# The Occidental Boys and Senses Wines

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Every vintner has a story to tell about the history of the winery and the property not to mention their personal involvement and those of the team surrounding the brand. But, every once in a while a truly moving and almost magical story comes my way.

Today, I want to share one special experience I recently enjoyed with my wife Barbara and dear friends from Southern California when we experienced some remarkable wines that are the "fruits" of three young Sonoma County Occidental natives and their life-long friendship.

Known locally as the "Occidental Boys," Christopher Strieter, Myles Lawrence-Briggs and Max Thieriot began their life-long friendship growing up on three adjacent vineyard properties surrounded by redwood forests where hide-and-seek and swinging from the massive trees were the games of the day. From the age of 3, and through high school, they were inseparable as each captivated the other while learning the lessons of nature surrounding the vineyards and experiencing the freedom of the great outdoors.

College temporarily separated the friends with each following a separate path. Christopher went to college in Claremont to study astrophysics and then earned a master's degree in finance. But after graduation, he became enamored by wine and the idea of flexing his entrepreneurial spirit. He went to work with Jess Jackson where his love for wine developed and a new quest for independence flourished.

Myles studied English literature and had intentions of following his father into the law but developed a love of cooking and wine pairing. He spent time in retail wine shops and expanding his cooking skills while also developing an increasing interest in farming through his connection with his family's vineyard in Occidental.

Max is a creative guy and studied acting in Hollywood where he became the star of TV's "SEAL Team" and now has a lead role in Cal Fire adding to his professional resume. While successfully following his acting career, Max has also assumed an active role in the Senses wine project primarily on the creative marketing side.

In 2011, when the Occidental Boys were out of college and in their early 20s, Christopher brought his friends together with the idea of pooling their resources and creating a wine brand based on their story and history growing up among the vines and forests of Occidental. Myles' parents, Lisa Lawrence and Carlton Briggs had purchased the Hillcrest vineyard in 1988 and in 2011 the grape-growing lease was expiring. So, Myles took over and the first estate vineyard was established.

Through their relationship and experiences, the number "3" took on great significance and is part of their label where the brand is expressed as SENS3S — probably Max's idea and quite fitting. First of all there were three friends coming together at the age of 3 from three neighboring properties to become three partners in wine.

Their goal in producing Senses wines is to illuminate the three senses of wine — sight, scent and sip — and of course, the letter "S" appears three times in the name Senses. In addition, their redwood needle logo has three points. So "3" is an important part of the Senses story that continues to evolve.

When the partnership began in 2011 the three partners all had their day jobs and the famed winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown agreed to join them as winemaker. At the outset, they all agreed they wanted to do something that was fun with a commitment of building something sustainable. In 2011, under Thomas' direction and skill, they produced 112 cases of about one-half each Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and Senses was officially born.

Christopher says, "There's an organic, wholesome and native vibe to Sonoma County and especially in the West Sonoma Coast. Our mission is to translate this vibe to each glass so wine lovers can capture the magic of our vineyards and share in our history." For reference, the West Sonoma Coast is a very cool area nestled just five miles from the Pacific, and on the verge of attaining its own AVA status. It is also considered by many as the 'true' Sonoma Coast. "

Kevin Jones owns and operates a highly regarded collectors' wine storage facility — Liquid Assets Cellars (LAC) — in North Hollywood, CA and regularly introduces winemakers to his clients at private tastings in the warehouse lounge. One day he called us to say, "You have to meet Christopher Strieter of Senses wines as he is truly something special and still relatively unknown to most collectors."

So Barbara and I took Kevin's advice and called Christopher to set up a fall visit to the vineyards with friends visiting from Southern California. Since our friends were staying in St. Helena and we'd be traveling from Napa, we decided to drive separately and meet at Senses. Driving along CA-12 for more than an hour through the majestic redwood forest, we weren't sure we had the right directions as there were no vineyards in sight.

But, as we approached the first ridge surrounding Occidental, the vineyards (some of Sonoma's oldest) opened up and we knew we were in the right place. We met Christopher few minutes later and he lead us on tour through the estate vineyards, with Chardonnay in hand. Later we sat on the veranda of the old family home where we were mesmerized by his passion and exuberance in relating stories of the Occidental Boys, their families and of course, the history of Senses wines.

All of this was underscored by an extensive tasting of Chardonnays and Pinots from their estate vineyards (Hillcrest, B. A. Thieriot and Bodega Thieriot) as well as examples from nine other storied vineyards where they purchase fruit on handshake agreements. Thomas Rivers Brown remains in the winemaking role and is doing an extraordinary job of letting each vineyard and parcel express itself and each bottle is vineyard designated to clearly indicate the wine's heritage.

Each wine we tasted on that brilliant fall morning and since, was true to its varietal character as expected, but also was an example of Thomas' valuable hand in the vineyard oversight and winemaking roles while expressing the remarkable character of the West Sonoma Coast and the inherent nuance of each vineyard. A tasty study in the meaning of terroir as expressed by a master of the winemaking craft and committed ownership.

Myles, Max, and Christopher are proud to say, "Our wines embody the natural and distinct characteristics of the vineyards from where the grapes are grown. Our team believes the vineyards are Senses' greatest assets, and we meticulously farm each vine so the winemaking process can be as hands-off as possible. This approach ensures the complexity and finesse we expect for each wine, vintage after vintage."

The 112 cases produced in 2011 have now grown to about 4,000 with most of their sales made on a Direct to Consumer basis, but with significant exposure in key markets around the country and abroad. Now in their early thirties (another 3?) they look forward to great futures ahead for the brand, the partners and their families.

Christopher humbly adds, "It's a real privilege to share our connection with this community and the wines we produce from this region with some of the finest restaurants and collectors around the world."

And I can only add I am looking forward to that long ride through the seemingly never-ending redwood forest because I know a true vinous delight awaits on the other side of the ridge.