

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



The Pour

A Thinking Man's Wines

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FAIRFIELD, Calif.

As with many small, utilitarian wineries in California, barrels and tanks practically spill out of Tenbrink, home of Scholium Project, here in the Suisun Valley, just east of Napa Valley. Yet to call Scholium Project a winery and its proprietor, Abe Schoener, a winemaker is a little like calling Salvador Dali a painter. It's true, but it does not begin to capture his visionary character.

No winery in California is more unconventional, experimental or even more idiosyncratic than Scholium. In an industry where the year are exquisite. The other half are shocking and sometimes undrinkable. All of them are fascinating, which is exactly the way Mr. Schoener wants it.

From his intuitive winemaking practices to the obscure names of his wines, Mr. Schoener marches to his own muse. In the winery, for example, he insists on using only cold water, no soap, to clean equipment and the barrels.

"Maintaining a complex microbiology is the best way to make wine," he says.

He is a fount of such epigrammatic sayings. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mr. Schoener, 47, was a philosophy professor at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md., when he caught the winemaking bug. While on sabbatical in 1998 he took an internship at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and never looked back. By 2000 he was making tiny lots of his own wine, and now, in 2008, Scholium (pronounced SKOH-lee-um) Project is a full-fledged cult wine, although surely the most idiosyncratic cult wine around, with sales driven by curiosity and word of mouth rather than critical approval.

By the dictionary, Scholium, derived from the Greek word scholion for school or scholar, refers to marginal notes or comments intended to illustrate a point in the text. On his Web site, Mr. Schoener, whose Ph.D. is in ancient Greek philosophy, describes it as "a small project, not a pre-eminent one, undertaken for the sake of learning. In other words, winemaking by discovery."

My first encounter with a Scholium wine was, in 2006, a pinot grigio that went by the name Elsa's Vineyard School of the Plains, inspired, Mr. Schoener said, by an experience in the Collio, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia in northeastern Italy, one of his favorite wine regions.

This pinot grigio was like none I'd ever had. It was huge: 16.6 percent alcohol. The aromas were piercing, almost painfully so, and while the wine was dry, it was excruciatingly powerful and overwhelming.

I said as much in my blog. The next day I received an e-mail message from Mr. Schoener, with whom I had never spoken.

I am so sympathetic to your reaction to my wine," he wrote. "I don't think that you said anything unfair about it. It is a kind of behemoth." He suggested that a roast chicken and a minimum of four people would make such a big wine more bearable.

Most winemakers tend to rival politicians in their efforts to

stay on message and spin catastrophe into triumph, but Mr. Schoener freely and cheerfully discusses his failures, which made me receptive to his invitation to try some of his other wines. He makes 10 or so different wines each year, and a total of about 1,500 cases.

So, on a trip to Northern California this summer, I spent a day with Mr. Schoener, visiting tiny vineyards in Sonoma and the Suisun Valley, where he buys grapes, and Tenbrink, where today, long after most of the 2007 vintage in California are either finishing their aging or are on the market, his 2006 wines are still struggling to complete their fermentation. "I learn by accident, through inattention," he says.

From massive and far out to almost classically delicate. Another 2006 Collio-inspired pinot grigio, called Rocky Mountain Road, from the Elgino del Collio, was in a style completely different from the first one. It had a lovely cidery color, which came from macerating the wines with their skins, and a captivating tannic texture. Even more impressive was a 2006 Farina Vineyards the Prince in this case, inspired by the eccentric Alberico Boncompagni Ludovisi, prince of Venosa, who made astonishing wines at his Fiorano estate outside of Rome before tearing his vines out in the 1990s. Mr. Schoener's wine, a sauvignon blanc, is serious, textured and complex, intense but not heavy, and, in contrast to his pinot grigios, only 13.3 percent alcohol.

While Mr. Schoener carries the tools of the modern California wine guy — pruning shears, iPhone and laptop — the resemblance to other winemakers ends there. After his internship at Stag's Leap, he was hired by John Kongsgaard, a prominent Napa winemaker who was then at Luna Vineyards, to home-school his son. In return, Mr. Kongsgaard taught Mr. Schoener about winemaking and great wines.

In 2000, Mr. Kongsgaard gave Mr. Schoener his own winery, Mr. Schoener took over at Luna. "It was a radical choice — he was a real freshman," said Mr. Kongsgaard, who has remained Mr. Schoener's mentor. "Abe is a very obedient student, even though he's not a very respectful or obedient student."

Mr. Schoener is a quiet, unassuming, unpretentious winemaker in California. He prefers natural fermentations, using minimal amounts of sulfur dioxide as a preservative, and while most California producers use it in their wine, Mr. Schoener does not. In the course of his cellar work, he said, "I do everything to banish fruit flavors."

Occasionally, his methods don't succeed, as with his 2005 cabernet from Margit's Vineyard.

"I blew it," he says. "I had made cabernet before and done it by the book, and it was very good. So I said, I'm going to make it even better now. But I blew it. In 2006 I got it right, though."

California is apparently not large enough to contain Mr. Schoener. He has another winemaking product in Maury, in the Roussillon region of France, and an unlikely consultant's job at a facility that is to make wine in Red Hook, Brooklyn, from New York grapes.

"That is it," he says. "Nothing in Ohio or Brazil yet."

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