The Wine Independent

"Senses New Releases"

Written by Lisa Perotti-Brown MW

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Five years ago, I first picked Senses out of a vast line-up of Chardonnays and Pinots at a regional tasting hosted by Sonoma County Vintners. Steadily tasting through the long rows of randomly placed 2015 Chardonnays and Pinots, their wines repeatedly stopped me in my tracks. I'd never heard of Senses before. The following year, I was equally impressed with their 2016s. Circling back to reviewing the wines of Sonoma this year, this is the rising star label I was most excited to rediscover..

Next-Gen West County Sonoma, The Senses Story

Senses was started in 2011 by three childhood friends, Christopher Strieter, Max Thieriot, and Myles Lawrence-Briggs, all born in 1988. They grew up together in the sticks of the west Sonoma coast, around the town of Occidental.

"We spent our childhood adventuring in Occidental and doing all things outdoors," said Strieter. "That includes watching our families plant and manage the vineyards we now proudly farm (including Myles' and Max's childhood homes, Hillcrest, bottled as 'Day One,' and B.A. Theriot estates, respectively). We couldn't help but become curious. My personal interest furthered during my college years when I worked with Barbara Banke and the late Jess Jackson of Kendall-Jackson. I learned business management, but the real breakthrough was uncovering my excitement for entrepreneurialism. I also wanted to get out of the corporate office to see how wine was made, but it wasn't until the summer after my Claremont graduation that I could finally work harvest. That's when Senses Wines was born."

In February, I met with Christopher Strieter and Max Thieriot at the B.A. Thieriot vineyard. I'd met Strieter before, but meeting Thieriot for the first time was an awkward double-take moment. As a horror movie fan, he bears a striking resemblance to the actor in House at the End of the Street, My Soul to Take, and the television series Bates Motel. Turns out, he is that actor. He started acting as a teenager and was pretty much an instant success. Taking time out of his hectic filming schedule for the up-and-coming CBS series Cal Fire, he showed me around his family's B.A. Thieriot vineyard.

"My parents purchased this property in 1988," said Thieriot. "At the time, my father didn't know much about farming grapes, but he liked the look of Chardonnay. So, he planted Chardonnay here in 1989."

Back in 1989, there wasn't a lot of Chardonnay planted in this part of Sonoma. To be precise, it was so cool and remote; there wasn't a lot of anything planted around Occidental back then. But the decision turned out to be an inspired one, and Max's father later sold the grapes to prestigious winery names such as Williams Seylem, Littorai, and, more recently, Rivers-Marie.

Of course, it would have been nice if the fruit from their families' and friends' prime, mature vineyards were automatically the basis of the trios' new wine label concept back in 2011, but it didn't work like that. There was never any entitlement. At the start of the project, Christopher, Max, and Myles were the project.

"The first year, we did everything ourselves." - Max Thieriot

"We pruned the vines ourselves," Thierot recalled. "It took us six weeks! We hired a team to do this the following year, and it took them six hours. We tried to get fruit from Charlie Heintz in the early years, but he wouldn't let us have any. He was a family friend, but he had to see we were serious first."

Eventually, they did manage to buy fruit from Charles Heintz vineyard. By then, they had befriended a winemaker who was one of the hottest names in Napa Valley and Sonoma: Thomas Rivers Brown.

"Thomas has become a friend as much as a mentor over the years," commented Strieter. "Our meeting felt destined. We took over farming responsibilities at our family vineyards and naturally wanted to make the best wines we could. We knew that working with world-class fruit demanded the best winemaking, but we were just 24 years old with little experience. We heard of Thomas through a neighbor, Scott Zeller, who previously owned Summa Vineyard and is a friend of our families.

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Thomas had also heard about us, and it was fate that we met in early 2013 where, after walking our vineyards, Thomas generously offered to help us and make our wines. It was a harmonious partnership, and we have learned so much from him over the years. Our philosophies overlap more than we expected: hands-off, native yeast, unfined and unfiltered, and most importantly, site-specific expression."

"Myles was the true grape whisperer." - Christopher Strieter

The third partner, Myles Lawrence-Briggs, has been primarily involved in the viticulture side of the business but was not in town during my visit and tasting.

"Myles dedicated himself to farming Hillcrest single-handedly the first few years," Strieter informed me. "Max and I helped, as did friends and family, as much as we could, but Myles was the true grape whisperer. His role evolved to vineyard management and my co-point during harvest. Max and I lead vineyard development and sourcing, which has grown considerably. We were lucky to be introduced to the late Ulises Valdez in 2017 and have worked with his family ever since. Between sourcing top-tier fruit and farming our estate vineyards, the Valdez family continues to be integral to Senses Wines, which is the same with all our growers. Starting with the best grapes is paramount if you want to make the best wines. When it comes to harvest, we are intimately involved and make most pick decisions in tandem with Thomas and the winemaking team. Taste is what drives everything. For winemaking, it's hands-off, outside various maintenance tasks, and we lean on Thomas for day-to-day decisions."

A short drive towards the Pacific coast from the B.A. Thieriot Vineyard took us to Max Thieriot's new "home" estate vineyard, called Bodega Thieriot. This is a 90-acre property that shares a fence line with Steve Kistler's "Occidental" site. In 2016, 8.6 acres of Calera clone Pinot Noir were planted here. 2020 would have been the first vintage to come off this site, except that smoke exposure from the 2020 fires ruled that out for the Senses team.

"There are no Pinots for 2020," commented Thieriot. "It was the first year the Bodega Thieriot fruit came on, but we decided not to keep it."

"All our 2020 red wines were eventually rejected. But the Chardonnays are great!" - Max Thieriot

Last week, government approval of the new West Sonoma Coast AVA was announced. Knowing that Strieter was actively involved in this development, I asked him why he felt it was important for this area to have a separate AVA.

"The Sonoma Coast AVA is too large and lacks proper identity," said Strieter. "By narrowing the region to what has regularly been referred to as the 'True' Sonoma Coast, this community of winemakers and growers can highlight what makes this place special - true Pacific Ocean climate. It's important to label these wines more specifically so we can educate trade and consumers alike about why these vineyards and this region produce world-class wines. We plan to label two of our estates West Sonoma Coast, both the 2021 Bodega Thieriot and 2021 B.A. Thieriot, while our third estate, 'Day One' (Hillcrest), will remain labeled Sonoma Coast since it's technically outside the WSC boundaries."

"I wouldn't have known the word, but I've always intuitively known that terroir is everything," Strieter continued. "You can't help but appreciate the people, redwoods, dirt, ocean breeze, plants, animals, climate, and all things mother nature and how they interact with one another when born and raised in Occidental, part of what we call 'West County.'

"This is our home, and we are proud to share our love for this community with wine enthusiasts around the world." - Christopher Strieter