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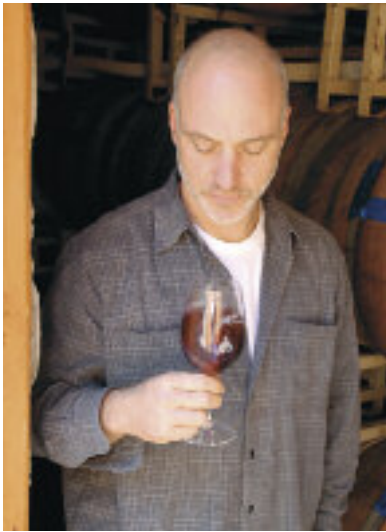
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# CASA BARRANCA: THE ART AND CRAFT OF MAKING GOOD “GREEN” WINE

BY LISA KRING



Can organic wine be good? That's the question Bill Moses, founder, owner and winemaker of Ojai's own Casa Barranca Winery, works tirelessly and daily to affirm. "I have always wanted to craft wines that are equal to taste, not subordinate to taste and health."

Sitting with him in the rich wood-paneled, Greene & Greene-built living room of Casa Barranca, one of five Arts

and Crafts-style bungalows on the Shangri-la-like grounds of his 14-acre historic Ojai estate, one feels thoroughly convinced that high ideals and sustainable values can marry seamlessly with elegant aesthetics. Taking in the majestic views overlooking Stewart Canyon offered through the many windows that circle the room, one feels housed within a holy shrine on sacred land.

Taking time away from the tedious work of bottling his '08 Viognier that morning, Bill all but collapsed into the Gustav Stickley rocker in front of the fireplace for a discussion about his organic wine journey. "I apologize, but I'm just a bit exhausted today...there is always so much to do, and I do most of it myself," he says.

In wine-stained jeans, sweatshirt and baseball cap, it is clear that Bill is the kind of winery owner who gets his hands dirty. Fatigue aside, Bill becomes animated when the talk turns to the many stories and events that have shaped his vision.

Hailing originally from Pittsburgh, he got his first taste of farming as a young child helping out in a neighbor's vegetable garden. "I'll never forget the taste of those tomatoes," he reminisces. While attending the University of Virginia, he spent some semesters abroad in the south of France, living with a French family who had a home vineyard. "It was definitely garage wine," he adds with a smile, "I cleaned up a lot."

But his exposure there helped cultivate a deep appreciation of the aesthetics of fine wine and culture. After earning degrees in psychology and theater, Bill headed off to New York with dreams of becoming a filmmaker. However, while

working as a back office clerk at a large investment-banking firm to support himself, he discovered a latent talent for finance and business. Gradually working his way up through the company, Bill eventually opened up his own firm. Merging his initial love of the creative arts with his business acumen, Bill found himself spearheading new media and theater projects in places such as China and South Africa in support of various civil rights movements.

By the mid 1990s, Bill was living the good life in a hard-won SoHo apartment in New York. However, something was missing. "I was growing things up on the roof, but more and more I wanted my hands and feet in the earth." Around this time, Bill also began taking a keen interest in all things Arts and Crafts, a turn-of-the-century movement that formed in reaction to the excesses and environmental blight caused by the industrial revolution. Through friends he learned that the Pratt House, as it was originally called in 1909, was on the market. Intrigued, he came west and instantly "fell in love with Ojai." He purchased the estate and, in the process, "changed my life."

From 1994 to 1998, he painstakingly restored the bungalows and the property, setting most of the stones himself. He connected deeply to the site, discovering that it had once been home to the Chumash Indians, and 5,000 years before that, to the pre-historic Oak Grove people. "Indian artifacts and remnants are all over the place here." For Bill, the site has a sacred kind of power. "A Black Hills Indian from South Dakota just walked onto the land one day, wanting to build a sweat lodge," he adds off-handedly, "so, of course, I said yes."

Drawing from his prior experiences in France, and with the support of local growers and farmers, it was not long before Bill planted an experimental home vineyard on the property. The hobby became more serious when he began making "Casa Barranca"-labeled wine at the Central Coast Wine Services facility under the guidance of Summerland and Cordon winemaker Etienne Terlinden. It was at CCWS that Bill reaffirmed his commitment to crafting organic wine. What he witnessed at the facility shocked him.

"Wine is a raw product. Many toxic substances are sprayed onto the grapes. They never get washed!" He shakes his head. "I didn't want that stuff in my body."

Supported by improvements in technology, as well as an open local wine community in which new ideas were shared and supported, Bill found that there was no excuse not to craft premium organic wine, once considered a contradiction



in terms. “Back in the ’70s, the ‘earthies’ who grew organic wine didn’t have the know-how, they were just concerned with health.” Organic wine became synonymous with poor quality. But, armed with a cadre of inspired friends in the burgeoning Central Coast boutique wine movement in the ’90s, all things were possible—even fine organic wine.

Bill’s Casa Barranca winery eventually found a home on the property after an ominous cue from the natural world. A bobcat family happened to fall into one of the two empty and neglected stone water cisterns on the property, built at the turn of the century with the original structures. Bill weighed his options and finally decided to build a ladder for their rescue. By the time he made it down into the deep empty well, he discovered that the father had cannibalized the cub and mother. Within minutes it was clear to Bill that a winery could be built on the property by converting the old cisterns. “After that, I just had to put a roof on it.”

Bill proceeded to painstakingly design and build a commercial winery on the property, excavating 15 feet down one side, and cutting through two feet of stone wall, all the while keeping the Greene & Greene design ethos in tact. Harnessing natural and sustainable practices, he insured that both the estate and the winery were drawing their water from a subterranean artesian spring and were also powered by solar energy. Not only that, with the creation of his home winery, Bill established the first certified organic winery in the Central Coast region. In the process, Bill went from producing 500 cases of wine at CCWS to 5,000. It was a big change and a huge commitment. He also became the winemaker. But Bill is confident that his business savvy, combined with his expertise and passion for natural wine, will successfully negotiate a “legacy” winery, as opposed to a fly-by-night rich man’s folly. “This is a really hard industry,” he emphasizes, “and I am planning on standing the test of time.”

It is time to taste the wine. We jump into our cars and drive down to the town center just down the hill to the privately managed Casa Barranca tasting room, sandwiched between a pharmacy and art galleries and boutiques. Casa Barranca produces nine wines, seven of which are vineyard designated and two that are value-driven blends. All are sourced from local organically farmed vineyards, and Bill has cultivated close relationships with the growers.

Bill places the wines up on the long wooden counter stretching along one side of the room. As we taste through the lineup, a few clearly stand out. The only white offered is a full-bodied 2007 Viognier, which Bill says is “very popular.”

Rich, exotic and brimming with tropical fruit, this is a white for those looking for lots of mouth-coating flavor. At \$20 per bottle, it is a great value. Next, a silky, richly textured 2007 Pinot Noir, from the excellent La Encantada Vineyard in the Santa Rita Hills, is noteworthy. Nicely balanced, with supple and integrated tannins, it is a classic expression of Santa Rita Hills terroir. Moving into the fuller-bodied reds, I get a thrill from the 2006 Harmon Vineyard Syrah. It is seductively wild and rustic, balancing deep bass notes of leather, earth and licorice with bright red fruit. At 13.3 percent alcohol, this is a Central Coast Syrah that delivers but doesn’t overwhelm. Finally, I am thoroughly impressed by the 2006 Paso Robles, French Camp Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. Like a proud papa, Bill is quick to report that it recently won the Double-Gold Medal—Best in Class at the 2008 San Francisco International Wine Competition. Integrated, elegant and expressive, this Cabernet will definitely hold up over time.

However, the real standout for me was the 2007 Arts and Crafts Red, an iconoclastic blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese from the French Camp Vineyard and the biodynamically farmed Haulier Vineyard, respectively. I take a deep smell and am instantly charmed. Literally brimming with life with floral and fruit aromatics, this wine practically dances in the glass. “Whoa, this is happy wine!” I laugh. On the palate, layered flavors abound, elegant yet playful.

Bill smiles and goes on to say that this was the only one of his wines that was not only organic, but completely sulfite-free, making it the most natural and healthy. Clearly, this bottling was the ultimate expression of Bill’s vision, both great and good for you. At \$20 per bottle, there was simply no downside.

As Bill puts the bottles away I ask him what is next for Casa Barranca. “Well, I am supportive of an AVA [American Viticultural Area] for Ojai,” he says, “and I’m also hoping to convince more local growers to farm organically.” It looks to be an uphill battle, when he goes on to explain that the glassy-winged sharpshooter, an insect that spreads the grapevine-devastating Pierce’s Disease, prevalent in the area is every farmer’s nightmare, even under commercial farming conditions.

“The economics of it all!” he says, throwing up his hands. However, one senses that it is only a matter of time. When “organic” wine gets this good, there seems to be no stopping the “green” growing movement in Ventura County.

**Lisa Kring** *lives in Los Angeles with her husband, two children, dog and biodynamically farmed home vineyard. She is a sommelier certified with the Master Court of Sommeliers, the International Sommelier Guild and the UCLA Vintage Program, but her passion for honest wines that taste of place is experienced most happily at a table with friends and good food. She is on the steering committee for Slow Food Los Angeles, and values and supports all products that are good, clean and fair.*