

Three young Sonoma County winemakers turning heads

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"God made only water, but man made wine."

—Victor Hugo

They were just kids when they first crossed paths with wine grapes and their mysterious powers. But the experience planted a seed in them, a dormant yearning that eventually became a calling for Erica Stancliff, Alison Crowe and Morgan Twain-Peterson. Today they're turning heads with their wines and showing the world what can be done in a short window of time.

Early sign of vintner talent

Erica Stancliff was 10-years-old when she first swirled a glass of merlot, took a sniff and then rattled off descriptors – "vanilla, cinnamon, blueberry, pie crust ... It kind of took a hold of me."

Vintner Paul Hobbs, a family friend, was at the house for dinner and he had uncorked the bottle.

"He just looked at me, then looked at my parents and said 'she needs to be a winemaker.'"

Stancliff, 29, now makes wine for Sonoma County's Trombetta Cellars and Furthermore Wines. But the horse-lover, wearing dusty brown leather riding boots, thought she wanted to be a veterinarian when she was in high school; she wasn't as certain as Hobbs of her fate.

"I shadowed my horse vet for a day," Stancliff said, laughing, "and I came to the startling realization that I'm terrified of needles and horse needles are massive, so that was off the table."

Next Stancliff gave political science a go, joining the speech and debate team at Sebastopol's Analy High School.

"I thought maybe I'd go into campaign management, but at a debate I realized some people could make an argument out of anything without believing in it," she said. "That's when I decided I could never work in politics."

Then came that life-changing walk in the vineyards.

"I was walking through a chardonnay vineyard right before harvest with Paul Hobbs and he started talking about the passion behind winemaking, making something with your hands that's a labor of love every year and it's different every year," Stancliff said. "When I took a winery tour at Fresno State, that's when it all kind of clicked and came into focus for me."

As for Stancliff's best accolade, she received 94 points from Virginie Boone of the Wine Enthusiast on her first commercial chardonnay, the Trombetta, 2014 Gaps Crown.

Stancliff credits her mom – Rickey Trombetta – for shaping her palate by growing up in a house filled with authentic Italian dishes.

"My grandfather was fresh off the boat from southern Italy," she said.

Being raised in a food-centric family, Stancliff said, is what makes her winemaking unique; she sees wine through a food-lover's lens. Her mother always had a garden ripe with herbs, vegetables and flowers, as well as orchards and blackberry bushes; she would harvest the garden to make dinner.

Italian fare included Calabrian risotto and pasta carbonara, and then there were the irresistible desserts, freshly picked blackberries and apples in cobblers and pies.

"In my winemaking I'm always thinking about what would go well with food," Stancliff said. "How would wine present itself at a table with friends and family?"

To that end, the winemaker is always searching for vineyard sites that maintain acid because it's one of the backbones of wine.

"I like finding that marriage of ripe fruit and acid – finding that match is what creates balance for me," she said. "Wine and food are meant to accentuate each other, but also draw a contrast."

Stancliff's favorite wine pairing to date is her Trombetta pinot noir coupled with salmon, drizzled lightly with a chipotle sauce.

The winemaker is excited to expand her food-savvy brands with new varietals, but she's also content with her progress.

"I've already gone much further than I thought I would pre-30-years old," Stancliff said. "I'm a winemaker for two amazing wineries, and I work with some of the best fruit this county has to offer."

A nose for grapes

Alison Crowe was 5-years-old when she was first fascinated by a grape, puzzled by its range in aromas and flavors. Her parents had taken her to Firestone Vineyard in Los Olivos.

"I knew a grape was a grape, but how does a grape get to smell like pineapple juice?" Crowe asked. "It was a watershed moment for me."

Today Crowe, 41, is the director of winemaking and partner for Napa-based Plata Wine Partners, a company that offers services that include accounting, sales and winemaking. She's the winemaker for Garnet in the \$30-range, and Picket Fence which sells for roughly \$10 a bottle.

Crowe looks like an urban farmer, clad in blue jeans, a shirt with a black vest and shoes with a 2 inch heel.

The winemaker grew up in Carpinteria, near Santa Barbara, with agriculture in her blood. One side of her family were cattle ranchers while the other grew avocados and citrus.

"I planted an herb garden when I was 12," Crowe said. "I was so curious and fascinated how a green growing thing could smell so wonderful."

By 17 Crowe knew she wanted to cultivate her fascination with growing things by becoming a winemaker. She was searching for something that embraced science, art and culture, but she had no romantic notions about winemaking.

"I knew it was hard work because of my background in agriculture," Crowe said. "It has long hours and uncertain outcomes ... also, there's lots to clean up. It's like being a glorified, microbial zoo keeper."

Crowe studied at UC Davis in the 1990s, earning two undergraduate degrees – Fermentation Science and Spanish. Later, in 2010, she returned and earned an MBA.

Today the winemaker's scores are often in the 90-92s at Wine Enthusiast and frequently appears in "Best Under \$20" lists and "Editor's Choice" articles. She was called out in Wine Enthusiast's "Best of 2014" issue for her 2012 Garnet Vineyards Monterey County Pinot Noir as a "Best Buy."

"Before I did my winemaking classes I signed up for harvest at Chalone Vineyard (in Soledad) and that's where I absolutely fell in love with winemaking," Crowe said. "I realized you're not just signing yourself up for a career but you're signing up yourself and your family for three months every year to be utterly crazy. Harvest is mentally and physically exhausting."

Today Crowe's tribe, living in a vintage 1898 house in Napa, seems up to the challenge of madcap harvests. It helps that her husband, Chris Purdy, their 4-year-old Bryce and 6-year-old William are also curious about her role as magician, transforming grapes into wine.

Crowe said her particular magic, what makes her unique as a winemaker, is that she's versatile and she understands the language of the grapes.

"I make delicate, aromatic dry whites to deep, dark reds to dessert wines and ports," Crowe said. "The depth and breadth forces you to really delve into every vineyard rather than carrying your preconceived notions of each project. The goal is to listen to the grapes and for them to speak through you ... I love being the authentic expression of the vineyard."

Crowe said what's critical is observing and developing a relationship with the vineyards and knowing how they communicate with you at different times of the year. For instance, when the leaves turn a light golden yellow, it signifies the leaves are starting to shut down.

"The leaves are telling you they've done their job and you need to be finalizing a pick date," she said.

Crowe, who makes wine out of a warehouse in Sonoma, said, "The glamor is in the grapes. If I had a big showplace on Hwy. 29, I probably couldn't sell my grapes for what I do."

The economics of wine intrigues Crowe as much as the winemaking, and eventually she said she expects to hold an executive level position, perhaps winery president or CEO.

"With a 360 view of the wine business, the actual growing and winemaking is only a small part of it ... in the world of consolidating distributors who now carry huge books of brands, it's increasingly hard for the small to mid-sized brands to get noticed."

Young man, ancient vines

Morgan Twain-Peterson is an anomaly. After founding Sonoma's Bedrock Wine Co. when he was just 26 years-old, he was one of the region's youngest winemakers. At the same time, he held the deepest respect for the area's most ancient vines.

"Eighty percent of the vineyards we work with are 80 years old or older," Twain-Peterson said of his go-to grapes. "It's our little piece and because of that we're a mission-based winery."

Twain-Peterson's fascination with vines dates back to when he was 5-years-old. That year family friend and wine grower Angelo Sangiacomo encouraged him to play winemaker by giving him a half-ton of fruit. He would ride his bike across the vineyard to check on his grapes. Of course once inside the cellar, Twain-Peterson would rely on his dad, vintner Joel Peterson, founder of Sonoma's Ravenswood Winery.

"I wanted to make pinot noir," Twain-Peterson said. "I didn't comprehend the chemistry so he made the major decisions ... The experience was laying out early a blueprint for how you take grapes and make [a particular] profile."

The passion has paid off. Robert Parker Jr. of the Wine Advocate gave Bedrock Wine Co. 100-point scores in October of 2016 for these two wines: Bedrock Wine Co., 2013 Weill Vineyard Exposition 2 Proprietary Red, and Bedrock Wine Co., 2013 Weill Vineyard Exposition 3 Proprietary Red.

Today, as Twain-Peterson, 36, celebrates his tenth year in business, he has recognized that tending to these old vines – and loving their history – is what makes his brand of winemaking unique. He has passed the prestigious Master of Wine exam and is submitting his dissertation this year. If the dissertation is accepted, he'll become one of fewer than 30 Americans to hold the title.

The winemaker pointed out that while farmers aren't always able to invest in their vineyards, vintners can push some needed funds their way, breaking the trend of deferred maintenance that can harm older vines.

Restoring the vineyards includes replenishing soils, replacing missing vines, as well as introducing organic and sustainable farming practices. Twain-Peterson says they have helped restore 10 vineyards spanning from the Sonoma Valley to Lodi and Contra Costa County.

"We want to make sure these old vineyards stay viable," Twain-Peterson said. "Old vines across California have incredible stories to tell."

Wearing jeans, a black t-shirt and boots, the bearded winemaker almost looks rugged. But the freckles on his face, like a dusting of paprika, give him a boyish quality.

Graduating from Vassar, and then earning a Master's in American studies at Columbia, Twain-Peterson initially wanted to be a history professor, but he had misgivings about academia.

"You work your ass off, accumulate all kinds of debt, and then have to take whatever job is offered to you," Twain-Peterson said. "When you're born and raised in Sonoma, where the weather and food are so good, where you're next to the mountains and the beach, it's hard to imagine living a large part of your life in Wichita."