



## TO BE A HUMAN

- Andy Peay, Wine Guy

I vividly recollect the feeling unfolding in my mind in the late fall of 1998 as I drove our new John Deere tractor down the long rows of Chardonnay. It felt not so much that *I* was the one sitting atop the tractor casting seeds and raking them into the freshly tilled topsoil. No, I had a surreal feeling I was a protagonist from a novel set in rural America I had read as an undergraduate English major. A Steinbeck story, no doubt. Those stories always ended badly for humans. Well, they usually started badly, too. Bleak. Tortured beings as unforgiving and uncommunicative as the poor dirt they banged their head against. Life doomed at birth. Was this me? Was this my fate? How did I get here when I thought I had stepped off the conveyor belt of conventionality and *routine* by leaving Wall Street to backpack across Southeast Asia to see how others lived and maybe find a path of my own choosing? Yet here I was four years later, preparing the newly planted vineyard for the oncoming winter rains dressed in faded Carthartts and broken Blundies. As I drove another long row at 3 mph, I felt a dread that I had chosen a path that was difficult and often tragic. Hail and windstorms stripped plants bare the night before what would have been a bountiful harvest. Infestations slowly ate away at crops and farmers' souls as they watched helplessly from a busted porch. Drought. Bank seizures. Why in gods' names had a boy raised in the Cleveland suburbs chosen to go into farming?! Ah, right, *wine*.



Those who have known me since high school or college are aware I always had a fancy for a beer or three as a young lad. Back then it was all a means to good fun and to fuel camaraderie. I wasn't a beer snob. The concept of a beer aficionado was nascent in the late 80's and I would splurge on a German Dunkel or our local Catamount ale on occasion but mostly as a poser. Focusing on what was in my glass did not really start in earnest until I washed up on the west coast and was living in Berkeley in 1994 trying to figure out what color my parachute might be (with credit to Richard Nelson Bolles who wrote the book of the same title.) My brother Nick would drive up from Santa Cruz where he made wine to brew beer with me in my in-law apartment. He would bring wine and beermaking supplies and I would cook and spin new jazz records I'd picked at the Ashby flea market. Those of you who have made beer know it takes quite a bit of time, and that leaves room for talking and eating and drinking and, generally, getting to know the person you are brewing with. That is how I got to know my brother, who is four years my senior, and for various reasons was not really a major character in my life until this time in my early twenties. These

occasions were when I was introduced to wine as something a little different from the Monte Antico my dad poured most nights for dinner or the coddled bottles that emerged from their cellar that my mom had picked up at Sherry Lehman's in Manhattan. Instead, Nick would open multiple bottles and enthusiastically tell stories about the people and places where these wines hailed from. Each was a discovery for me. A new grape variety, a new region. He often would jump down deep rabbit holes of geological or enological (or god forbid organic chemistry-ical) detail that would leave my slightly fuzzy brain under a mink coat of confusion. His enthusiasm was infectious. I wanted to see these places, taste their wines, meet the people who felt that their bit of dirt was the best place to make that wine. This was a vast world full of discovery with more questions than answers. I wanted in!

Sensing he had a fish nibbling his hook, Nick directed me to work a harvest. In 1995 I went up to Spring Mountain to labor for the superb people at Cain Vineyards and in the late fall I took a job at a wine shop in San Francisco so I would be exposed to a lot more wine. As the green sales rep at an Australian-focused wine shop, the wine distributor sales reps would home-in on me and pour me all the wines the head buyer would never buy. I would bike home with a dozen half open bottles in my backpack to share with my roommates at night. I joined tasting groups (3 per week at one point) exploring all the regions of Burgundy in one, the wines of Italy in another, and American wines for the third. I learned Chardonnay from one region could taste completely different than Chardonnay from another. Further, Chardonnay from the same exact vineyard would taste different based on the vintage and/or the age of the wine when I drank it. Huh? Cool, I would not tire in this field. I was hooked! Nick and I would proudly make California wine that spoke of place and at a quality level commensurate with the best wines of the world.



There was only one problem. I pretty much only drank European wine at this juncture in my life. I did not like the bombastic, fruit forward, souped up wines coming out of California in the 80s and 90s. Those wines spoke of ego – “have you met muckity muck cult winemaker X” - and process – “ahem, 100% ML, and let me tell you ad nauseum about my barrels.” That was not what thrilled me. I was intrigued by discovering what a *place* tasted like. I liked wines that told the narrative of the people, the culture, and the physical place. Where people growing the grapes and making the wine knew they had something unique to reveal in their wines. To obscure this narrative body under a wardrobe of easily manufactured winemaking flavors was not only a sin, but worse, uninteresting.

Nick assured me that we could make wines of place in California, that indeed a handful of people were already doing it. We just needed to stray from the elysian fields and valleys of

inland northern California wine country to the rocky, chilly coastline. California sun brought forth the bounty of fruits and vegetables that fed most of the country, but the sun also brought all the sugar and fruit concentration that made the powerful, monochromatic, flabby wines I disliked. If we wanted site expressive wines with moderate alcohol, bright acidity, tension, and flavor complexity we needed to hide from the California sun and embrace the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The rest of the story can be found on our web site but, as you well know, we eventually found a piece of land on the coast and were the first to plant grapes in the colder northern reaches of what is now the West Sonoma Coast AVA. Looking back, we have had tremendous critical and, at most times, financial success. Currently, we are experiencing challenges to a degree not unlike the ones I imagined while riding on the tractor. Farming challenges aside, this is a tough time to make fine wine. Heck, it's a tough time to make alcohol. Period. But wine is not just alcohol. It speaks of a singular season and, in the most evocative examples, of one place. Only an estate winegrower can make wine from their grapes and that result is singular. When we drink that wine, the unique sensory impressions are a catalyst and trigger emotions and memories from instances when we have had it before or smelled something similar to it. The wine, and the story behind it, become part of the fabric that clothes us and using our senses and our mind gives our life texture and meaning. I do not think we are doomed as a family business or as an industry. At least I hope not. If so, the loss will be greater than just our individual dream but nothing short of an important factor in what it means to be a human.

