



QUE SERA SERA: A LIFE AS RHAPSODY...

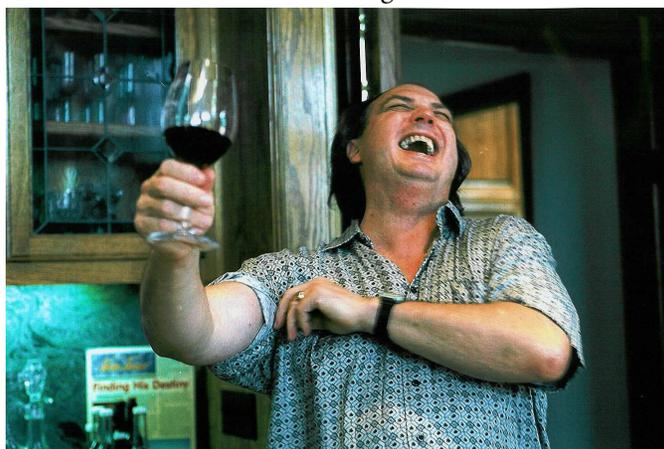
SWEET LIFE: What will be has been for vintner David Hunt, who brings light to a world that is growing darker. The kid who used to bump into trees while trick-or-treating came west to California in the 1970s as a starry-eyed musician and wound up in the grapes of success, even as his world view became hopelessly stuck on a dimmer switch.

But David Hunt has always found a way to turn on the lights again – he even found a way to do it just by

walking down the hall. His is the story of how one thing leads to another, sometimes forced by what he calls his “inconvenience,” sometimes due to his enterprise.

He recorded with the likes of Ambrosia and Vanilla Fudge, but his songs largely died on the vine – though he would later find more fruitful vines. While in the music business, he developed alarm systems to protect his equipment. He extended that security concept to homes. From there, he became an early

distributor of voice mail to offices and brought innovative comfort controls to homes; both were hits, and he plowed the profits into real-estate. When he started to become a stumblin'-bumblin' danger to himself at construction sites, he sold out. But he didn't forget the value of land and location, especially when he searched for the place to build the perfect vineyard a few years ago and found it in the hot agricultural fields near Paso Robles.



David Hunt went into winemaking following previous successes in music and as an entrepreneur. Now, he says, "it's all about the wine."

All of which sort of leads us to the bar at Hunt's massive, 29-room Colonial mansion in the hills above the north end of Topanga Canyon Boulevard in

Chatsworth. Hunt is holding court on his latest passion pursuit, wine. He clutches his bottles like a mother holds her cubs. "Let me tell you the story behind this one," he booms out through a thick smile. He is ebullient, charismatic, someone who clearly delights in wine and conversation - not a bad pairing.

One by one, they trot out of the cellar - a chardonnay, a sangiovese, a zinfandel, a Sarah, then a blend of sangiovese, merlot and pinot

noir that Hunt calls "Rhapsody in Red," and finally the sweetness known as port. All are high quality.

Hunt is like an orchestra conductor, waving his wand at the senses of taste and smell. He points out the nuanced tropical aromas in his chardonnay, the honeys and caramels in the sangiovese, the traces of blackberries, blueberries and other fruits, the silky viscosity of his "Rhapsody," and the butterscotch, raisin, chocolate, peppery and smörgåsbord of other tastes in the various elixirs. All the while, he discourses on acid-to-sugar ratios in the grapes, the burn-and-freeze weather patterns that create fruit intensity, how to grow root stock and graft varietal grape genetic strains onto it, how to push carbohydrates up from the soil to the vine – and how he battled the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and lost over his proposal to name one of his wines "Que syrah, syrah."

Winemaking, he says, is really "whatever hand Mother Nature deals you."

A different kind of genetics dealt David Hunt a bad hand. When a guest points out the unique, pretty red color of the zinfandel, Hunt replies, "Wouldn't know." Hunt, 52, has lost his sight to a degenerative eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa, not in one fell swoop but over 40-

some years. It's his "inconvenience," the thing that caused him to wander dangerously at home sites. Slowly, he's been robbed of simple things.

He drove a car until 1982, played tennis until 1988, lost the ability to read the next year. When he first planted his vineyard in 1996, he could see the grapes and the rows; now he can't. Even last year, he could discern the outline of his tasting room; that, too, is now only a memory. He misses nature's scenic wonders, historic buildings in Europe. But foremost, he misses the faces of his wife and three kids. Then he says, "It would have been worse to have never seen them." In fact, he never saw the face of his youngest, 4-year-old Destiny, adding, "from what I hear, that's very regretful." Hunt can still distinguish day from night, and some shadows. But he overshoots a couch when he comes in for an interview, walks into a wall in search of another room, runs into a door in his own house. His fingers clutch air until they reach a guidepost – a ledge, the back of chair, an outstretched hand, the neck of a wine bottle. When he's out, he has to have someone take him to the bathroom, open a car door – he doesn't like how that inconveniences them. His world vision becomes cloudier, murk.

His life is anything but. To borrow from Dylan Thomas, Hunt does rage, against a different kind of dying light, pouring himself into his endeavors and then moving on when they dry up.

“I learned at a young age that a person's greatest power is the power to choose,” Hunt said. “If you don't like the dream, change the dream. A lot of what I've done in my life is a byproduct of my blindness.”

Lighter years

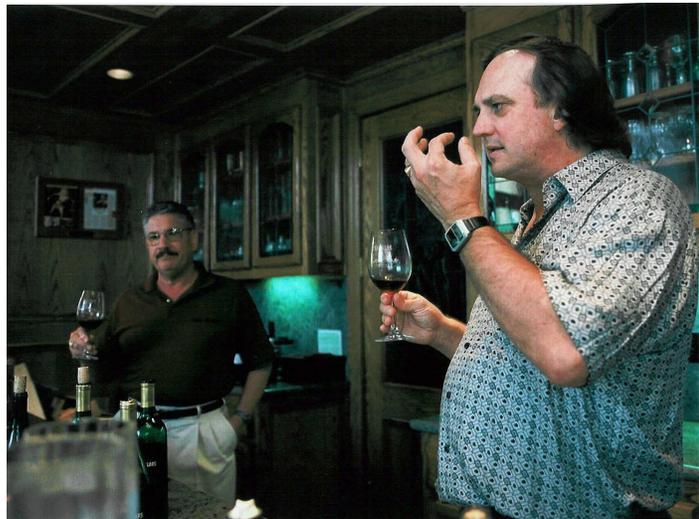
Hunt was born near Eden, N.C., and grew up in Lexington. By age 7, problems were apparent. “I never could see at night,” he said. Hence his tasting bark on Halloween. “I ran into trees, and the other kids didn't,” he said with a smile.

At age 13, a doctor told Hunt he would eventually go blind.

Retinitis pigmentosa refers to a group of hereditary disorders affecting the retina. The retina – which functions much like the film in a camera --is a delicate layer of cells at the back of the eye that picks up pictures and transmits them to the brain. The cells, called rods and cones, generate tiny electrical impulses when light falls on them. The impulses are passed on via long cell fibers called optic nerves to the

brain, which puts together the picture in the process called seeing.

Cone cells are found in the retina's center and are used to see color and detail in good lighting, as well as read this story. Rod cells, located on the retina's edges, are used in poor light, such as at dusk, and pick up movement out of the corner of the eye, alerting us to objects in our path or a passing car. Each eye has about 120



Hunt, at home here in Chatsworth, produces Hunt Cellars wines near Paso Robles.

million rod cells and 6 million cone cells.

RP causes those cells to break down or deteriorate. RP sufferers don't see well at night, they stumble into objects or trip over them, and often they have "tunnel" vision. Some retain tunnel vision until late in life; the speed of the vision loss varies from person to person and with the type of RP. It is thought that RP is caused by mutations in several genes. About one in 80 people have the mutated genes, Hunt

said. Whether it gets passed on is basically luck of the draw. Hunt's grandfather and father had it – his dad could read until age 60 – and so do his two brothers. But none of his four sisters – one of whom is married to Los Angeles Dodgers broadcasting legend Vin Scully – has it.

None of Hunt's three kids – Christopher, 16; Derek, 14; and Destiny – show signs of RP.

'E to seize the opportunity'

Hunt sang in a band in his teens and, in his 20s, he came west to enhance his music career.

His introduction to California was an appearance on "The Dating Game." "The girl didn't pick me," he said.

Hunt wrote songs and, among other things, recorded with Ambrosia, which had some light pop hits in the 1970s and early 1980s. But the music business was tough: "There's many Elton Johns that have never been discovered, and it's hard to hang your hat on something," Hunt said.

Concern about stolen equipment led to his alarm company business in the 1970s. Hunt patented a telephone line protection device. He moved on to distributing voice mail systems in the early 1980s.

At that time, voice mail was a tough sell because offices were used to answering machines and

secretaries. But soon, Hunt's voice-mail applications caught on. In real estate, he came up with a visual tour of properties accessible by a phone number and a code.

"One of the secrets to success is not only to recognize an opportunity, but to seize the opportunity," Hunt said.

In the 1980s, he also developed the "Smart House" concept – perhaps symbolized best by his own home, customized to accommodate his sight deficiencies.

In his home, room temperatures are controlled by touch settings that allow any temperature to be punched in. Hallway and room lights come on as you walk in, controlled by sensor beams that throw light into activated zones. Using a keypad, Hunt can punch in a code and put water in a fountain. Drawing the drapes can be done via keypad; likewise, Hunt has his home stereo system programmed that way.

"I can listen to Bach in one room, Beethoven can be playing in another, and the kids can listen to Van Halen – all simultaneously," he said.

'Smart House'

Hunt built his antebellum South-style home in 1987 in a ritzy Chatsworth subdivision developed by the father of actor Val Kilmer.

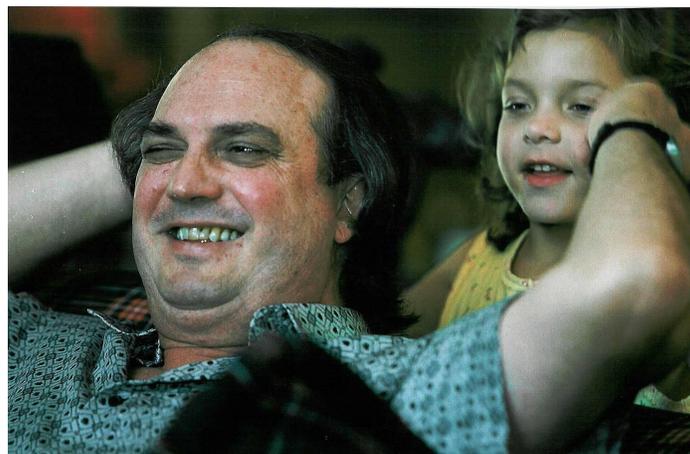
“What we did (with home comfort controls) in the 1980s is still the cat’s meow today,” Hunt said.

He sold that business in 1995, in part because of his difficulty walking around construction sites. By then, his curiosity had tilted toward the wine industry. Hunt scoured the three Pacific coast states looking for a utopic site for a vineyard.

He chose the Paso Robles area because of its combination of good soils and ideal weather – hot in the day, cool at night – for growing grapes that produce high-end wines.

He bought 550 acres in Creston and established a vineyard in 1996. Destiny Vineyards is named after his young daughter, who right before the wine-tasting skips into the room, tries to climb Dad’s leg and giggles and smiles a lot – Hunt’s wines, marketed under the name Hunt Cellars, have won numerous awards.

He specializes in red wines. Son Derek helps him blend wines and wants to follow Dad into the wine business;



CHILD DESTINY: David Hunt's 4-year-old is the inspiration for his Destiny Vineyards. Hunt has never seen Destiny: "from what I hear," he says, That's very regretful.

Hunt's wife, Deborah, 44, also is up on the industry. Son Christopher, already 6-foot-6 and playing basketball, is less interested in the grapes.

This year, Hunt plans to grow and harvest 200 tons of grapes, which will translate to about 10,000 to 12,000 cases of wine.

“I want to make wine for people who really appreciate wine,” Hunt said. “I see a trend toward good boutique, hand-crafted wines.” As such, it’s a little more difficult to find the Hunt Cellars brand.

“These aren’t the type of wines you find in stores,” said Gil Gordon, a Newbury Park-based wine broker who handles Hunt’s wines.

Locally, the Verona Trattoria restaurant in Camarillo and La Cupola restaurant in Oak Park carry Hunt’s wines, Gordon said. Another way to get them is to call the vineyard and have them shipped.

Central coast winemakers who grow grapes near Hunt’s place described him as sociable but still relatively new to the scene and a bit of an unknown

quantity; some have never met him, others only in passing.

“A blind winemaker? I see no reason why not,” said former state Assemblyman Brooks Firestone, who has a winery in Santa Barbara County. “One's senses are often enhanced in that situation.”

It is said that people who lose one sense often have better acuity in others because they rely on them more. Hunt believes that might factor into his wine success. He took sensory evaluation classes at the University of California at Davis, where he had to pick out aromas such as eucalyptus, bell peppers, lemon and even sweat in wine; he scored 100 percent. Hunt believes he might be only the second blind winemaker ever.

“Dom Perignon and me; it's pretty good company,” he deadpanned.

Enjoy Life

Hunt's goal is memorable wines, ones where they, the people in company, the conversation and the place are all remembered. “I want people to have a good time, party and have a hoot,” he said. “Is that so wrong? I want to have fun.”

To that end, he tops off the wine-tasting at the piano. He warms up, complaining he hasn't

practiced much lately and can't sing anymore. But then he adroitly plays an Elton John medley, including "Rocket Man" and "Bennie and the Jets." His voice, though not in the soothing ranges of Sarah McLachlan, would cop a few karaoke titles.

“It never leaves your blood,” he said.

If the status quo prevails, David Hunt will go totally blind. He believes a cure for RP exists, that he might regain his sight. He's involved in funding research, and is watching human genome mapping breakthroughs on genetic codes with great interest.

For a moment, he laments the tasks others have to do for him.

“I'm a self-made man, so that's a big thing to swallow,” he said. “Those who are handicapped have to eat a lot of crow. I miss everything, absolutely everything. Driving a car – what a freedom!”

“But I'm blessed with a lot. And if I can inspire people to have a good attitude about their handicap or inconvenience, that makes me feel good,too.”

“I learned at a young age that a person's greatest power is the power to choose. If you don't like the dream, change the dream.” – David Hunt, winemaker

– Interested in obtaining David Hunt's wines?

On the Net: www.huntwinecellars.com.

Call 237-1600 or (818)700-1600.

Brett Johnson's e-mail address is

bjohnson@insidevc.com.

David Hunt Bio

Age: 52

What: Winemaker, founder and owner of Hunt Cellars and Destiny Vineyards, Creston. (The tasting room is in Paso Robles). Hunt lives in Chatsworth.

Past pursuits: Musician, owner of a home security-alarm business, a voice mail system distributor/creator, a "Smart Home" marketer, and real estate developer. Though he still dabbles in real estate and holds business-related patents, wine is the focus.

Family: Wife, Deborah, 44; sons Christopher, 16, and Derek, 14; daughter Destiny, 4 (for whom the vineyard is made).

Favorite wine: Hunt is a red wine specialist and connoisseur. When pressed, he chooses a cabernet sauvignon, but it's only a slight lean. "If the world was one wine, it would be pretty boring. Fortunately, the world has blessed us with hundreds of kinds of wine. I like it all. I really do. I do everything from washing the bottles to corking the wine to stomping the grapes."