

# San Jose Mercury News

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FEBRUARY 22, 2006 | WEDNESDAY  
THE NEWSPAPER OF SILICON VALLEY

## Food+Wine

### Cameron Hughes offers quality wine at modest prices

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#### '10-Clam Cam' wines trump 'Two-Buck Chuck'

Shoppers perusing the wine selection at Costco see lots of familiar labels. But what about this modestly priced **Cameron Hughes** wine?

It's a concept that's something like Charles Shaw: Buy wine on the bulk market for a good price, then blend it, package it and give consumers a good deal. But the Cameron Hughes wines are small lots of high-quality wine, while Charles Shaw wines ("Two-Buck Chuck," sold at Trader Joe's) are huge lots of average to, shall we say, rather pedestrian components. And unlike Charles

laurie daniel  
wine

Shaw, the person — who sold his brand years ago and has nothing to do with it today — Cameron Hughes, the person, is the driving force behind the wines that bear his name.

Hughes, who says people sometimes call his wines "10-Clam Cam" and similar nicknames, has a long background in wine sales and marketing, much of it with the huge Wine Group, which owns brands such as Corbett Canyon, Concanon and Franzia box wine. Next, he helped set up an import company that brought in small lots of French wine. Along the way, "I learned how to get wine in a bottle under your own name," Hughes says. It's a concept that has existed for years in France, where people known as nego-

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ciantis buy up wine from others and sell it under their own names.

Taking advantage of a wine and grape surplus in California, Hughes started his San Francisco-based business in 2001. His first wines were



Hughes

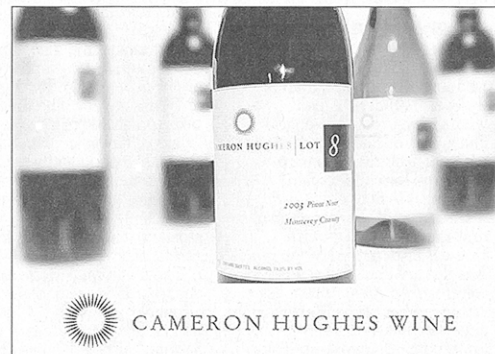
good-value blends he called Synergy. As he made more contacts, Hughes refined his business model. He wanted to scour the landscape for

good-quality wine that was left over or didn't fit into a particular winery's blend — wines that weren't rejects, but that the winery didn't have a good use for. And he wanted to align himself with a big retailer that would sell most of the wine. Costco was the first one to bite on the concept.

He presents the wines to Costco even before they're bottled, and the warehouse retailer sells 98 percent of his wine. Most of the wines are fairly small lots, ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 cases. Costco, Hughes says, likes to keep much of its inventory fresh and continually changing, so "it's a match made in heaven." The wines generally sell out in a few weeks.

Each wine has a lot number — the wine currently at Costco is the **Lot 8 pinot noir** (\$8) — and the lots are sold one at a time. When the pinot sells out, which Hughes predicts will be soon, Costco will start selling the **Lot 10 cabernet sauvignon** (\$10).

The long-gone Lot 7 cabernet from Alexander Valley earned Hughes a lot of great press, but I like the upcoming Lot 10 cab, a blend of wine from Alexander and Dry Creek valleys, even better. It's still quite tight, with lots of juicy black cherry and black



CAMERON HUGHES WINE

SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

Cameron Hughes expects that the current pinot noir, above, will sell out soon. The next release is a cabernet sauvignon.

raspberry flavors and good structure. Open and pour it well ahead of time, or give it some more time in the bottle.

The Lot 8 pinot noir, a 2003 wine from Monterey (mostly Arroyo Seco), smells a little prune, but on the palate it's bright and supple, with flavors of raspberry, strawberry and spice. In the works are a Paso Robles syrah and petite sirah, a Sonoma Mountain syrah and others.

Hughes has a mailing list to notify customers when the wines hit Costco; sign up at his Web site, [www.chwine.com](http://www.chwine.com). The Cameron Hughes wines are also sold by the case or half-case through the Web site. Prices are higher online — the Lot 8 pinot, for example, is \$13 — but the wines usually are available for longer. (Enter the word "oscar" in the coupon code box for a 20 percent discount.)

**MORE GOOD VALUES:** The chardonnays and pinot noirs of **Talley Vineyards** in Arroyo Grande are undeniably delicious but, at \$26 and up, they're not exactly everyday wines for most people. But the winery also has a brand of well-made, more affordably priced wines called **Bishop's Peak**.

The name comes from the tallest of the peaks known as the Seven Sisters that dominate the landscape around San Luis Obispo. The wines are made from mostly purchased fruit from various parts of San Luis Obispo County.

The **2004 Bishop's Peak Chardonnay** (\$14) is an Edna Valley wine that's bright and a little tropical, with some creamy and toasty notes. It's nicely balanced and easy to drink. The tasty **2003 Central Coast pinot noir** (\$16) has flavors of cherry and raspberry, a hint of tomato and supple texture.

The **2003 Rock Solid Red** (\$12), a blend of mostly cabernet and syrah from Paso Robles, is a tremendous value, with ripe black cherry and just enough tannin for structure. A great pizza wine. One of my favorite Bishop's Peak wines is the **2003 Edna Valley syrah** (\$16), a savory rather than jammy syrah, with notes of white pepper and roasted meat and a smooth finish. The **2003 Paso Robles cabernet sauvignon** (\$16) displays bright cherry flavors, a note of black olive and medium tannins.

**UPCOMING EVENTS:** The

second annual **Pinot Paradise** tasting, featuring more than 30 pinot noir producers from the Santa Cruz Mountains, will be March 26 at the Mountain Winery, 14831 Pierce Road, in Saratoga. The day starts with technical sessions from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. about the growing and making of pinot noir; followed by the "grand tasting," 2 to 4:30 p.m. Tickets to the technical sessions are \$50, which includes a box lunch; grand tasting tickets are \$50 until March 1, \$65 afterward. On Saturday, participating wineries will offer barrel samples and, in some cases, older vintages of pinot. (For this "Pathway to Pinot Paradise" you'll have to drive from winery to winery.) Tickets are \$20.

There's also a pass that includes all the events for \$100, or \$120 after March 1. Last year's grand tasting was extremely crowded, but this year's venue is larger, so there should be more elbow room. Several restaurants will be on hand with food, too. For more information or to buy tickets, go to [www.scmwa.com](http://www.scmwa.com).

If Rhone wines are your thing, mark your calendar for the **Rhone Rangers** tasting on March 18 in San Francisco. More than 140 wineries will be pouring wines such as roussanne, viognier, grenache and syrah from 1:30 to 4 p.m. at the Festival Pavilion in Fort Mason.

On March 17, there will be a live auction and cioppino dinner starting at 6 p.m. at Fort Mason's Golden Gate Room with some of the member wineries, including Ridge Vineyards, Morgan Winery, Hug Cellars and others.

Tickets to the March 18 tasting are \$45 in advance, \$55 at the door; tickets to the auction and dinner are \$75 (advance sale only). For information, or to purchase tickets, go to [www.rhone-rangers.org](http://www.rhone-rangers.org).

Contact Laurie Daniel at [ldaniel@earthlink.net](mailto:ldaniel@earthlink.net).