A Sense of Place

Hallgarten & Novum Wines

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Sometimes wine has the capacity to delight. Sometimes it has the capacity to surprise.

And sometimes it has the capacity to *amaze*.

We're at the Senses Wines vineyard in Sonoma County with owner Christopher Lloyd Strieter. We are surrounded by a Gods-Own country of redwood trees, organically grown vegetables and artisanal breads. But I don't really register any of that. All I am thinking is: *How can something be this good? How can they have come so far so quickly?*

The story of "they" is brief. Senses Wines was founded in 2011 by three childhood friends from Occidental: Christopher Lloyd Strieter, Max Thieriot, and Myles Lawrence-Briggs. All were just 22 years old. All either had family ties with the wine industry or at least some related work experience. (Christopher, for instance, had majored in Finance, Economics and Physics, before slogging away in inventory at VinFillment warehouse and working with Williams Selyem and Jess Jackson of Jackson Family Wines.)



Now here's the first **BIG FACT**. They had one major advantage: Max's family had planted and owned a stunning vineyard – the BA Thieriot vineyard, five miles from the Pacific Ocean, and next to the town of Bodega of Hitchcock's *The Birds* fame – which at that time sold grapes, but not wine. "Wouldn't it be cool to turn those grapes into wine, we thought," says Christopher.

Here comes the second **BIG FACT**. The three decided not to seek investors, but to pool all of their limited savings into the scheme. To this day they have no investors (and no safety net.) They made 112 cases in 2011 and reinvested everything over the years. "We didn't know what we were doing. We just concentrated on paying the bills."

Third **BIG FACT** coming up: Max Thieriot became a well-known actor, starring in *Bates Motel* and *SEAL Team*. So they are guaranteed publicity.



As well as the BA Thieriot vineyard, they began to source Chardonnay and Pinot Noir fruit from high quality vines throughout the Sonoma Coast and Russian River areas. Quality was *always* the key. Now they deal with about twelve different vineyards.

But a turning point came with the fourth **BIG FACT:** ace winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown approached them to make their wines. "He offered to make wine for us if we sold him some of our premium fruit for his other wines." Brown was once named 'winemaker of the year' by Food & Wine Magazine, and has received perfect scores from The Wine Advocate and many others.

Fifth **BIG FACT:** they decided to sell their wines directly rather than through wholesalers or Cellar Door (they don't have a cellar door.) "We sell primarily through the mailing list to thousands of people within the U.S." Today, their business is booming, while the waiting list for their vintages grows.

Senses Wines (on the label the second letter 'e' has been substituted with the number '3' representing the three founders and the three wine senses of sight, scent and sip) first became a boutique, and then a cult.

All of this is interesting, of course, but what turns interesting into fascinating is to learn of it while tasting the wines. Because they taste *extraordinary.*



Christopher pours a 2020 Russian River Chardonnay. I immediately think: Puligny-Montrachet. It's a lovely floating-on-air wine, a hint of ice cream sundae with a smidgeon of lime. Firm acidity. Brilliant lightness of touch.

A 2020 Charles Heitz Chardonnay is pure Burgundian, with a honeysuckle and cream nose, balanced by perfect acidity.

But Christopher is keen to state "We shouldn't ape Burgundy. We are Occidental, Sonoma County, West Sonoma Coast. We don't want opulent and rich. We want elegance"

A 2020 UV El Diablo Chardonnay has more body to it, a whisper of toast, more creaminess, more Meursault-like (I merrily ignore Christopher's non-Burgundian plea.)

Finally, their estate 2020 BA Thieriot Chardonnay: I only rarely get to taste Le Montrachet, but I can't help being reminded of it. A staggering combination of pure fruit and perfect acidity.

As we taste, and then walk the vineyards (with Christopher pointing out where he used to play as a kid) I still can't get my head round it. "How come you've become so successful so quickly?"

He laughs. “We are meticulous about everything and we do it all in-house. I’m the spreadsheet guy and the lucky one to host events around the world. I do the numbers and we keep things very tight. Max does all things branding and gets us air time. Myles is in the vineyard, and helps with production and events.”

Yes, they have had a couple of advantages, but Christopher is keen to stress a couple of things: “We didn’t have any pre-conceived ideas, no history baggage. And we did work hard with our winery friends and always made sure we kept on friendly terms.”

But these wines are so good, and I still don’t get it. But there is one other thing at the back of my mind. Christopher had also told us that they have 50,000 followers on social media. It was always going to be that way, of course, for three young educated hipsters. But not many others wineries have that clout. I was reminded of the success that Barack Obama had had when first running for president with a new form of politicking via social media. A new way. But the point is that no matter how savvy your marketing and selling skills are, the wines have got to match up.



And if the Chardonnays are good, the Pinot Noirs are mind-blowing.

A 2019 Terra de Promissio Pinot Noir has sturdy young fruit, raspberries and rose petal, such lightness of touch!

A 2019 MCM88 Pinot Noir is sturdier and creamier with a lovely plummy finish. This wine hails from the vineyard formerly known as Keefer Ranch, top-of-class Russian River Valley fruit and terroir.

Finally, from their other estate, the 2019 Day One Pinot Noir has beautiful texture and mouth feel. Lovely dark velvety chocolate fruit, tannins firm and sweet. Supreme balance.

So: we end the tasting with me stunned. We stand on the veranda of the small house in the middle of the winery and gaze out over a beautiful landscape. “We’re farmers first and winemakers second,” says Christopher.

What a place in which to farm. What wines! And I still can’t work out how they’ve done it.