

wine country



# FULL CIRCLE

## FOUR WINEMAKERS RETOOL FOR THE FUTURE

By David Cable

Photos by Mehosh Dziadzio



Too the benefit of wine drinkers, recent changes have been welcome: (left to right) Ken Brown of Ken Brown Winery; Thekla and Richard Sanford of Alma Rosa Wines; Bruno D'Alfonso of Di Bruno and Badge Wines

In the world of wine, change is a constant. It is in the nature of the business. Winemakers are faced with a different product with each new vintage, as every year has different weather patterns which affect the grapevines and contribute different nuances to the wines. In addition, wine's popularity changes periodically due to economic factors, social events, and the seemingly fickle whim of the buying public. What was the popular wine last year isn't necessarily the top wine this year.

And like vintages, winemakers also experience changes with each year—some subtle and some dramatic.

#### **RICHARD & THEKLA SANFORD, ALMA ROSA WINERY**

Not many people on the local wine scene go back as far as Richard and Thekla Sanford. The Sanfords were instrumental in planting the Sanford & Benedict Vineyard along Santa Rosa Road in 1971, making it one of the oldest vineyards in Santa Barbara County and establishing Sanford Winery as a local standard. The Sanfords also made local history by establishing the first certified organic vineyards in the area.

In 2002 Richard and Thekla had outgrown their old winery and decided to build a new winery just down the road on the grounds of one of the best new vineyards in the area, La Rinconada. (You probably recognize this name since it has produced several 90+ point Pinots over the past few years.)

The winery was an organic, state-of-

the-art facility. Its walls were constructed of adobe bricks that were created on site, while the beams supporting the roof were created from 100-year-old reclaimed lumber. They found a defunct sawmill in Washington State, trucked down some old growth timbers that were still in inventory, and set up a sawmill across the road to mill down the huge timbers so they could build with them. The doors were also made from that heavy lumber and, when closed, helped to keep the winery and barrel room cool from the warm afternoon air. They found a local spring and tapped into it bringing free-flowing, pure water down into the winery. A dozen open-topped fermenters were set up and linked to two tanks that could be raised and lowered to below ground level to delicately drain the pinot noir juice from the fermenters. (Pinot, especially, does not like to be pumped, so it was very important to transport the juice by gravity.)

After building the new facility, the winery looked for some additional capital. In 2002, the investment partners in Sanford Winery turned to the Chicago-based Terlato Wine Group and Paterno Wine Imports, for an influx of money. Terlato bought in and rapidly increased their shares until they had controlling interest in the winery.

Unfortunately, a series of events came about to cause the withdrawal of Richard Sanford as the figurehead of the winery. First, September 11 occurred and caused a drastic decline of restaurant use and restaurant wine consumption. There

were also some disappointing crops as far as quality and quantity. The 2003 Pinot Noir yield was very small (approximately half the yield of a normal vintage). There was also a significant difference in philosophy between the Sanfords and the investors. Terlato decided that going back to "conventional" farming would help the bottom line, which meant abandoning their organic designation. This was not something that Richard Sanford could compromise on.

The split finally came late in the year of 2005. Richard and Thekla Sanford left the winery that they had created and given their name.

Fortunately, four years earlier, Richard & Thekla had planted 115 acres of vineyards, just a bit further down the road, with the idea of selling grapes back to Sanford Winery. When the split came and the Sanfords left the winery, they used these new vineyards to create a new winery, Alma Rosa. These vineyards are, of course, still farmed organically, and the Sanfords are continuing their commitment to sustainable farming, sustainable winery operations and their uncompromising philosophies.

#### **BRUNO D'ALFONSO, DI BRUNO, BADGE**

Sanford Winery's longtime winemaker was Bruno d'Alfonso. Bruno had been instrumental, over the years, in producing some of the best Sanford wines ever made. From 1991 through 1999 their La Rinconada, Sanford & Benedict, and Barrel Select Pinot Noirs were high in

*(continued on page 72)*

## wine country

(continued from page 49)

the ratings charts, scoring into the 90s from major wine critics.

Shortly after Richard Sanford left Sanford Winery, Bruno decided to leave as winemaker. He is continuing to make wines under the Di Bruno label (Pinot Grigio and Sangiovese) along with making a Sangiovese for Beth Vandale. He has also released another vintage of Pinot Noir under the Badge label. This wine that is now in its second vintage and is reminiscent of the Sanford La Rinconada Pinot Noir of a few years ago.



### **KEN BROWN, KEN BROWN WINES**

Ken Brown (technically Byron Kent Brown) had one of those life changing experiences in 1976 when he met Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict and tasted one of their first Pinot Noirs from their new vineyard. Smitten by the wine bug, he accepted an offer to become Zaca Mesa Winery's first winemaker in 1977.

As founding winemaker, Ken had the opportunity to help design the winery, select the winemaking equipment and set the standards. His wines were highly acclaimed and he was one of a handful of winemakers to catapult Santa Barbara County into an established appellation. As he worked at Zaca Mesa, Ken hired a series of assistant winemakers, whose list now reads as a virtual who's who of the Santa Barbara County's wine scene.

In 1984, Ken left to establish the Byron Winery in Santa Maria Valley with his wife Deborah and several partners. For 20 years he experimented with the potential of Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County, working with different clones, rootstocks, terrior, and winemaking techniques and establishing Byron Winery as one of

the forces in the region consistently producing high-quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Though Ken sold the winery to Mondavi in January of 1990, he stayed on to run operations. In 2003 he formed the Ken Brown Winery and in 2004 stepped down from Mondavi to give full attention to Ken Brown Wines. Ken sold to the Mondavi family originally because they had the same vision that he did for the potential of Pinot Noir in Santa Maria Valley. It was not until the Mondavi family began selling all of their brands that he decided to take his fate once again into his own hands. As Ken notes, "Life has a way of coming full circle."

It may be back to his roots, but he is still producing premium quality wines under the Ken Brown label, releasing Pinot Noirs from Santa Barbara County, Santa Rita Hills, Bien Nacido Vineyard and Clos Pepe Vineyard, and a Chardonnay from Santa Rita Hills.

#### **KEN VOLK, KENNETH VOLK VINEYARDS**

Ken Volk is a local California boy who discovered winemaking when, as a Cal Poly student, he worked a crush at nearby Edna Valley Vineyards. Shortly thereafter, in 1981, Ken and the Volk family established the Wild Horse Winery in the Paso Robles area. Over the next 22 years he would establish this as a household brand and would increase winery production from 600 to 150,000 cases. Like others, attracting the interest of corporate winemaking, Ken sold the winery in 2003 to Peak Wines International, a division of Jim Beam Brands Worldwide.

In another full-circle move, Ken bought the original Byron Winery facility from the Robert Mondavi Corporation, returning it to local ownership. In 2006 he released his first Kenneth Volk wines with a Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Santa Barbara County's Santa Maria Valley and a Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon from the Paso Robles appellation. (His Cabernet, for example, comes from the Carmody McNight Vineyard, which is literally right next door to the much-touted Justin Vineyards, just being separated by a fence line.)

While Santa Barbara Burgundy varieties are the focus of Kenneth Volk Vineyards, Ken's Bordeaux varietals are sourced from the top westside vineyards of Paso Robles.

Each of these winemakers were instrumental in forming the local wine scene. Though, in recent years, events moved them to start over and create something new, in all cases they were changes for the better: Richard and Thekla, Bruno, Byron, and Ken, are producing as good (if not better) wines than they ever have before. ■

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