

7.2006 Beverage

DAVID HUNT • 57 • Winemaker-Owner • Hunt Cellars • Paso Robles, CA



Restless, confident and proud, David Hunt is an affable jokester and self-promoter, a lively, coaxing conversationalist with a Carolina drawl. He's also a fanatic in the lab and crush-room, an inveterate tinkerer when blending. His Hunt Cellars produces boutique quantities (nearly ten thousand cases) of almost all red wines that win a disproportionate number of awards. Being afflicted with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease, doesn't slow Hunt down a whit. A pianist who's likely to sit in his red mahogany bar entertaining guests from his white grand piano, Hunt whimsically names his wines in musical terms. A keen competitor, he exudes an enthusiasm for his wines that's boyishly infectious.

By: FRED BOUCHARD

BEING BLIND Blindness in some ways helps me making wine. I'm totally hands-on: I analyze seeds, grapes. The Good Lord took away my eyes but gave me an extra-sensitive palate and nose. I trained my palate before I started making wine. You have to practice. In a restaurant the other day, my wife picked up the wrong bottle. "Debbie, this '03 sure tastes like the '01." Turned out it was. I've developed my wine memory: it's critical for blending; when I do 1000 blends, I have to find the perfect combination by touch, memory and taste. I can actually hear the weight and texture of a wine by its sound, the timbre changes as the wine pours into a glass. I use my sensory abilities to remember freeway exits; I keep people from getting lost.

PERFECT VINEYARDS After looking at numerous parcels of vineyard potential property, we eventually (in 1996) settled on our uniquely beautiful property of over 550 acres in the foothills and mountains of Creston. This area met our criteria for topography, soil composition, unparalleled beauty, and ideal terroirs – its varied elevations and mineral soil composites mirror some of the world's great wine regions. That said, I want the very best grapes when I

make my wines. If my Syrah is not as good as my neighbor's, I'll buy his. I'm in the marketplace now for Cabernet Franc. I'll buy grapes if I can, juice if I can't.

HILLTOP CABERNET Since we can't extend growing seasons, I try to make the wine in the vineyard. Our vineyards are all hilltop and mountain fruit. We say we have the French kiss and the farmer's curse: our grape berries stay small and intense, but we can't grow a decent tomato! The soil's light, shallow, loamy, potassium deficient; some vineyards have white calcified rocks, oceanfront at one time distant. We have planted 40% Cabernet. Every winemaker's goal is to win Best of Class at LA's International Wine Fair; we won it out of 2500 entries in 2002, our second harvest. In our premiere year, our Zinfandel and Syrah won.

TERRIOR CENTRAL Destiny Vineyards has six distinct terroirs; I'll give you a few examples. Our Cabernet "Bon Vivant" – 400 feet below our Cabovation block – brings out the red fruits: wild cherry, Bing cherry red currant. Cabovation gets darker hues: black currant, black cherry, a darker personality, more structure, lower yield. Our Syrah is on slopes and swells; I chose four clones and four rootstocks, following UC Davis' correct assessment. The grapes ripened in four different colors, and the wine-geeks at Aspen

Food & Wine Festival dubbed our '02 Hilltop Serenade the "Screaming Eagle" of Syrah. Our 5-acre Sangiovese plot is also in good Cabernet soil, so we treat it likewise: cold soak, long hang-time. People go wild over "Rhapsody in Red" our Supertuscan (Sangiovese, Merlot, Barbera).

GO for the GOLD Every wine in our current release has won Multi-Gold Medals, Best of Class and/or scored 90+. Since I think a Gold Medal means more to consumers than a magazine's 90, if we win a medal I don't enter that wine in further competitions. We won seven Gold medals in 2004 at Florida International Wine Competition. We've won ever year since 2002 at the San Francisco Chronicle Event – Double Gold, Gold or Best of Class. [Wine guru] Robert Balzer said of my Sauvignon Blanc, our only white, that it was best he's ever had. Its huge viscosity gives it a big mouth feel, so 'red only' drinkers say, "I can drink this!"

OAK PROGRAM I went through two cycles of oak in '01 and '02. Some of the big wines soak it up and the oak induction dissipates, so I had to give them some more new oak. I don't rush a wine to market, I give the wine what it needs to mature. I let them stay in barrel 32 months, where they gather expression, but not too much extraction. I try various combinations of French heads and American staves. All my reds get 2+ years in barrel, it takes that long to exude the expression.

MUSICAL TOUCH As a musician I name my wines "Symphony" or "Rhapsody". I was in show bands at 12, doing college tours and playing clubs. I came to California to make it as a musician – almost got on The Dating Game – wrote songs but couldn't make money. Dave Benoit was my pianist for three years. I play piano for tasters and guests; after eight flights, they think I'm good! But some music does not go with wine; you have to watch it with certain blues and classical pieces.

TINKERING 'TIL *the* END I treat each wine as if I'd never make another one. I work the wine and make changes on the bottling line – or I can't sleep at night. There's no winemaking team; it's all up to me; I get feedback from tasters later. I almost didn't release the last Sangiovese '01; I was about ready to sell the whole batch, despite its 32 months in barrel. But I added 80 gallons of Cabernet into the final blend and that did the trick! It was only 3%, but it made all the difference: added more beef, made mouth feel better, brought out the strawberries. The Critics Challenge made it a Gold Winner!

MARKET DARLING Marketing and networking are the hardest part of the wine business. It never ends, and you're only as good as your last bottle. But we're close to establishing ourselves. Dartmouth College School of Business picked us as the next cult winery.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT My wife Debbie is good at marketing, she does the shows. We named Cabernet Sauvignon vine blocks after our sons, the high Mount Christo ("Cabovation") for Chris (he's 6'7") and Derek Heights ("Bon Vivant") for Derek (6'4"). Our daughter Destiny's name goes as vineyard designation.

BOSTON PRESENCE Scott Dahill – of Andy's, our Massachusetts distributor – has us in 50 Boston area restaurants. Blue Ginger rotates six of my wines. Others that come to mind are Excelsior, Azure, The Ritz Carlton, Blackfin, Smith & Wollensky, Ruth's Chris.

RECENT TRAVELS It's mostly business now. We've been to France and Italy, going back to Tuscany. When we had a blind tasting of 2000 Sassicaia (\$400; Sangiovese, Merlot, Cabernet) with my 2000 "Rhapsody in Red" (as above with 5% Barbera; \$48), all five Italian sommeliers chose mine for more expression of fruit. We were in Manhattan in April for a Paso Robles Winery Tasting with my neighbors EOS, J. Lohr and Justin.