Three Childhood Friends Rock Sonoma Coast Wines

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Senses night harvest. Photo: Adam Shindledecker

Nine years ago, when they were 22 years old, three childhood friends from the town Occidental in Sonoma County, California, decided to produce wine. Today, their business is booming, while the wait list for their vintages grows. Their endeavor, which produces reputable wines yet still lacks investors, is turning profitable. If you pencil a line on a map due west of the town of Oakville in Napa Valley, that graphite will transect the city of Santa Rosa before intersecting the

town of Occidental—some 29 miles (47 kilometers) total distance, as the crow flies. From the Barley and Hops Tavern, near the crossing of Coleman Valley Road and the Bohemian Highway in Occidental, it's about another 7 miles (13 kilometers) to where Furlong Gulch meets the Pacific Ocean. More practically for motorists, the town is an hour and a half drive northwest of San Francisco. The population of Occidental hovers just north of a thousand. This is redwood tree terrain, a land with fresh organic grown vegetables, gourmet garlic and artisanal breads, a place where locals appreciate fresh air and deplore incentives to be in a rush. Here, respect for natural beauty prevails.

When Christopher Strieter, Max Thieriot and Myles Lawrence-Briggs—from Occidental—decided to produce wine in 2011, they either had family ties with the wine industry or at least a modicum of related work experience. Max's family has owned Thieriot vineyards since the 1970's, which sells grapes, but not wine. The three chose a Burgundian model of production: they decided to source fruit from high quality vines (many in west Sonoma County), then work with a reputable and established winemaker to produce non-fined or filtered wines fermented with native yeasts.



(L to R) Strieter, Thieriot and Lawrence-Briggs. Photo: Senses

They named their wine Senses. The second letter 'e' has been substituted with the number '3.' This represents three founders and three senses—sight, scent and sip—wielded to appreciate wine.

Christopher Lloyd Strieter is tall, vivacious and articulate. He constantly exudes gratitude at their venture's success. He is also well educated (with degrees in finance, mathematical economics and physics) and adeptly manipulates multiple spreadsheets to keep their company's finances in fighting order.

He shared their history.

“We started this thing bootstrapped, with our savings. To this day—no investors. Made 100 cases in 2011, when we were 22 years old. We started reinvesting everything. In 2013 we took over this Thieriot vineyard—Max’s vineyard. We knew we had big shoes to fill. A couple of other producers worked with us. We had really to make the highest quality wine possible. This winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown was making Chardonnay and offered to make us wine if we sold him fruit. We were nervous. He was a big wig from Napa. But he was cool. It was a match made in heaven. We partnered with him and never looked back.”

Winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown. Photo: Adam Shindledecker

A decade ago Brown was named 'winemaker of the year' by Food & Wine Magazine, and his wines have received perfect scores from The Wine Advocate.

After sourcing grapes and landing a reputed winemaker, the trio decided to sell their wines directly.

“We sell primarily through the mailing list to a couple thousand people within the U.S. The French Laundry restaurant has our Chardonnay by the glass. They came to us. I was over the moon on that one. We sell within the U.S. and distribute internationally as well—Hong Kong, Denmark, Germany, Singapore, Canada. All those markets found us—we never approached a market. In 2015 for the first time we had a wait list. Senses Pinot Noir harvest

Senses Pinot Noir harvest. Photo: Adam Shindledecker

“Myles, Max and I have been friends since pre-school. We have a lot of history, and a lot of trust. The hardest thing is growing with the company. Every single year it’s grown, whether in prestige or sales. Much more than we would expect.

“Max is an actor [on the CBS series SEAL Team]. He has a pretty big responsibility. Myles is the one in the vineyard doing production. I do a little bit of everything. The hardest challenge is how to maintain momentum while staying true to the brand which is moving and growing quicker than we expected. But it’s worked out. It’s just dividing and conquering. That’s the challenge. Because we trust each other, everything falls into place. I’m very frugal, so we spend little money to maximize the value and results. A challenge is how to keep doing that without sacrificing our

attention and staying ahead with the brand. With no investors, there's no safety net. I feel I've gotten lucky, always balancing and paying off, and then incurring more debt and paying it off. It's like how quickly can we grow without pushing ourselves. We're very efficient. That's the name of the game. Sonoma coast vineyards

Sonoma Coast vineyards. Photo: Senses

"We produce three to four thousand cases a year now, and sell via a mailing list. We have nine or ten vineyards. It's Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet—13 wines. We have a couple of releases a year. We could scale and just buy more fruit, but that's not the point. We want the best possible vineyards, best possible people and to grow this slow and steady.

"This is the best thing possible. When I left school I thought I was crazy to go home and make wine and build a business out of it. All my friends worked at defense companies, like SpaceX, or in banking, like Goldman Sachs. Six digit plus salaries. I studied finance. Spreadsheets—I use all the time. It's the backbone to the whole thing.

"My parents? Very shocked. Would never have expected it. Nobody had anything to do with wine. Myle's family had the vineyard. Max's family was also very passionate for grapes. But none of them expected the three of us to ever partner up, grow grapes and take on this business. They've very excited, and love the journey.

Heintz vineyard. Photo: Adam Shindledecker

"We embody the west Sonoma coast. That's where we grew up. These wines are acidity driven, but they're not just earlier-picked—which means spice or floral driven, or late picked—candied, rich, intense. We are all about the Goldilocks. Not too ripe, not too under ripe. Always defined by the acidity, but textured. We want mouth feel to be number one. Everything else is just balance. I think that's our secret. These wines work great with food, but stand on their own as well.

"It took a long time to come up with such a simple label. We threw in a redwood needle to pay tribute and homage to our childhood."

I tasted three wines from Senses—two Chardonnays and a Pinot Noir. The two Chardonnays are made the same way, but have noticeably different tastes because of the different sources of fruit.
2018 Russian River Pinot Noir



2018 Russian River Pinot Noir. Photo: Senses

The first was a 2017 B.A. Thieriot Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay, made from grapes located three miles from the Pacific Ocean. Strieter described this as a 'lean, white Burgundy; smells like crushed rocks.' This includes lime and butter aromas and a taste with distinct minerality, for which a 92 to 93 point score on a scale of 100 is well deserved. The second was a 2017 Charles Heintz Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay, which spends 14 months in non-new French oak (and which Strieter described as being a 'little richer, with honeysuckle, more California style'). This includes aromas of pumice and tropical fruits, is silky in the mouth and has a luscious length. 94 points for this.

Their 2017 MCM88 Pinot Noir is made from grapes from a select Russian River block. This includes a velvety click on the tongue and has aromas of Minestrone and blueberries. 94 points for this memorable wine—well done. Joy Road in Occidental

Joy Road in Occidental. Photo: Adam Shindledecker

Strieter is pleased with their mutual choice to band together, respect their home terrain and have wines produced from the best vines possible.

“I think starting Senses, it’s like building a lifestyle. These are all amazing people. It’s my job to go out and meet new friends and share that story. Building a business out of childhood memories. That’s pretty much how it started. Sonoma County—that’s home. It’s a privilege to make a business out of it.”