

HAVENS

*Wines of Passion Derived from Right Bank Bordeaux
and Northern Rhone*

Artisanal Wine Making

An interview with wine grower Michael Havens

Twenty years ago, the course of wine making in North America was shifting from a model of industrial production to artisanal hand crafting in the style of old-world European methods. A taste for fine wine was on the rise here. Growers at that time, too, were beginning to look critically at varieties planted rather than just accepting what had managed to struggle through Prohibition and the following years.

Merlot from the Right Bank, for example, had hit Michael Havens as full of character and even mystery. But Napa Merlot was being treated, in the vineyard and in the bottle, more like a weak Cabernet Sauvignon. There was little attempt to produce wine in the style of Pomerol or St. Emilion at the time: Elegant and age-worthy, full of ripe, dark fruit flavors and complexed by the non-fruit characteristics unique to the growing sites. He set out to grow and produce them, and for 20 years has pleased the palates of wine enthusiasts who know it is possible.



Q: Why make artisanal wines?

A: *Artisanal wine* has been our vision, and this was a truly personal matter. In Europe, I had seen wines that had the imprint of not only the local grape but also the producer. These wines were given specific care, sometimes even using eccentric techniques. But it was technique appropriate to the wines of that vineyard interpreted by that house. In those few grower-produced wines, I saw a way of working that was connected to the Earth in a way I had never experienced in the U.S. Like so many in my generation, I



Michael Havens

was disillusioned with mass-produced, slickly-marketed goods. It felt like we were getting fooled every time we ate a fast-food meal, put on the latest advertised fashion, or drove in the latest car we were told to worship. It felt like the texture of life was being ground down to a dull sameness.

So seeing and tasting wines and cheeses and breads that were unmistakably local and distinct, that bore the mark of the maker in every aroma and texture, *that* was liberating. It felt like a return to a better way of life than what the advanced edge of industrialism had given us. And I found that incredibly seducing, almost like a home-coming.

Q: What makes an artisanal wine (or wine artisanal)?

A: Anyone can make one or two barrels of something—that doesn't make it artisanal. An artisan is a crafter, a person who has learned techniques appropriate to the medium and has learned how to apply them with reflection and skill, not out of rote obedience to a recipe. So that means that wines that are made to an industrial standard, rather than a personal interpretation of regional taste, cannot by definition be artisanal. Artisanal wines are those that allow the grapes' origins to show through. That is, they speak the variety as grown in the place. So trying to make a

wine more ripe or more acidic than is reasonable for the place moves us toward sameness, rather than distinctiveness, in wines. Or wiping out the variety's character with oak or residual sugar can do the same. There's a mistaken tendency to measure everything by the world's ripest, most tannic Cabernet Sauvignon. How boring! I want Merlot to taste like Merlot, and I want it to taste like it does where it is grown, not like what some self-appointed arbiter of taste thinks is international perfection.

But we must also have a personal touch for a wine to be truly artisanal (and I would say to be truly interesting). The degree to which there is a house style is the degree to which that producer has succeeded in creating an artisanal tradition. Of course this changes, if for no other reason than that proprietors die or sell the business. And taste changes historically as well. So we can't fault Jean Louis Chave, in Hermitage, for making wines that are less tannic than his father did. He is still making Chave wines for this generation. And anyone who knows northern Rhone wines knows when they have his wines: this is Hermitage Syrah in the hands of Chave. That is success on the level of artisanal wine-growing.

Q: What are the top influences to look for in artisanal wines.

A: To the surprise of many, "artisanal" is not just another way of saying "international" when defining the category, although Europe developed many of the traditions that produce artisanal wines. In many places, if the wine is not made by the grower, it is unlikely to be artisanal wine (true in most of the Rhone, Alsace, most of Italy, and even in the more corporate world of Bordeaux). But in other places, great wines are made by close cooperation between wineries and independent growers: some in southern France, Champagne, Switzerland, Austria, and even many French co-ops, where a skilled winemaker may make the grower's grapes into his own estate

wine each year. Burgundy is an interesting case in point: great Burgundy was made mostly by a few large houses and negociants until growers started bottling their own wines more widely in the 1970s. Today, negotiant wine is still important, but grower-bottled wine is the standard. That has moved the artisanal hand of control back to individuals, counter to the modern tendency of consolidation and corporate aggregation.

But the key in European wines is that local growers, often the same as the wine maker, are attempting to preserve local traditions. That means sticking with local grape varieties, local standards of taste, and local blends, if that is the case. Small variations on that makes wine-drinking interesting.

Q: What is the potential for American producers creating artisanal wines?

A: Artisanal wines begin with an aesthetic or philosophy, but evolve out of a life experience. Sometimes that experience is inherited, so that the decisions about the wine are an organic interaction of personal history, geography, and cultural traditions, rather than something imposed. When I make a wine a certain way, I make it on the basis of what I've tasted and what I prefer. When I hire people, until they have part of that experience by going through a history of vintages and tasting them next to other wines, my ideas are merely imposed upon them. But working together, allowing for that organic process of compounding thousands of little decisions, the artisanal aspects begin to inhabit the whole process. In this way, a "house style" evolves and seems to take on a life of its own.

Q: What is Havens' aesthetic for artisanal wines?

A: Havens wines reflect what happens in the vineyard more than anything else. We have found that

the Carneros and Southern Napa appellations offer some terroirs reasonably matched to the Right Bank of Bordeaux (for our Merlot and Bordeaux blend, Bourriquot) and the upper Rhone Valley (for our Syrah). That's where you always start - at an understanding of your growing sites and a traditional reference for that sort of terroir. Since 1980, Havens Wine Cellars has cultivated relationships with grape growers in select vineyards that offer this terroir: moderating influences of nearby San Pablo Bay combined with well-drained, mid-slope clay soils, resulting in moderated vine vigor and extended growing seasons. The fruit from these sites offers balanced ripeness—not just sugar, but acidity and tannins developed simultaneously. The result is that the bright fruit is complexed by pleasing earthiness and engaging texture. We consider Carneros and Southern Napa, once an unorthodox growing region for Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Syrah, to offer the best place in North America to grow these grapes. This is confirmed by the surprising textures and age-worthiness of these wines, not characteristic of their counterparts from warmer California regions.

In the cellar, we continue the meticulous process of *elevage* to produce artisanal wines. *Elevage* is a French term that loosely refers to the care and attention to details of nurturing a wine along through its various stages, bringing it up from youth to maturity



Michael directs vineyard practices for all sources of Havens wines.

But wine making is not like writing poetry on blank paper or painting on a blank canvas; rather, it is more like sculpture, wherein the inherent form of the raw material dictates what is possible. The wine-sculptor's job is to carefully reveal the best he finds in that raw material and leave the rest behind. Our goal is to make wines that work with food, not monsters to showcase for awards. Our ideal is balance in the wine to give drinking pleasure at the table, so every decision must serve that ideal.

Q: Why care about artisanal wine?

A: If we care where food comes from, we care that our wine is more than something to just wash it down. If drinking a wine interests you as a way to experience other places and other traditions than those immediately at hand, it's important. It's as important as when we chose a sheep's milk cheese from a single producer in a given location with a name that means it comes from that place. Why? First it tastes better if it has this personality; it's subjective, of course, but that is the experience. Second, we choose it because we love the idea of eating something from someone who leads a pastoral life. In the case of wine, it allows us to express the values of a life no longer available to many people in the modern world. By choice, we return to it through our artisanal wines, breads, cheeses, and farm fresh vegetables.

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