

PERSONAL BUSINESS

Executive Dining

Living the Winemaker's Dream

**Bored with investment banking, Wall Streeter Jamie Kutch
headed to Sonoma County to make his own pinot noir.**

By Elin McCoy



◀ On March 9, 2005, Wall Street trader and investment banker Jamie Kutch, then 31, started a thread on a popular Internet wine bulletin board: “My entire life is changed. I am moving from NYC to California to make Pinot Noir. . . . Keep an eye out for '05 Kutch Pinot Noir in 2 years.”

Kutch quit his job and persuaded his girlfriend of eight years to join him. Early last fall, he crushed two tons of grapes for his first vintage of 150 cases



of the new wine-country startup model of buying grapes and making tiny quantities of wine in an empty corner of someone else's winery.

And in true 21st-century fashion, his story couldn't have happened without the Internet. Over breakfast in San Francisco, Kutch told me how, after being laid off by Merrill Lynch & Co. in 2003, he spent his days surfing the Wine Talk forum on Mark Squires's bulletin board on www.eRobertParker.com and



mailing list so they could buy a case of his first vintage. Requests are still coming in to his Web site, and the list now has more than 600 names, which means purchases will be limited to two or three bottles each.

Most of Kutch's online buddies admit to living vicariously through his story. “You have a little piece of all of us in your venture,” one wrote. “Rock 'n' roll, brother.” While Kutch is dressed in jeans, driving around vineyards in



at tiny cult winemaker Kosta Browne Winery in Sonoma County's Russian River Valley and was getting advice from some of the region's star winemakers. “It was like being on an all-star high school team,” he says. “I was sweating, drenched, working 14-hour days—and happy.”

Throwing over an unsatisfying career to follow a dream is a common fantasy, and judging from my e-mails, many wine lovers harbor the secret desire to do just what Kutch did. The lure of that dream gave birth to the California wine boom of the 1960s and '70s, when dozens of now famous boutique wineries were started by former advertising executives (Stony Hill Vineyard), stockbrokers (Mayacamas Vineyards), college professors (Stag's Leap Wine Cellars) and other second-career types without prior wine experience.

These days, only the megawealthy can buy a wine estate or build one from scratch, so Kutch took advantage

making cold calls to get a new job. He spent his nights at wine tastings.

Great pinot noir was Kutch's passion. Through the board, he'd previously connected with a Wall Street trader based in San Francisco who'd just made his first batch of wine. The trader encouraged Kutch to come out and “get your hands dirty” by helping out during the next harvest. Kutch did, and kept thinking, “Why can't I do this, too?” he says.

Decision time came only after he landed a good but “boring” investment banking job. Kutch was “blown away” by a 2002 Kosta Browne Kanzler Vineyard pinot and exchanged e-mails with winemaker Michael Browne, who wrote, “Go for your dreams. . . . I'll help you make it a reality.”

When Kutch announced his move to California two weeks later, more than 100 people immediately posted good luck wishes and offers of help. Even better, most asked to be put on a

an old pickup and kicking back at night, drinking and talking wine, they're wearing suits, staring at four screens in the office or returning home on commuter trains. No wonder they're envious. His dream isn't about ego, Kutch says, but about having a better life, “without the cutthroat high stress of Wall Street.”

Add to that dream the story of love among the grapes. As the day's last bin of bunches was dumped onto the sorting table during harvest last fall, Kristen Green, Kutch's girlfriend, was keeping an eye out for praying mantises and rotten grapes—and found a box with a diamond ring in it, instead. Kutch dropped to one knee and proposed. They celebrated with champagne—and got back to work.

By January, Kutch was hustling commitments for grapes for the 2006 harvest season. Trained to research stocks, he mapped soils on Google Earth satellite images and made

friends with a vineyard manager in charge of 250 acres (101 hectares). "I played an aggressive, New York City role," he says. "I didn't come out here to fail." His experience making cold calls on Wall Street helped. "When someone said, 'No fruit; it's all committed,' I'd always ask, 'Do you have a friend who might?' before they hung up," he says. "I knocked on doors. I talked for hours. I took a lot of rejection."

One vineyard owner liked Kutch's

capital. He spent about \$30,000 in start-up costs last year, including fees, licensing, barrels, labels and grapes. The 2005 won't be bottled until January 2007. This year, he'll put out about \$120,000 to make 750 cases of three different pinot noirs that will start at \$28 a bottle. None of that includes living expenses. "So far, it's all my own money saved from my financial days," Kutch says.

By year four, Kutch hopes to start making money. But he'll do all right any-



story and said he might be able to let Kutch have grapes in two years, when a contract ran out. Kutch considered the grape search basic networking. He now has a Rolodex of names for the future.

Kutch spent a couple of months lining up promises of grapes from five different vineyards and even managed to snag some from Kanzler. "I have no piece of paper with signatures, only handshakes," he says.

Of course, Kutch needed significant

way: Several bulletin board regulars have offered to invest as silent partners. "Feel free to call or email me any time," a Deloitte & Touche LLP partner wrote.

Will he succeed? I'm betting yes. It helps that he's banking on the new hot grape, pinot noir, made popular by the movie *Sideways*.

Resources

WINEMAKER WEB SITES

www.kutchwines.com Jamie Kutch's Web site

www.crushpadwine.com The best reasonably priced U.S. custom crush facility for amateurs

WINE BULLETIN BOARDS

www.erobertparker.com/members/bboard/boardintro.asp Access to Mark Squires's bulletin board on wine guru Robert Parker's Web site is free. Heated discussions among well-informed wine geeks can go on for pages.

www.wine loverspage.com/forum Robin Garr's Web site is the home of one of the oldest wine discussion forums on the Internet. Tasting notes and useful wine travel information are especially valuable to newbies.

www.wine-pages.com/cgi-bin2/ultimatebb.cgi Tom Cannavan's excellent Web site is the host of the U.K.'s best wine forum.

Bloomberg Markets

Case of the Month

Twelve summer wines to enjoy in August

WHITE

2005 Antinori Vermentino (\$19)
Crisp, almost salty; from Italy's Bolgheri region

2005 Graf Hardegg Riesling Steinbügel (\$20)
Elegant and complex mineral and citrus flavors; from Austria

2005 Redcliffe Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$10)
A zesty, intense, lime-flavored New Zealand bottling with a reliable screw cap

2005 Sauvignon Republic Cellers

Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)

Appetizingly sharp, clean as a whistle and a great pairing for fish

ROSE

2005 Bodegas Muga (\$10)
Has a robust fruit-and-spice style; from Spain's Rioja region

2005 Château Ferry Lacombe Cuvée Lou Cascaï (\$18)
A tangy, spicy, mineral Cotes de Provence bottling

2005 Soter Pinot Noir Rosé (\$25)
Serious, elegant, bone dry; from Oregon

2005 Wölffer Estate (\$12)
A vibrant, light, savory classic from Long Island

RED

2004 Bouchaine Carneros Pinot Noir (\$28)
Warm cherry flavors and hint of spice; from California

2005 Georges Duboeuf Beaujolais-Villages (\$10)
Offers surprising quality for a widely available standby

2003 Glen Eldon Dry Bore Shiraz (\$26)
Rich, spicy and berry flavored; from Australia; the ideal grill wine

2004 Potel-Aviron Côte de Brouilly (\$19)
A mouthwatering and brightly fruity-spicy Beaujolais from a top *négociant*