



As Seen In... **The Boston Globe**

Romancing the grape

## California vintner-philosopher adopts non-classical approach

By Stephen Meuse

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Are you a classical or romantic personality? These terms may not capture every nuance of temperament, but who doubts their usefulness in describing a fundamental difference in outlook? Classicists prefer to measure everything against a universal and timeless gold standard. For the romantically-inclined, excellence is a matter of what is most appropriate at a given time and place.

California winemaker Abe Schoener has given more than the usual amount of thought to how these categories continue to play out their age-old drama. One would expect a former professor with a PhD in philosophy to have a thoughtful approach to his new métier. But if you think all that exposure to Plato and Aristotle will only result in wines of ideal classical proportions, you've got another syllogism coming. Schoener, 48, is a blend of the grape juice; a distortion artist willing to employ techniques that turn conventional winemaking on its head. "My peers consider some of these practices heretical, but during his recent presentation to Boston retailers and sommeliers, "full of totally identifiable flaws."

Schoener's wine adventure began in a wine study group he founded at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md., where he taught philosophy for nine years in the 1990s and where, as a student, he had learned "never to be afraid to think anything." In 1998, during a sabbatical year in San Francisco, he changed tweeds for jeans and worked as a lowly cellar rat at Stag's Leap Winery in Napa Valley. Later he extended his leave, then jumped ship entirely. Around this time he hooked up with John Kongsgaard at Luna Vineyards, an impeccably-credentialed winemaker who became his mentor.

At Luna, Schoener got his hands on a load of fruit - sangiovese grapes that were past their prime and of no interest to Kongsgaard - and made his debut wine: an amarone-like red he swears he has never bettered. The idea that luck should play an ongoing role in the work of a winemaker isn't something taught at enology schools, but for this autodidact luck, accident, and the occasional bolt from the blue are tools of the trade.

The Schoener toolkit includes some items even stranger than these. Take, for example, the spoilage bacteria known as acetobacters, the organism non grata of modern commercial

winemaking. Instead of simply banishing them with a dose of sulfur dioxide, he may prefer to let them develop - to a point. The resulting acetic acid gives considerably more edge than you're used to getting from California wine, particularly reds.

Or oxygen. Bucking the rule that says modern wines need to be kept from the air to preserve freshness and fruit, Schoener may decline to top up barrels, leaving headroom for oxygen and wine to interact and giving an effect reminiscent of fino sherry.

**His portfolio includes red and white wines, made in a facility newly built for Schoener by Tenbrink Family Vineyards on its property in Suisun Valley, east of Napa.**

His wine can be a bit like traveling back to a time when the flavors and aromas were far from uncommon. Except that here the flavors, aromas, and textures are fresh and vibrant. In this sense, everything old is new again.

Although he does dabble in a few pies, since 2005 his main focus has been on his brand, Scholium Project. On his website, he describes scholium as a modest project undertaken for the sake of learning. His portfolio includes red and white wines, made in a facility newly built for Schoener by Tenbrink Family Vineyards on its property in Suisun Valley, east of Napa.

Schoener says that as he tastes freshly pressed juice he asks himself "what direction the wine wants to take." It's surely a different approach than one that starts with a preconceived idea of what the wine should be and then tries to make it that - but it's also pretty obvious that any conversation with a grape is really a conversation with oneself. In this sense, Schoener is a true auteur, the kind of artisan for whom the character of the raw materials, no matter how outstanding, will always be subordinate to a forceful and visionary personality.

"Scholium Project represents an opportunity for me to experiment," Schoener said. "I have no responsibilities beyond myself for them, so I can take chances. It's very exciting not to know how the wine will turn out. So far more things have worked out well than badly."

How romantic.