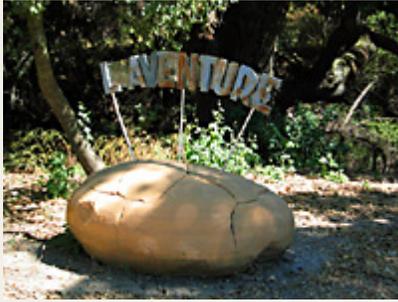


Grape-Nutz

L'Aventure

by Eric Anderson

(excerpted from *Vol.11 No.2, Journal du Vin, May 2003. ...a visit on 5/29/03 to L'Aventure in Paso Robles for a tour and tasting.*)



I contacted Stephan Asseo to see if I could stop by *L'Aventure*, while in the Paso Robles area for Hospice du Rhône. For some time now, I'd wanted to visit this former Bordeaux resident who had started building a vineyard and winery from scratch in Paso Robles, but Stephan and his aptly named wine venture, *L'Aventure* had already been featured in the *Wine Spectator* and several other wine publications, so I thought he might have had his fill with visits from the press or the curious, and thus probably wouldn't be interested in taking in visitors. Happily, I was wrong.

I suggested a date for coming by, and he replied with an upbeat 'sure,' and said to give him a phone call as we got closer to the date, and we could set up a particular time. So, I gave him a call one afternoon, as we got closer to the date. Gracious and very outgoing, he agreed to a time of my choosing and we were all set.



We arrived for our 3:00 appointment, just as the vineyard manager was just pulling in on his ATV. Hi, are you looking for Stephan (correctly pronouncing it as *Stef-FAWN*). I'll let him know you're here, he told us. We stood there a moment looking around at the vineyards, and said "hi" to a teenager trimming what appeared to be an ornamental vine, growing up a trellis in front of the winery. Stephan came out from inside the winery greeting us warmly, and called out to the teenager in French, with something that may have meant 'stop fooling around and get to work.' Ahh, probably Stephan's son, we thought. Stephan had literally just returned from a round trip drive to Los Angeles to meet with distributors, restaurants, etc. (and we think this is an easy business - 3 hrs one-way). He still seemed filled with energy - even after the drive, and asked us to hold on for just a few minutes while he greeted his wife who had just pulled up after picking up the kids from school. No problem, I said - we're on Paso time.

Selected Tasting Notes:

...from bottle...

2002 Stephan Ridge Roussanne - appealing yellow-gold color, lovely floral/fruity nose, very rich mouthfeel, big, tasty and rich, with a nice crispness to the long finish.

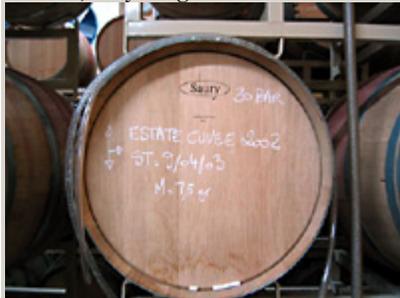
2000 Stephan Ridge Red Wine - 52% Syrah, 48% Cab. Loads of fruit - almost Zin-like in its effusive boysenberries fruit. Ripe and rich on the palate, with a long, if slightly warm finish. Very tasty!

2000 L'Aventure Zinfandel - (from Zenaida fruit) More medium, than full-throttle mouthfeel and texture on the palate, with touches of chocolate and black cherry accenting the raspberry and boysenberry fruit. The meaty flavor really adds to the tasty quality of this wine. 100% new oak (when I seemed surprised about the smoothness or imperceptible new-oak qualities, Stephan informed me this was a special toast). Stephan intends to sell off 80% of this wine, keeping only 1 barrel for his own Stephan Ridge program. So, the last L'Aventure Zin will be the '02.

2000 L'Aventure Optimus - 50% Cab, 40% Syrah, 5% Petite Verdot, 5% Zin. Hint of beet and/or iodine hiding behind the cassis and toast scents, but the Cab qualities seem to predominate here. Mouthfeel is slightly steely and firm, yet beautifully fruit driven. Nice use of oak - nothing obtrusive, just smooth toasty aroma and flavor. Fascinated about the inclusion of Petite Verdot, Stephan told me that use of this grape was originally suggested to him by Michel Rolland.

2001 L'Aventure Syrah - Delicious, though slightly pinched on the back end, where it seems to fade out smoothly. Blackberry, both red and black licorice flavors, long finish. Blend of 60% westside, 20% estate, 20% eastside.

2001 L'Aventure Estate Cuvee - 50% Cab, 30% Petite Verdot, 20% Syrah. Complex, seductive scents of red and black fruit, lots of mocha, and a touch of herbs. What a treat on the palate. Just flat out delicious! Chewy and rich, smooth texture, very long finish. Excellent!



...from barrel...

2002 L'Aventure Syrah - Fascinating floral, blueberry, and light tarry aromas. Smooth and rich in mouthfeel, very concentrated, tasty long finish.

2002 L'Aventure Optimus - Somewhat floral scent to the thick fruit. Thick and rich on the palate, this seems more intense and concentrated than the '01 was from bottle.

2002 L'Aventure Estate Cuvee - 50% Syrah, 45% Cab, 5% Petite Verdot. Dense and concentrated in the nose, with lots of dark fruit, tar and toasty aromas. Quite chewy, and though well balanced, this was definitely an in-your-face wine, that is currently at 17% alcohol. Production: 30 barrels.

2002 L'Aventure Cabernet Sauvignon - Very toasty nose of cassis and herbs. Very rich and smooth on the palate, with a touch of mocha/toffee adding to the dark cherry. Tannic in mouthfeel, but the oak seems very well-managed.

2002 L'Aventure Estate Syrah - Sweet, ripe, and massively fruity in the nose. Mouthfeel is dense and largely monolithic right now - almost more Petite Sirah-like. Given the rest of his '02s, this ought to be killer stuff.

We were standing there admiring the view of the hilly terrain, when Stephan returned and asked if we minded if he gave us his "blah, blah, blah" speech before we went to taste some wines. Sure, we said. Not only did we expect to get whole story - we actually *wanted* it. Stephan recalled how he'd spent 17 years establishing himself with his family vineyards in Bordeaux, but felt the urge to create something in the New World, something without all the constraints of bureaucratic tradition, things like *Appellation Controlle*.



Stephan Asseo

Arriving in Paso in 1998, he began looking for a place to start anew with his family. He found his L'Aventure in the last parcel he visited. Using a backhoe to examine the limestone soil composition, he confirmed that this was indeed the place he wanted. Despite the absence of vines, and only a house on the property, after Stephan saw the *terroir* he easily visualized the potential.

After purchasing the parcel on Live Oak Road, Stephan planted vines - lots of vines. He put in about 2,100 vines per acre - probably three times more density than usual. He planted most vines with a north-south facing, and was intent on striking a balance between ripeness and brix. On the steep hillsides, he planted Cabernet with southwest facing rows, and other varieties facing to the east in order to get what he felt would be more "elegant" qualities. Stephan's vision of "Rhône meets Bordeaux" was beginning to take hold, although he still had to actually build a winery.

Stephan feels that 80% of the winemaking effort takes place in the vineyard, considering himself a vigneron, rather than merely a winemaker. On the 126 acre parcel, Asseo currently has 30 acres under vine, with near-term plans to plant up to 55 acres. About 40% is Cabernet, with 30% Syrah, and 15% each Mourvedre and Petite Verdot, as well as a very small amount (1 acre) of Grenache. Curious about the Petite Verdot, I asked where he got the idea. He explained that he had written the renown Michel Rolland, explaining that he was going to be planting in Paso, and asked for recommendations. Petite Verdot was the answer. I couldn't agree more. I've tried 100% Petite Verdots that mesmerized me, and I was glad to see someone validate their usage here.



Stephan Asseo's goal is to be 100% Estate, figuring this will take from 6-7 years to achieve. As part of that plan, he has started to produce a high-end Estate Cuvee (\$75), a blend of Cabernet, Syrah and Petite Verdot. In further refining his estate wine program, Stephan doesn't intend to bottle any vineyard designations, and will ultimately be abandoning both Chardonnay and Zinfandel - although abandoning Zin is tantamount to heresy in these parts. The last L'Aventure Zinfandel will be the '02.

We had continued chatting as we made our way back to the barrel room, and even as Stephan started opening up a half-dozen wine bottles. Starting with the Stephan Ridge Roussanne and Red blend, and then segued into the L'Aventure wines. All very nice, especially the new Estate Cuvee. Moving from bottles to barrels, Stephan explained that he picks the final blends for both the Optimus and the Cuvee about 10 months before bottling. He uses only new oak for the L'Aventure label (80% of his 1-yr old barrels are sold off - 20% are kept for the Stephan Ridge line). I was surprised to hear that this was all new oak, because the wine's smoothness didn't seem to show any perceptible new-oak qualities. Stephan explained that this was a special toast, one that was very light - but done over an extended period of time.

As we were chatting about the barrels, something about them caught my eye. Looking closer, I noticed that there appeared to be small pinholes drilled into the heads and stave ends of some of the barrels. In some cases, they were plugs fitted into the holes. And, in a few instances, it appeared that the tiny hole may have caused a wine leak. Curious, I asked what was going on here. Stephan said that some sort of wood-loving bug was boring into the oak - indicating it was pretty common in here in Paso. Seemed like an annoying little pest to have around.

Stephan very graciously credits the friendship of his neighbor Marc Goldberg of Windward Vineyards, with easing the transition to Paso Robles. Marc's the primary (and maybe the only) Pinot producer in Paso, and he makes a very nice wine. It seems apparent that nearly all growers/winemakers have a common bond with each other, a bond that allows them to ignore that they are essentially competitors. In fact, Marc continues to pour Asseo's wines at the Windward tasting room. As we chatted about how Paso's reputation was becoming very well known, Stephan asked if we'd heard about the efforts of a select group of 9 westside growers/wineries that had banded together to form a group called the 'Grand Crew.' I hadn't, so he gave me a classy brochure that they'd produced. It's largely a trade group, but this type of association can often lead to something much bigger. Either way, Paso has arrived!

We had a great visit. Unfortunately, all good things must end, and we had to be moving along - we still had one more stop to make, and Stephan and family were going bowling! Yes, HdR's infamous Rhône n' Bowl.

