

KEN BROWN

Ken Brown (Byron Kent Brown) is recognized as one of Santa Barbara County's pioneering winemakers and innovators, making his mark on the region as the founding winemaker at Zaca Mesa Winery, owner and winemaker of Byron Vineyard & Winery, and owner and winemaker of Ken Brown Wines. He was among the first vintners to realize the tremendous promise for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in this cool-climate appellation beginning in the mid 1970s. He was also the first winemaker to introduce the Syrah grape, as well as Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, to Santa Barbara County.

A third-generation California native from Sacramento, Ken earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Linfield College in 1966. He pursued a career in sales with IBM and later in real estate development, but found his true passion to be wine, and took steps to transform that passion into a career.

Ken enrolled in the graduate enology program at California State University at Fresno in 1974. Unlike many other students at the time, he took both viticulture and enology courses to gain a broader perspective of winegrowing. While at Fresno State, Ken led the research program in the school vineyard and winery. He was approached by several growers from Santa Barbara County to help determine the commercial viability of wine grapes in Santa Barbara County and made wine from some of the county's earliest vineyards. Impressed and excited about the wine quality from these early plantings, Ken accepted an offer to become Zaca Mesa Winery's first winemaker in 1977.

As founding winemaker at Zaca Mesa, 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.

Lured by the appeal of making great Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Ken, with his wife, Deborah and several partners founded Byron Vineyard & Winery in 1984 in the little-known Santa Maria Valley of northern Santa Barbara County. Byron Winery enjoyed early success and gained national recognition for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Ken sold Byron Winery to the Robert Mondavi family in 1990. Ken and Tim Mondavi shared a mutual passion for Pinot Noir and felt that with their collective resources they could access its full potential. They embarked on an extensive experimental vineyard program featuring various rootstocks, clones and planting densities. As the new vineyards produced their first crops, the promise of high quality looked within reach and Ken and the Mondavis built a state-of-the art gravity winery in 1996 to provide the best possible winemaking environment for the fruit.

In early 2003, Ken felt inspired to renew his pursuit of Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County on his own and return to small scale production. With the benefit of more than 30 years experience in the region, Ken's goal in founding Ken Brown Wines was to focus on exceptional Pinot Noir from leading vineyards in the Sta. Rita Hills. The first Ken Brown Wines were released in 2005. Ken and Deborah's small, family-run winery produces 2,000 to 3,000 cases annually, a level that allows Ken to optimize the best sources of Pinot Noir with uncompromised winemaking. Ken still spends much of his time in the vineyards, tracking and assessing Pinot Noir plantings to ensure the best quality grapes are used for his wines. While Pinot Noir is the primary focus, Ken Brown Wines also produces limited bottlings of Syrah and Chardonnay.