

Behind the Wines

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“And so, what I have learned after 26 years of being a vigneron is to make the wine of your terroir”

— Stephan Asseo



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PHOTO BY KEVIN DAUGHERTY, RED BOOTS STUDIOS

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L'Aventure: Stephan Asseo A Vigneron's Story

Living your dream. It is the greatest of all adventures. To decide at an early age what you want to do and then pursue it with a passion is one of man's ultimate desires. And when you get to experience your dream in both the Old World and the New World, it makes that fantasy all the sweeter. Such has been the dream, life and adventure of Stephan Asseo, Stephan Vineyards, L'Aventure in Paso Robles.

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L'Aventure *cont. from p. 1*

“Since I was a teenager I always wanted to be a farmer. Not specifically a wine-maker or grower,” recalls Stephan, remembering his childhood in France. “Even though I was born in the city, I am not a ‘city-boy.’ So, about age 15 my dream was to leave the city and be in the country. After I graduated [high school] I was ready to go to agricultural school. It was very hard.” The difficulty Stephan encountered was from the rural, French farming community. During the ’60’s and ’70’s “peace and love” movement there was a huge wave of people that had left the cities to find their roots in the country. “The country population, they were a little bit disappointed with all those city guys who came back to their roots and made a mess or did nothing,” Stephan said. “So they said, ‘We are tired about poetry and stuff like that. In the agricultural world we want workers.’ For me I had no roots in the farming business. I was obliged to find a way to be accepted into agricultural school.” To show his motivation, he decided to do an internship.

It was Stephan’s father who encouraged him in the direction of winemaking. In 1977, he ended up in Burgundy through a contact of his dad’s. He interned there for a year. After that, he recontacted the

but this school had a great reputation,” Stephan reflected. “It was a practical trade school with teachers who were professionals in the wine industry.” He still has his oenological notes from his courses that he refers to from time to time. He studied for two years and received his diploma in 1980.

“My goal was to have my own land. I was too young and naïve. And I wanted to live a little bit, too, even if definitely growing and winemaking was what I wanted to do.” So, after graduation, he and his best friend decided to live in the Pacific Islands and ended up in French Polynesia. He spent two years in the Marquesas Islands helping his friend build his snorkeling business.

Meanwhile, his parents decided to leave Paris. Lured home by his father and mother to look at some property for them, he fell in love with the property and also a girl. Stephan bought the property in 1982. He married Beatrice and spent the next 17 years rebuilding the vineyards and winery of this property, in Bordeaux, France.

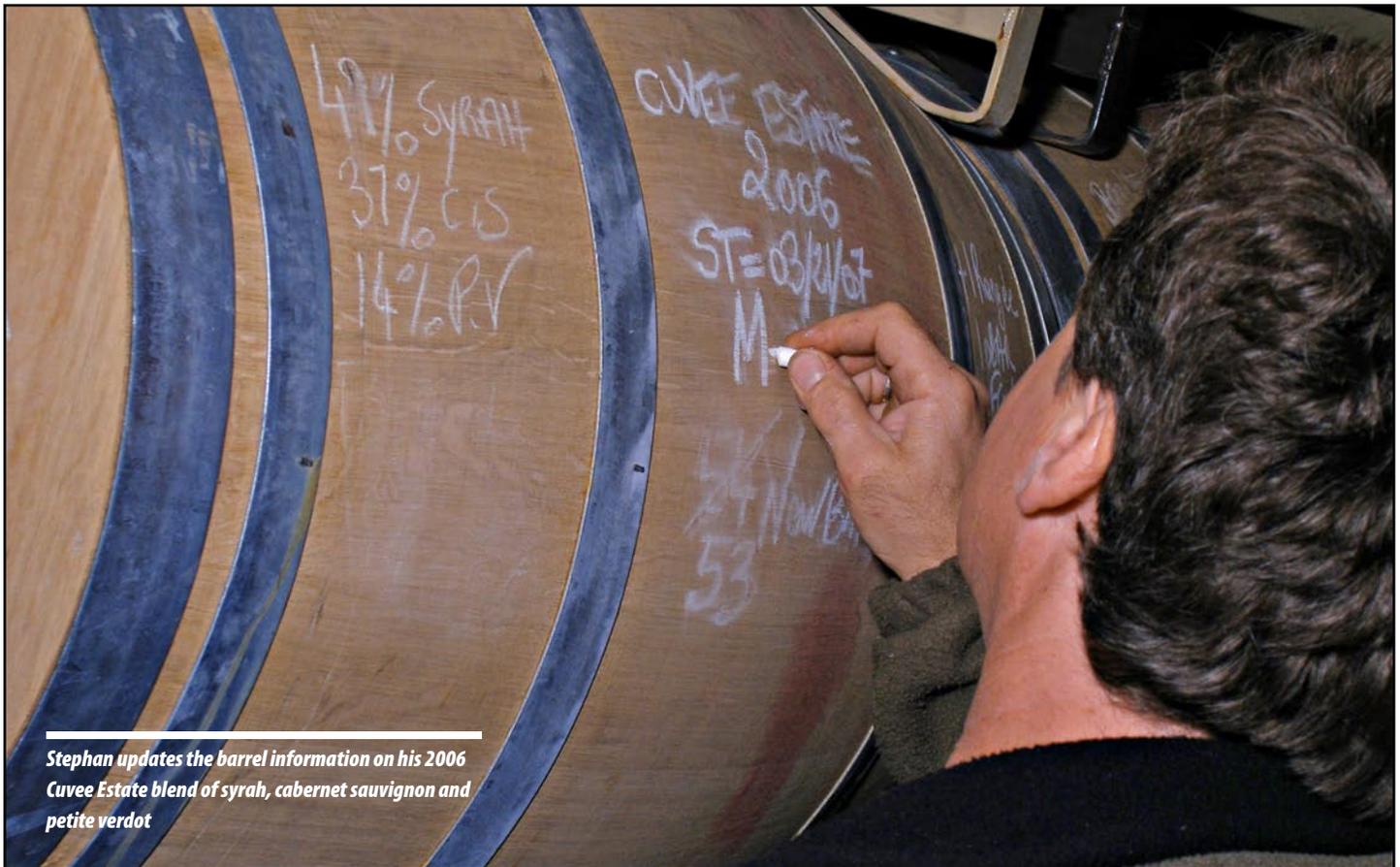
The Asseo’s property was known as Domaine de Courteillac. They later purchased additional properties: Chateau Robin and Saint-Emilion Grand Cru, Chateau Fleur Cardinale. The family business became a familiar word in the world of Bordeaux wines. Stephan made such exceptional wines that eventually he was asked to manage properties for Chateau Guillot Clauzel in Pomerol and Chateau Corbin, St. Emilion Grand Cru.



A case of L'Aventure 2004 Syrah. The name for the winery comes from Stephan's experience of moving from Bordeaux, France to Paso Robles

school he wanted to go to. “I was finally accepted to the Lycée Viticole de Macon Davayé. I did not know at the beginning,





Stephan updates the barrel information on his 2006 Cuvee Estate blend of syrah, cabernet sauvignon and petite verdot

After 15 years of producing Bordeaux wines, Stephan was searching for new challenges. He had already made a name for himself and was considered a maverick in the Old World of wine. But being under the stiff restrictions of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) was getting a bit tiresome; he could only make Bordeaux wines and if they didn't meet with the AOC's approval he couldn't sell them as Bordeaux. In 1997, he spent a week with a friend at a winery in Lebanon where they experimented with all kinds of crazy blends. He discovered a blend of cabernet and syrah that he really liked and was indelibly etched in his mind. He longed for this type of freedom.

That began his quest for a new adventure away from France. Searching in South Africa, Australia, South America (Argentina and Chile) and finally in North America, he methodically explored for just the right terroir. Napa was not interesting to him and too expensive. Sonoma was a bit more interesting but still too expensive. Then, he looked in Monterey and Santa Barbara counties. But he kept hearing from people that he should look at a little known place called Paso Robles. He found what he had been looking for — soil with a strong personality. He fell in love, sold the family business in France and bought 127-acres of prime west-side calcareous soil.

Speaking very little English, he hired a backhoe operator to dig

holes all over the property. "I just asked him to make holes everywhere. At this time I didn't know the complexity of the terroir of Paso. It was more my instinct. So, I asked him to make holes at the top of the hill in the middle, everywhere. He must have thought I was a crazy French guy." In 1998, L'Aventure was born.

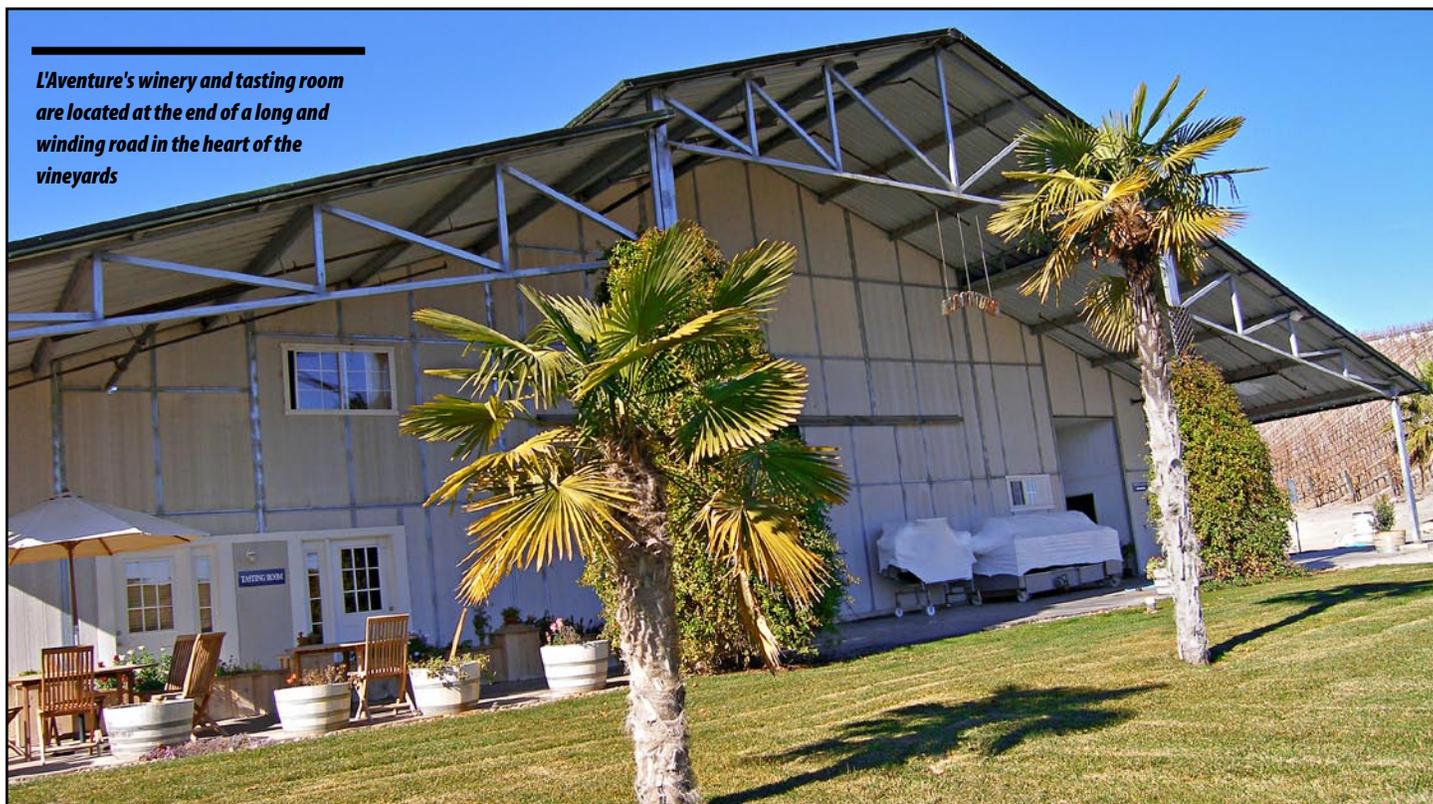
"The idea was to make a high-end wine. And so the tool for that is the terroir and I found it," he related. Stephan's plan was to plant mostly cabernet sauvignon and syrah. But, he received some



A memento and reminder of the Asseo family's past life in France as one of the premiere producers of Bordeaux wines.

advice from his friend, Michel Rolland, a very famous worldwide "flying winemaker," to plant a bit of petit verdot. With his former experience, he understood the importance of high density planting, but was the only "crazy guy" to do it. His vineyards are

L'Aventure's winery and tasting room are located at the end of a long and winding road in the heart of the vineyards



planted at 2100 vines per acre, more than three times the normal amount. According to Stephan, the calcareous, rocky soil creates huge competition between each vine. This makes the vineyard self-regulating and in turn generates lower production yields. “When I speak about yield, I speak about yield per vines, not yield per acre,” stated Stephan. “So, here at L’Aventure, at my estate level production, I produce one bottle per vine.”

With his roots firmly planted in the Paso Robles terroir, he set all of his sights on making the highest quality possible. “Here we have a terroir with a strong, strong personality,” he expressed fervently. “I moved to Paso. All of my energy is based to make a ‘Paso’ wine. If I move from Bordeaux is not to make a copy of Bordeaux in Paso Robles. I could stay in Bordeaux to make Bordeaux. It’s really to try to make a wine that will be representative of my new appellation.”

Stephan feels that in his profession, 80% of his job is to be a good grower and 20% is winemaking. Being a vigneron is the word that describes this best. “In America, you have no word. You are a winemaker or you are a grower, but you have no word that describes you are both. And for me it is very important. One foot in the growing side and one foot in the winemaking because both are so intertwined — vigneron. And so, what I have learned after 26 years of being a vigneron is to make the wine of your terroir,” he said.

But what Stephan wasn’t prepared for was the differences in marketing and distributing here in America. By 2001 he was facing bankruptcy and close to going back to France. His first vintage in 1998 was a cabernet, syrah and zinfandel blend. His national distributor purchased the first two vintages, but not the third and that is when the trouble started.

“I wanted to make the best wine possible. I tried to find a national distributor who would buy my crop and the next year they would buy the next one. That’s how it works in Europe,” he re-

counted. “I was a little bit naïve. Also, I had no clue, no idea of the potential of the direct sales — tasting room, wine club members. So, I woke up after four years and I saw the importance of them.” After selling shares of L’Aventure to the person who bought his family’s vineyards in Bordeaux and hiring Michael Young to handle his marketing, business began to increase. They implemented a tasting room and wine club. Stephan began going to wine shows and doing dinners. “From that I restarted from ashes or from the bottom of the wave. And now I’m starting to surf on a nice wave,” he said with a smile.

When he brought his family to Paso Robles ten years ago, they were young. But now their oldest son is 25 and working on his doctorate of physics at UCLA. Their middle son has just received his degree as a chef from a culinary school in Bordeaux. “Our daughter, Chloe, she is 16, I don’t think she will make wine. She’s more a designer, an actress,” said Stephan. “I have friends who are in the business, the Hugel family of Alsace, France, in the vineyard and wine business since 1639. Thirteen generations. Most of the time, in Europe, there are a lot of successions from generation to generation. The joke is,” he laughs, “with me, I will be a very short dynasty. I will be the first one and the last one of the dynasty.”

Stephan is now considered one of the Paso Robles pioneers who has helped to shape the excellent world standing Paso enjoys in the wine community today. “I am very proud and happy to be recognized and integrated into my area,” Stephan says with emotion. “More than my knowledge, I think, I brought a philosophy, that there is no concession based on the quality, the quality, the quality. There’s no restriction. That means I don’t care about the cost, I don’t care about the yield — just try to make the best possible. That for me is the point.”

by Kevin Daugherty