Senses

The Wine Palate · Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW · May 2025

https://thewinepalate.com/winery-story/senses/

Rebuilt from the publisher's members' page (printed August 2025) for the Senses press archive; the text is unchanged, the layout is the house archive style.

Three childhood friends are building on the vineyards their parents and friends planted to create world-class Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays that capture the cool-climate finesse of the West Sonoma Coast. WEST SONOMA COAST BORN & BRED



West Sonoma Coast Born & Bred

Senses Wines 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," Christopher told me. "That includes watching our families plant and manage the vineyards we now proudly farm. 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."

I did a double-take when I met Christopher's partner, Max Thieriot. A horror movie fan, I recognized him as the lead actor in House at the End of the Street. He also appeared in My Soul to Take and the television series Bates Motel. Max started acting as a teenager and was pretty much an instant success. These days, he is best known for his role in the CBS drama series Fire Country. Thieriot's parents were pioneers in Sonoma, establishing their B. A. Thieriot vineyard in the 1980s.

"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. It was so cold and remote that there wasn't a lot of anything planted around Occidental back then. But the decision turned out to be inspired, and Max's father later sold the grapes to prestigious winery names such as Williams Selyem, 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 only employees.



“The first year, we did everything,” said Max Thieriot. “We pruned the vines ourselves. 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 Christopher. “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. 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.”

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,” Christopher 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, as is the case 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 of the picking 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 dayto-day decisions.”



A short drive towards the Pacific coast from the B.A. Thieriot Vineyard is 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 were no Pinots for 2020,” commented Max. “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!”

In 2022, government approval of the new West Sonoma Coast AVA was announced. This new AVA is used on the Senses labels. Knowing that Christopher 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 Christopher. “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—the 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. I wouldn’t have known the word, but I’ve always intuitively known that terroir is everything. 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.”

More recently, the Senses team has expanded their relationship with the Dutton family.

“We’ve worked with Steve and Joe Dutton since the beginning in 2011,” said Christopher. “With the 2023 releases, we’ve introduced a ‘Dutton Ranch’ Pinot Noir and the inaugural ‘Dutton Bodega Vineyard,’ located in the West Sonoma Coast. This is big news for the Dutton’s, who predominantly farm in the Green Valley AVA, as they set their eyes on a flagship planting on the rugged coast. This site is shared with Steve Kistler and Steve Dutton’s Dutton Goldfield.”

The other big news is that Senses has purchased the Hillcrest Vineyard (producing the wine labeled ‘Day One’) from Myles’ family.

“In addition to the purchase, we’ve since learned that the site is known as the first planting in the Freestone Occidental area, to ‘Gray Riesling’ back in 1974,” said Christopher. “It was colloquially known as ‘an interesting site’ back then because it was so late to ripen. Talk about being ahead of their time! It was later grafted to Chardonnay and Zinfandel in 1984, and the fruit was sold to various wineries over the years. Ted Lemon bottled his ‘Occidental Vineyard’ Chardonnay from

there in the 1990s before moving across town to the B.A. Thieriot vineyard due to disease at Hillcrest (those vines were eventually ripped up). Our current block was replanted in 2005 and expanded over the years since we began farming it in 2012."

Most recent reviews for this winery

- 2023 Senses B.A. Thieriot Vineyard Chardonnay – 97 points
- 2023 Senses Charles Heintz Vineyard Chardonnay – 97 points
- 2023 Senses El Diablo Vineyard Chardonnay – 96 points
- 2023 Senses Tenth Stop Chardonnay – 96 points
- 2023 Senses Dutton Bodega Vineyard Pinot Noir – 96 points
- 2023 Senses Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir – 96 points
- 2023 Senses Kanzler Vineyard Pinot Noir – 95 points
- 2023 Senses Russian River Valley Chardonnay – 93 points
- 2023 Senses West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir – 92 points
- 2023 Senses Russian River Valley Pinot Noir – 92 points