

Winemaker Ken Brown

Q & A WITH LESLIE A. WESTBROOK

Since 1977—from Zaca Mesa to Bryon (Byron Kent Brown is his full name) to Ken Brown wines—legendary winemaker and third-generation Californian Ken Brown has been turning out noteworthy Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah wines. Soft-spoken and immensely knowledgeable, Ken Brown's legendary Pinot Noirs show the terroir from the finest vineyards in the Santa Rita hills. His total annual production is about 3,000 cases, making the highly respected wines from his boutique winery ones to be savored and appreciated. Ask many well-known winemakers in the valley about Ken Brown and you might be surprised to discover that they learned quite a bit about their craft under his mentorship. The delightful Mr. Brown was kind enough to answer some questions for *Food & Home* readers recently.

LAW: How did you get interested in the noble grape? Was there an “aha” moment for you?

Ken Brown: My interest in the noble grape began through a friend of my father's who grew up in an Italian family that owned a vineyard near Lodi. The family's grapes were often sold to wineries in Napa Valley during the 1940s and 50s. My father's friend got to know some of the early winemaking pioneers, since he delivered their family grapes to these wineries. I told him that I was planning to visit wineries in Napa Valley and asked if he would give me a few recommendations. These visits turned out to be definitely “aha” moments, since I quickly became enamored with the lifestyle and stories of these winemaking families. From that moment, I was hooked.

LAW: Why do some wines soar?

Brown: I became an early student of wine and attempted to understand why some wines stood out and others did not. The one question I always asked was, “What do you think makes this particular wine so special?” The answers usually varied to some degree but ultimately the best winemakers all seemed to be very focused on never compromising when it came to grape growing and winemaking. I think of it as precision winegrowing.

LAW: What are some of the highlights of your many years of learning about wines?

Brown: I have had the very good fortune to have visited many wineries in France, Germany and Italy during trips to the great wine growing regions of Europe. Whether in Europe or in



this country, winemakers from around the world have a common bond and that usually means a sharing of winegrowing ideas and techniques. This fellowship amongst winemakers is something that clearly separates winemaking from most other professions.

LAW: I read about an Italian winemaker who is playing Mozart to his grapes? Any thoughts on that?

Brown: I prefer Rachmaninoff for Syrah, but agree with Mozart for Pinot Noir. However, I find it preferable just to show up in the vineyards on a regular basis, so the vines know that I care.

LAW: You and your wife, Deborah Brown, founded Ken Brown Wines in 2003 and have a tasting room on Hwy 246 in Buellton that opened two years ago. What's the best part about waking up every morning?

Brown: I know that there is an opportunity every day to discover something new that may help me to better understand how to best reflect the unique wine signature from each of the great Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah vineyards in Santa Barbara County. This journey will take many more years, which is why I have no plans to retire anytime soon.

LAW: What have you learned that has surprised you the most?

Brown: When we first started producing wines in Santa Barbara County in the 1970s, we felt that there was good potential for a range of varieties. As we stand back today and survey the vineyard scape, we now recognize that we underestimated the potential of almost all grape varieties. We really did not fully understand how cool much of the western part of Santa Barbara County is and attempted to plant Cabernet Sauvignon where Pinot Noir should have been planted.

LAW: What have you learned that you wish everyone else would learn/acknowledge?

Brown: The best wines come from winemak-

ers who spend time in their vineyards and understand the rhythm and nuances of the grapevines' growing cycle. Viticultural and harvesting decisions should not be made by a pre-determined plan, but made by routine observations of the condition of the vine's canopy, leaf color and signs of stress plus the appearance and condition of the grape cluster.

LAW: What do you look for in a wine from other winemakers that you want to add to your own personal collection/table?

Brown: A wine that captures complexity, character and sensuality in a seamless thread and which demands the taster's total focus and stimulates our intellectual properties, but other than this not much.

LAW: Any funny anecdotes around wine?

Brown: Maybe more strange than funny, but the fact that one movie (“Sideways”) could make Pinot Noir a glorified wine, and at the same time change the perception of Merlot into a common wine for the masses.

LAW: What do you think about wine snobs?

Brown: By definition they drink wine, which makes them a heck of a lot better than just normal snobs.

LAW: If you had to choose three wines for your “last supper” what would they be?

Brown: If it were truly my “last supper” and I was not alone and not paying for the wine, I would choose a 1.5L bottle from one of the best vintages and producers in Musigny, Montrachet, Hermitage, Barolo, and of course a bottle each of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Santa Barbara County's finest. It is important to always have a few extra bottles just in case!

Ken Brown Wines tasting room is open Thursday-Monday, 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m., and is located at 157 West Highway 246 in Buellton. Call (805) 688-9400 or visit kenbrownwines.com. Before or after tasting, pop into Industrial Eats (just three blocks away) for superb pizzas, unique salads, filling sandwiches and daily specials.