

Swirl WINE NEWS

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The Swirl Set



Stephan Asseo - Vigneron, Stephan Vineyards/L'Aventure

Winery

Stephan Asseo, former owner of the Domaine de Courteillac winery in Entre-Deux-Mers, Bordeaux, brought his 15 years of winemaking experience to the emerging Paso Robles, CA winemaking region in 1998. There, he combines his passion for tradition and experimentation with an appreciation for terrior and technology. Stephan grows grapes indigenous to Bordeaux as well as Rhône varietals, and sells his wine under the L'Aventure and Stephan Ridge labels.

Swirl spoke with Stephan (over a glass of his 2002 Roussanne) about his personal and professional journey, and his views on life and winemaking in Paso Robles.

How did your wine journey begin?

I purchased my first wine property in 1982 in Bordeaux. My first vintage was 1982, and 2003 will be my 21st, so now I have 21 years of winemaking and growing experience. I'm a city boy, born in Paris, but I've wanted to be an agricultural guy since I was young. It's a passion. My parents were a little bit scared; we had no [farming] roots in our family and their kid wanted to be a farmer! Buy my Dad said "OK, if you want to become a farmer and live in the country - you could grow some cereal, but maybe making wine and winegrowing would be more noble." So he oriented me more towards this track than another one. Slowly, I discovered the world of wine and fell in love with it. I did an internship and then [attended] a school in Macon, Burgundy where I learned winemaking and growing.

Was there an event when you were a young boy in Paris that sparked your wine interest?

Both my mother and father were wine lovers in the French tradition, where food and wine is a way of life. Maybe I was educated subconsciously with that around.

What was it about life and winemaking in Bordeaux that motivated you to look elsewhere?

I did 17 vintages in Bordeaux. In France you have regulations like Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), which means that everything that is not [specifically] allowed is forbidden. The weather isn't consistent like it is in California, so each vintage is a new story. That means you put yourself in question every year. That's what I love about this job, even in California! But after 17 years in Bordeaux, I had the impression that I'd done my time, more or less. At the end, when the success arrived, I was doing more PR - like restaurant lunches with buyers - than doing what I really love in this job.

On top of my own property in Bordeaux, I had a small consulting company, which meant a crazy schedule. So, my family was ready to make a move! We thought about Spain, South Africa, Australia, and America. Finally, we decided on California, because what I love about winemaking and growing here is that you still have no legislation about production. It's a free field of experimentation.

I've seen you referred to as a "renegade." What's that all about?

Maybe the word is too strong, but I'm a renegade because I'm doing something that's not very conventional. My idea when I came to Paso Robles was to not make a copy of something that already existed. I don't want to make a copy of a Rhône blend, I don't want to make a copy of Bordeaux. I was ready to adapt myself to the new terrior, to the new weather, to my new location. I make a Cabernet-Syrah blend, which is completely unusual, but with a touch of Zinfandel and a touch of Petit Verdot. I've spoken of it as a "bastard" blend, which is not very politically correct, but my focus is to make a blend that's representative of Paso Robles, specifically the west side of Paso Robles.

How did you choose the varietals that you grow?

First, because of the climate and the terrior. I don't try to add to nature, to do what the market wants. I try to make the best of what nature is giving to me. After making what I think is the best, I try to put that on the market. It's not a marketing approach, it's not a businessman's approach. It's a vigneron approach. I try to find the best balance between the growing cycle for each variety. Most of my varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon, Mouvedre, Grenache, Syrah and Petit Verdot, have a longer cycle of maturation. The longer the cycle of the maturation, the more complexity you have in your fruit.

Blending is truly a wonderful mix of art and science. How do you approach blending in your wines?

My blending starts in the field, where I have the different varieties growing. My goal is not to make a "style" - I'm not a wine factory. Each vintage has its own personality; my goal is to find the best wine for the vintage. Three or four months after the harvest, when the wines start to be finished, I try 20 different combinations in a first blind tasting. This first selection is to say: "That's fantastic, that will go to L'Aventure" (my first brand) "and that will go to Stephan Ridge" (my second label). [Ultimately] I make a selection of 8-10 combinations and organize a second blind tasting with some friends, and not just winemakers. I want a spectrum of sensitivity that is bigger than just professionals! The winner of this last test - although it's me that has the final decision - is the Optimus, my flagship wine.

You've been recognized with high critical "scores" for your wines. What do you think about the whole concept of "grading" wines?

I'll give you the [same] answer that I give my customers when they come to the winery. First, I am a vigneron, so I'm making wine with my terrior, not making a wine for a market. When I make a bottle, I imagine my wine being enjoyed with some food, with some people, and not just being judged like a tasting wine. We need journalists like they need us; it's a kind of partnership. From my point of view as a producer, we don't have to go so far to make wines that they love. I make no concessions about what I like and they like it, too. If I was just hunting a score, I know the recipe to make wine that will get a big score. But I try to be authentic with myself. Wine has to stay drinkable, so I try to make wine that is drinkable.

What do you drink when you're not working so hard?

For me, wine is a way of life. It's a way to share good times and good food. When I left Bordeaux and tasted the first California wine, I found those wines too much, too ripe. Today, I drink more California wine than European wine. Now, when I go back to France and retest Bordeaux wines, I find them a bit austere, not ripe enough. I need some time to re-adapt my palate and my mind. So we change, you know!

What was the last glass of wine you had?

It was a nice bottle of Linne Calodo from Paso Robles. It's a small, small winery run by Matt Trevisan. He doesn't have his own vineyard, but purchases good fruit.