommeliers, wine collectors and general consumers who attended the annual International Chardonnay Symposium in San Luis Obispo County.

As part of the festivities, I got the opportunity to moderate an impressive winemaker and grower panel sponsored by *The Somm Journal* at Edna Valley Vineyard with host winemaker Matt Steel, Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat, Eric Pooler of DeLoach Vineyards, Randy Bennett of Sojourn Cellars and Mark Williams of William Hill Estate Winery, which explored the new offerings of world-class Chardonnays made with fruit from pristine sites.

Located five miles from the Pacific Ocean in the tranquil agricultural zone of Edna Valley the original Chardonnay vines planted at Paragon Vineyard, the site of our panel, were part of a diverse mixture of 500 acres planted by the Niven Family in 1973.

At the time, there were only 1,000 acres of the noble grape variety planted in California. But later that same decade, the amount rose to 7,000 acres and eventually, in 1988, surpassed the 45,000 acres planted in Burgundy.

Over the years, one of the most dynamic Chardonnay plots at Paragon Vineyard has become Block 105, which is planted on its own roots. Although the valley has a relatively warm temperature in the early afternoon, the development of each cluster is kept in check by the strong influence of foggy mornings and late afternoon breezes blowing in from the ocean five miles away. This natural process helps preserve a high level of acidity as the berries ripen.

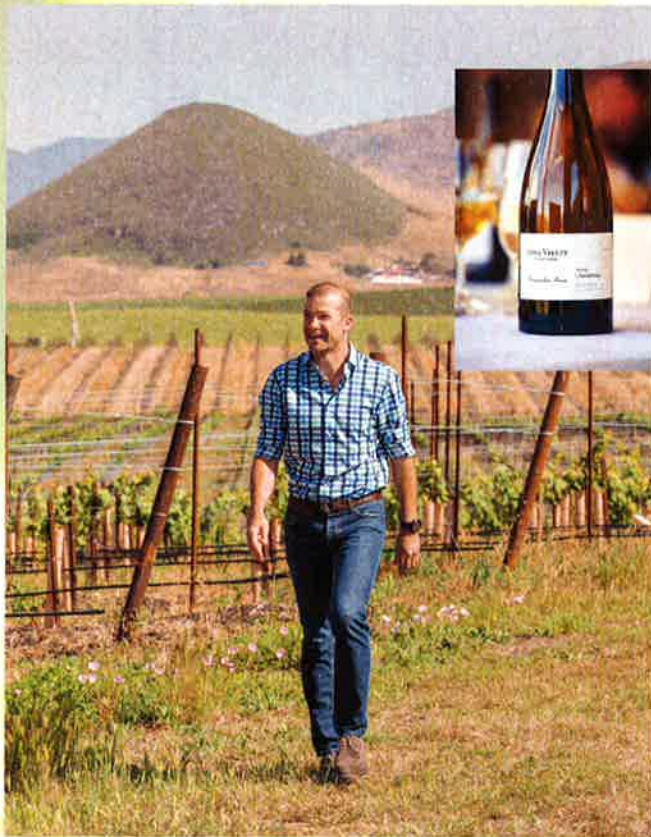
For these reasons, Steel says he uses as little intervention as possible to capture the purity of fruit flavors from Block 105, which he bottles separately as the limited-release **Edna Valley Vineyard Heritage Chardonnay**.



Chris Sawyer takes a selfie with the winemaker panel: Edna Valley Vineyard's Matt Steel, Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat, Eric Pooler of DeLoach Vineyards, Randy Bennett of Sojourn Cellars and Mark Williams of William Hill Estate Winery.



The panel was held at the picturesque Edna Valley Vineyard.



Matt Steel is winemaker for Edna Valley Vineyard.

To make this happen, Steel and his team use the more traditional method of lees stirring for up to two months. The end result is a beautiful wine with notes of ripe tropical fruits, fresh citrus, creamy texture and a lingering note of mineral leading to a long, engaging finish.

"Besides being an expression of place and time, it's a wine that essentially makes itself," says Steel. "For that reason, my job is mainly to help avoid spoilage and preserve the natural flavors inside the bottle for many years to come."

For Clendenen, the secrets behind the complex flavor profile of his new **Au Bon Climat 2013 Los Alamos Vineyard Chardonnay** began when he started working with fruit from that site in 1982. That was the same year Clendenen started the Au Bon Climat label and went on to make his first few vintages in the old dairy on the property. During this exciting period, his 1986 Reserve received the amazing #7



ranking out of 425 of the world's most sought-after Chardonnays a prestigious tasting in Switzerland put on by Steven Spurrier in 1988.

Running east to west in the northern section of Santa Barbara County, Los Alamos Valley is wedged between the well-know regions of Santa Maria Valley and Santa Ynez Valley. According to Clendenen, the combination of heavy maritime influence and shallow soils allow him the ability to be very selective on when the grapes are picked. Thus, in addition to being young and tasty with

lively notes of ripe fruits, lemon, mineral and fine French oak, this well-crafted wine has great structure and makes the tongue tingle with its admirable level of vibrant acidity.

Overlooking the quaint town of Freestone in western Sonoma County, one of these intriguing sites is Hawk Hill Vineyard. Planted on an 8% slope on sandy Goldridge soils, this isolated vineyard is influenced by swirling winds and dense fog that come in from the ocean a few miles to the west. As a result, the temperature never gets too cold or hot and the fog provides an average of 1/100th of an inch of precipitation on a daily basis.

As an important part of the DeLoach Chardonnay program, vineyard manager Pooler and winemaker Brian Mahoney worked with fruit from separate blocks planted on the lower and higher elevations of the property to craft the **DeLoach 2013 Hawk Hill Chardonnay**.

In the cellar, this fusion of these lush fruit and citrusy flavors are lifted with the help of a special Montrachet yeast strain, 50% malolactic fermentation, and 20% new French oak for 16 months to create a rich, voluptuous and engaging wine with lively notes of lemon marzipan, ripe pear, wild herbs, roasted almonds, structure and a lingering finish.

A little more inland, fog also influences the flavorful expression of the **Sojourn Cellars Durrell Vineyard Chardonnay**. Located on the southeastern facing slopes of Sonoma Mountain, the original Chardonnay vines were planted by Ed Durrell and Steve Hill in 1979. While Kistler Vineyards has become famous for making a big, ripe and flavorful style of wines from this site, the style from Sonoma-based Sojourn is much more elegant and refined.

As a maritime Chardonnay with a twist, the larger portion of the fruit Williams uses to make the **William Hill Bench Blends Collection Chardonnay** comes from two vineyards located in Carneros District of southern Napa Valley, which are moderated by their close proximity to the San Pablo Bay and strong winds blowing in from the west via the Petaluma Gap and the Bodega Head on the coast.

To add richer, more complex layers of tropical fruits to the more acidic, citrus-driven flavors from Carneros, the third portion of the blend is from 20-year-old vines planted near St. Helena, where the fruit is the first Williams picks each year.

"To me, each one of these wines shows not only the character of the site, but they also have that great mixture of richness, texture and the vitality of a really well-made, exciting variety," says Clendenen. "When it comes down to it, I think we're all here because we are so passionate about crafting world-class Chardonnays from the very unique cool-climate regions California has to offer."

