

# Los Angeles Times

## California adventure

### Matters of Taste

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It was 1997 and Stephan Asseo, having made wine in his native Bordeaux for 17 years, was growing restless, grumpy, tired and distracted, and he knew exactly why. Six years earlier, hail and frost had destroyed most of his grapes, and to make ends meet since then, he'd taken consulting jobs with 10 other wineries.

But Asseo is a hands-on winemaker, a husky, 6-foot, 175-pounder with strong, laborer's hands and a tan that comes from time spent outdoors, with the vines and the soil.

Working the vineyard, physically making the wine — those are his passions. But suddenly, in Bordeaux, he was finding himself "spending more and more time in my car, doing business and public relations ... and spending less and less time in the vineyard," he tells me over lunch in Brentwood.



He wanted to start over, "to find a new challenge and new excitement, to be in charge of my grapes and myself again," he says, his cobalt-blue eyes flashing.

Asseo read up on winemaking in Chile and Argentina. He visited vineyards in Spain and South Africa and Lebanon. He tasted wines from all over the world, and soon realized that the ones he liked best — those he now wanted to make — were blends, not just one-grape varieties.

"In Bordeaux," he says, "we drink only Bordeaux. In Burgundy, they drink only Burgundy. That's the French way. But everywhere I went, people were drinking a wide variety of wines — and most of the wines were blends, not just Cabernet or just Pinot."

Asseo decided to leave France.

With a wife and three school-age children, he found that as he explored his alternatives, the United States looked like the right choice.

"California represents freedom, the chance to experiment, to make the kinds of New World blends that would be impossible in Bordeaux," he says.

But early visits to Napa and Sonoma were discouraging; he couldn't find land that he liked and that was affordable. He was equally disappointed as he worked his way south through other winemaking areas — until he got to Paso Robles. He didn't know that Paso — as it's called by locals — was about to become one of the state's hottest winemaking regions. What he did know, instantly, was that it looked and felt perfect.

"The soil there had the limestone and clay I wanted," he recalls, "and my wife and I fell in love with the terroir."

And so began his American adventure.

"We visited 60 different sites in Paso and used a backhoe in most of them to check the soil," he says. "We dug holes as deep as 15 feet at some sites before we picked our property."

Asseo bought 126 acres. He figures about half of that is usable; by the end of this year, he expects to have 56 of those acres planted to produce the five wines he makes under the label L'Aventure (The Adventure).

In Bordeaux, as a consultant to wineries miles apart, he never felt he could devote the time necessary to each vineyard — "each baby," as he came to think of them — but in Paso Robles, all his babies are in the same area, under his direct supervision, and like a proud father, he grins broadly every time he talks about them.

### **True to the grape**

My favorite among his babies is his Estate Cuvée, the 2002 vintage of which was released last month. The blend is 50% Syrah, 45% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot. The 700 cases he made sell for \$75 a bottle.

During our lunch at Zax, we drink his 2001 Estate Cuvée with — of all things for a \$75 wine — a thick, juicy hamburger. It's a perfect match — a big, hearty burger and a big, hearty wine.

L'Aventure also produces 1,500 cases of a wine called Optimus — 47% Cabernet, 45% Syrah, 5% Zinfandel and 3% Petit Verdot; the 2001 vintage, released last month, is \$45.

"Optimus means 'the best,' " Asseo says, "but the name is also a wink at Opus and Dominus," two of California's best Meritage wines, both made by Franco-American partnerships.

Asseo's third L'Aventure blend is Côte-à-Côte (Side by side), which is 60% Grenache and 40% Syrah. The 2002 vintage — 150 cases — is \$65 a bottle. In addition, Asseo has two single-varietal bottlings, an estate Syrah and an estate Cabernet (250 cases each, \$60 a bottle) and, under a second, Stephan Ridge label, an 800-case blend that's 70% Syrah and 30% Cabernet; it costs \$15 a bottle.

L'Aventure wines have already won good reviews — scores in the low 90s from Robert Parker and the Wine Spectator. But Asseo, at 44, remains his own toughest critic. He's made five vintages of Zinfandel, and even though the most recent, the 2002, got a 90-point Parker rating, he says it's the last one he's going to make.

"The soil and climate in Paso produce Zins that taste more like Port than Zinfandel, and I want to be true to the grape," he says.

He made four vintages of Chardonnay before also abandoning that varietal after the 2001 vintage.

"It was lean, more like Chablis than the big taste Californians like in their Chardonnays," he says. "I couldn't sell it."

Maybe he was just ahead of his time. There's a nascent movement underway in California to make those steely, minerally, Chablis-like Chardonnays and to get away from the over-oaked, overly buttery Chardonnays that have given the varietal a bad name.

Instead, Asseo has turned his white wine interests to Rhône varieties — Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier — and, as with his red wines, he's looking to make blends with these grapes.

Clearly, Asseo likes to experiment. Although blending Cabernet and Syrah is widespread in Australia and southern France, it's still relatively uncommon here.

"I like the complexity of a blend," he says. "Mourvèdre has the same kind of softening effect on Syrah in Paso that Merlot does for Cabernet in Pomerol. It's a challenge to figure out the percentages in these wines, to balance the power of the Cab, say, and the feminine exuberance and finesse of Syrah and the elegance of Petit Verdot in my Estate Cuvée."

### **Shaking things up**

Petit VERDOT is traditionally a blending grape, especially in Bordeaux, where it seldom contributes more than 8% to 10% of a given wine's encépagement, or blend (although it's often as much as 15% at Château Kirwan in Margaux). Asseo has joined a small but growing number of California vintners now using a greater percentage of Petit Verdot. What he called "my joker" made up 30% of his 2001 Estate Cuvée. Then, he had trouble in his Petit Verdot vineyards.

However, that trouble was mild, compared with what happened at 11:16 a.m. Dec. 22, when an earthquake struck Paso Robles. More than 200 L'Aventure barrels toppled as a result of the temblor, and 20 of them — 500 cases of wine — were destroyed.

"It took a month to fix all the cracks in the winery and to repair the barrels and clean everything up," Asseo says. "My mobile home also fell over and had to be repaired."

### **Mobile home?**

"I told my wife and kids when we moved here that they had to give me two or three years to get the winery going, and then I'd build them a beautiful house, the house of our dreams." He pauses, sheepishly. "It's been six years. We're still living in the mobile home. Every dollar I make goes into improving the vineyards and the production facilities. In three or four years, I'll be able to make all my wine from my own grapes, and then I won't have to buy any more grapes from anyone.

"Then," he says, "I'll build the dream house."

Unless, of course, his winemaking muse has other ideas.