Robert Parker: The Wine Advocate

Law school. Acting. Finance. These were the career paths followed by three childhood friends from **Occidental**—until they decided to start a wine brand.

Chris Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs have known each other since kindergarten but were following disparate paths in their early 20s. “I knew I wanted to start a business and have an impact on the world, but wine was never in the picture,” Chris says. Myles’s parents own the Hillcrest vineyard (bottled as “Day One”), the first site planted on the Sonoma Coast in 1974, but he hadn’t considered a career in wine, either. “I was studying English and pre-law, but law school didn’t feel like the right path,” he says. Meanwhile, Max was in front of the camera, building his acting career.



But life never seems to work out the way we plan.

Chris became acquainted with members of the Jackson family of **Jackson Family Wines**. “I fell in love with wine, with the idea of it,” he says. “Jess Jackson took me under his wing and I got sucked into this wine world.” The seed had been planted, and he took it with him to Australia. “Myles and I were in Sydney with his family and I had a paper due for an entrepreneurial finance course. We went to a beer garden, enjoyed way too much beer and had this genius idea to take over his parent’s vineyard and make some wine.” The business plan Chris wrote to raise a few million dollars to plant 100 acres and build a winery never panned out. But serendipity struck again.
“Max and I were catching up one day, talking about wine and vineyards,” Chris says, “when suddenly it became clear that the three of us all had the same dream!” Max’s parents purchased land and planted the Thieriot vineyard to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the late 1980s. “I always knew Max’s family had a vineyard, but I had no idea of the prestige,” Chris says. “As kids, we played hide-and-seek out there in the dirt, between the vine rows.” Fruit from Thieriot had been selling to clients like Ted Lemon at **Littorai**, Burt and Ed at **Williams Selyem** and Thomas Rivers Brown of **Rivers-Marie**. “The three of us got together, and in that moment it all clicked.” Sounding more like a blood pact than a business plan, the three purchased some grapes with their savings and produced 100 cases of wine in 2011. The Senses brand was born.



“We were all 22 years old. We had little clue what we were doing,” Max says. They parceled out tasks: Chris took over business management and development, Myles farmed the Hillcrest vineyard and led production and Max directed marketing and branding efforts. Chris explains the method: defer to the others’ strengths. “We divide and conquer what needs to be done.”

“When we started, we had no broker or distributor in California,” Max explains. “So we hustled.” They cold-called restaurants to set up tasting appointments. “At our first restaurant tasting, I had to text Chris to ask him how much we should charge for the Pinot,” Max recalls, laughing. Meanwhile, Myles was out in the vineyard. “It was just me with a pair of shears and a backpack sprayer,” he remembers. In 2012, they harvested more Pinot Noir fruit than they had planned on from the Hillcrest vineyard. “We couldn’t afford to process all of it, so we made two barrels in Myles’ garage,” Max remembers. “I was legit sleeping two hours a night,” Myles says, wearily. They

lovingly dubbed the wine “Château Garage.”

“We really took the in-the-garage approach to starting this brand,” Chris adds. “Everything was sweat. We used our own savings to get started, and we’ve reinvested everything back into the company. We farmed the vineyards, built the website and sold the wines. We worked our tails off.” Max notes, “The industry isn’t easy no matter how you get into it, but it’s even harder when you build the business without any money from investors.”



Hard work isn’t the only element of building a brand. Relationships and personal connections have proved vital. “Everything we do is together and through our combined relationships,” Chris explains. Growing up in Occidental has its advantages. “A lot of the brand has been built on relationships we’ve had from living here our whole lives,” Max says. These relationships have allowed the trio to source top-quality fruit from vineyards like **Charles Heintz**, **Terra de Promissio**, and various **Dutton Ranch** properties, which they’ve used to craft extraordinary single-vineyard Pinot

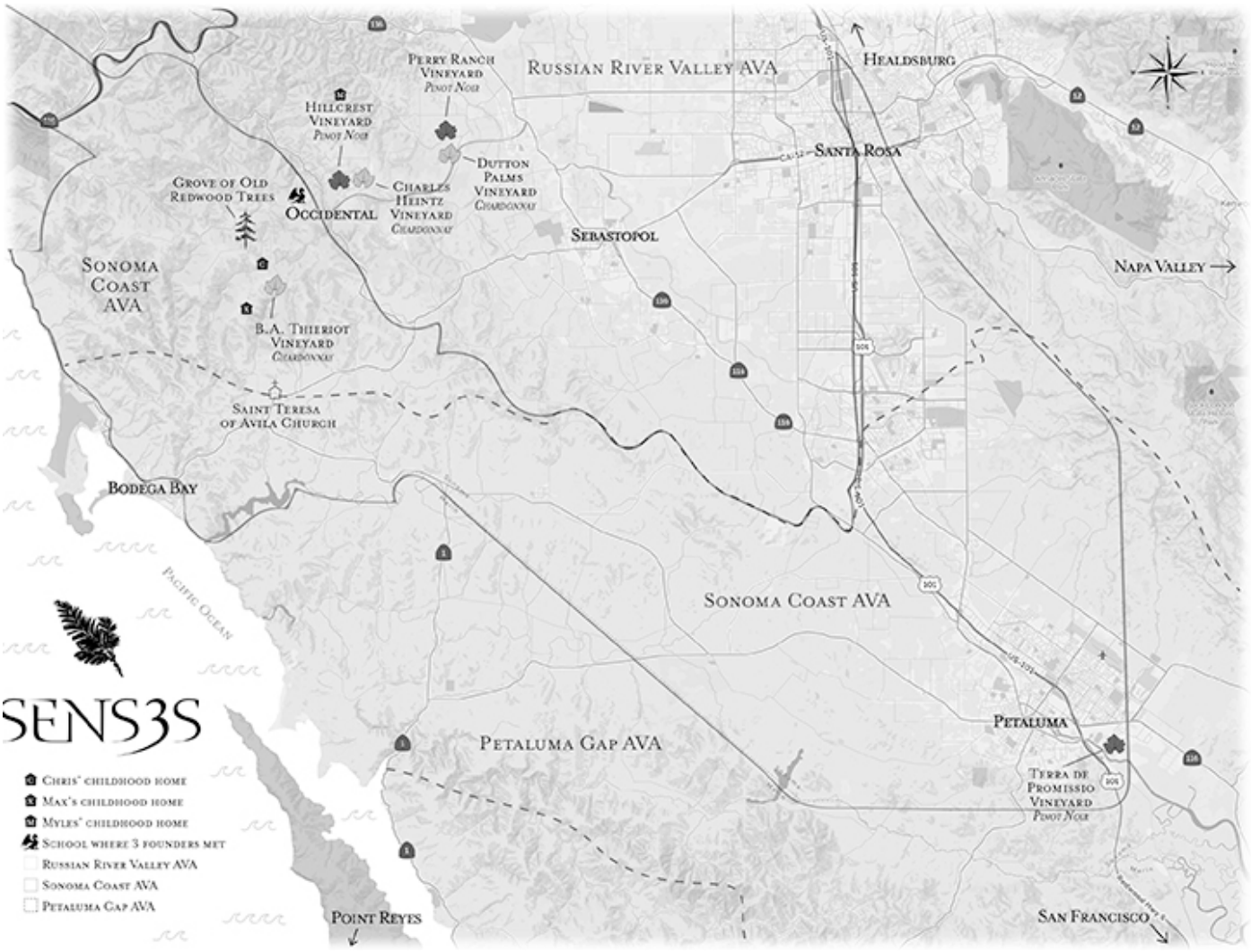
Noirs and Chardonnays. “We came in with little experience but with lots of relationships and built the brand in a hybrid model all from scratch,” Chris explains. “People underestimate how hard it is to build a business, period, but in this industry especially—wine doesn’t sell itself.”

A big step in building the brand came when a mutual friend advised the trio to meet with Thomas Rivers Brown, who became their winemaker. Max says, “I didn’t know who he was, but my friend said, ‘He’s a great guy, he makes killer wines, and you should meet with him.’ Soon after, the four met for the first time in the vineyards. “We instantly hit it off and it was clear that Thomas was a perfect fit for joining the team,” says Max.

Chris offered to let Thomas taste the Château Garage wine. “I had a turkey baster without the rubber piece that I was using as a wine thief,” Myles says, shaking his head. “I thought, ‘this is a disaster. He’s going to walk away.’ He tried it and said, ‘that’s frickin’ awesome.’ I thought, this guy is super cool. From that moment forward, everything changed for Senses. It became picking fruit by taste versus analyzing numbers, and so much more. He brought a natural comfort to everything.”

“He’s become more than a winemaker,” Chris says. “He’s a mentor for sure. It’s a very close relationship.” Myles says he was caught off guard by Thomas’s hands-off winemaking approach. “It caught me by surprise because he was making those big Napa Cabernets. The biggest practical lessons we learned from him is: don’t panic, do less. You can’t make great fruit better, you can only make it worse.”

In partnership with Thomas, the trio recently planted just under 10 acres of Pinot Noir in Bodega-Freestone in western Sonoma County, very close to the coast. The seven-year-old brand now includes three estate vineyards on three of the closest ridges to the ocean in the much cooler western section of the sprawling Sonoma Coast appellation, what some have called the “true Sonoma Coast.”



Senses now produces a few thousand cases a year, depending on the vintage. “Every year we’ve needed to play catch up to the brand,” Chris says. “In the beginning we pounded the pavement and since have grown the business slowly. We add the right vineyards to our portfolio when it makes sense.” (No pun intended.)

Max agrees. “We want to over-deliver on quality,” he says. “We don’t want production to get out of hand to the point that we’re sacrificing quality.”

The Senses wines have become highly sought after and allocated. Although new customers bump into a waitlist, the trio doesn’t feel the need to rush increased production. “We want to grow sustainably,” Chris says. “There’s no need to push to make more wine.” Myles nods. “We also don’t have the yields to sustain large-scale production,” he says. “From a farming standpoint, that’s hard to do. Being on the coast, you’ll be socked in with fog for a month at a

time. The weather is our greatest challenge." Max adds, "We try to honor those who have supported us from the beginning, because relationships are everything. You're only as good as your word."

After growing the Senses brand from the ground up, what advice would Max, Chris and Myles give to someone who wants to do the same? "Go with your gut," Max says. "Don't second guess yourself." Chris emphasizes relationships and trust. "If you're going to go into business with your friends, you have to know them and trust them really well," he tells me. "Don't do it unless you truly love all aspects of it." Myles says, "It's a hard business so you better love it. The passion has to be there at the start—it's not going to follow."

Photos by Adam Decker.

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