

The fruit-bomb resistance

High alcohol levels have been a defining characteristic of California wines for decades. But now a small yet influential band of vintners, critics, and sommeliers has decided enough is enough—and is setting out to change the way we drink.

BY JORDAN MACKAY

ILLUSTRATION BY LEANDRO CASTELAO

It was mid-August in the freakishly cool summer of 2010, and along parts of the Sonoma Coast, only a handful of days in the previous three months had seen the temperature rise above 70°F. The weather up and down the state's coastline had been so cool, in fact, that if someone had asked the region's pinot noir producers to make a prediction about the coming harvest, two clear plotlines would likely have emerged. For vintners who prefer the big, jammy, fruit-forward wines for which California has become known, things did not look good. They hadn't seen enough of the long, hot days necessary to ripen the fruit and boost the sugar levels, so the grapes were maturing slowly. Meanwhile, the small but growing number of winemakers who champion lean-bodied pinots with sharp acidity and lower alcohol levels were getting excited about what was shaping up to be a very good year.

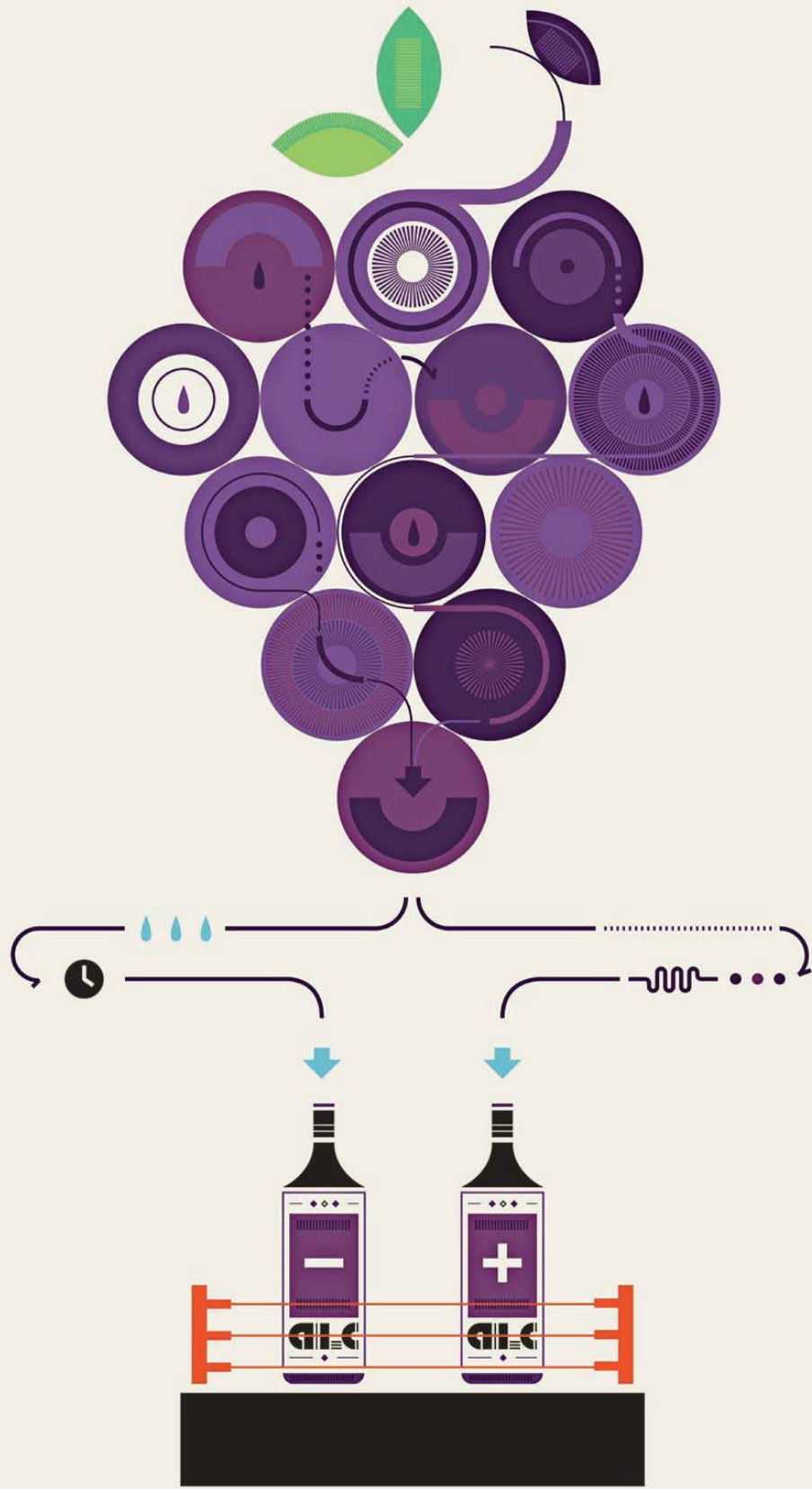
Then, seemingly out of nowhere, several extreme heat events (that's winemaker-speak for very hot weather) bombarded the coast like a series of Molotov cocktails. Placidly basking grapes were suddenly subjected to several days of unrelenting temperatures reaching into the triple digits—and the two camps of pinot noir makers bolted in opposite directions. Many of those who were attempting to cultivate riper fruit saw their grapes roast in the heat, the sugar content quickly rising and the hot sun scorching the grape skins. By the time the harvest ended in Sonoma County, many grapes had been ruined by sunburn. Yields dropped dramatically, and the financial losses are expected to set records.

Brian Loring, a proprietor of and a winemaker for the Loring Wine Company and an advocate for the riper style, says that he typically harvests 70 tons of grapes each September. This year, he brought in just three tons that month. Meanwhile, those producers who favor more balanced wines brought their grapes in early and are looking forward to what promises to be one of the best low-alcohol vintages in a long time.

This difference in harvest dates represents more than a simple stylistic choice. It points to the long-standing rift between the high-alcohol-wine faction and the low-alcohol camp, a split that has become increasingly wide.

Alcohol levels in California wines have been creeping up for decades. In 1971, Napa Valley's wines averaged 12.5 percent alcohol; today, the average surpasses 15 percent. As that level has risen, the tone of the argument has become more contentious. "Have you ever sat at a dinner table with Republican and Democratic family members and watched them go at it?" asks Jamie Kutch, a young winemaker who produces his highly regarded Sonoma Coast pinot noirs under an eponymous label. "That's the difference in opinion when it comes to alcohol and wine. We can fight it out all day long and never come to an agreement."

Advocates of the two styles have been at loggerheads for years, but lately, the dynamic has shifted. Low-alcohol enthusiasts have long felt like resistance fighters battling an overwhelming conspiracy, the lone voices of reason in a world gone mad with its attraction to high-alcohol wines. But the tide has shown signs of turning as more



Low-alcohol advocate Jim Clendenen stands in Bien Nacido Vineyards, in the Santa Maria Valley, weeks after his pinot noir grapes were picked.



A question of quantity

A RETIRED MD AND THE CREATOR OF PRINCEOFFPINOT.COM, **RUSTY GAFFNEY** CONDUCTED HIS OWN STUDIES ON THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL. HERE'S SOME OF WHAT HE LEARNED.

People argue over the significance of a 2 to 3 percent difference in alcohol level between glasses of wine. Does that really have an impact?

Yes, a noticeable one. My research shows that in all subjects tested, wines with 15 percent alcohol or higher produce blood-alcohol levels nearly at or exceeding legal intoxication (0.08 percent) after one standard drink (5 oz.).

What are some factors that affect intoxication?

First, the amount of food in the stomach. People get drunker faster if they haven't eaten recently. The speed at which drinks

are ingested also makes a difference—alcohol leaves the body much more slowly than it enters. Temperature plays a role, too; alcohol is absorbed more quickly when it's warm. And, of course, much depends on the physiology of the individual. Experienced drinkers, those who are heavier, and those with a greater muscle mass, as well as those who are not fatigued or under stress, are less affected by alcohol. The ability to metabolize alcohol diminishes with age, and women reach higher blood-alcohol concentrations faster than men do. Some medications also figure in: For instance, birth-

control pills can speed the absorption of alcohol.

What about the potential benefits? Is there any health-related reason to drink high-alcohol wine?

Most experts, myself included, are confident that alcohol in moderation is good for your health. Many studies suggest that the polyphenols in red wine give it a health advantage over other alcoholic beverages. But since there's no advantage to consuming more than a moderate amount of alcohol daily—two standard drinks for men and one for women—there's no health-related reason to drink high-alcohol wine.

vintners are making wines with lower alcohol levels and more sommeliers, retailers, and members of the media are beginning to appreciate them.

While a few winemakers across the state have always clung to a more restrained style—Jim Clendenen and Bob Lindquist, in the Santa Maria Valley; Randy Dunn, Jeff Virnig, and Cathy Corison, in Napa—the opposition to higher alcohol levels has sharpened in the past few years. In 2007, shop owner and celebrated wine guru Darrell Corti, who operates Corti Brothers, in Sacramento, created a firestorm when he decided that he would no longer stock unfortified wines that were higher than 14.5 percent alcohol. Restaurant wine directors have become more vocal as well. Rajat Parr, wine director and co-owner of RN74 (as well as my coauthor for *Secrets of the Sommeliers*), refuses to stock new-world pinot noirs and chardonnays that clock in at higher than 14 percent.

A handful of producers—Ross Cobb, Parr, Arnot-Roberts, and Wind Gap—are now focusing their efforts on restrained, lower-alcohol wines. For Wells Guthrie, cofounder and winemaker of the highly respected boutique label Copain, the move to a more balanced style was a dramatic one. Guthrie had been making ripe, fairly alcoholic wines that received lavish praise (scores of 95



and up) from the powerful critic Robert Parker. At the same time, he had been traveling in France, drinking old burgundies with alcohol levels of 13.5 and 12.5 percent. The fact that those wines still had energy and focus after 10—or even 30—years in the bottle left a big impression. So, in 2006, Guthrie did an about-face and harvested his grapes when the sugar levels were still quite low. He wanted to make a higher-acidity pinot noir with an alcohol level of less than 14 percent. Guthrie knew he would likely lose Parker's support and a few followers, but he was intent on making a more balanced style of wine. He took a risk, and in the end helped prove that sometimes, simply by picking well-managed vineyards earlier in the season, you can still make ripe wines with good color and flavor but with a lower level of alcohol.

Prominent voices in the media are also making the case for more reasonable alcohol levels in wine. Eric Asimov, the influential wine writer for the *New York Times*, leads the way in the mainstream, while critic Allen Meadows, who publishes *Burghound*, a newsletter devoted to pinot noir, has shown a willingness to criticize wines for over-ripeness and excessive alcohol.

Not surprisingly, there's now a backlash to the backlash. Parker recently praised a Philadelphia restaurant for its lack of a "precious sommelier trying to sell us some teeth-enamel-removing wine with acid levels close to toxic, made by some sheep farmer on the north side of his 4,000-foot-elevation vineyard picked two months before ripeness, and made from a grape better fed to wild boar than the human species." He continued, "We all know the type: saving the world from drinking good wine in the name of vinofreakism."

In a column for the *Wall Street Journal*, wine writer Lettie Teague also took the low-alcohol crowd to task. She invoked elitism, as Parker did, by asking if this preference is "just the next form of wine snobbery, similar to the backlash against chardonnay?" Teague then posited the questionable notion that "alcohol delivers flavors," noting that many wines in her cellar are "well north of 14 percent" and "[have] flavor and intensity and [are] immensely pleasurable." She went on to quote one top New York sommelier who compared alcohol in wine to the "fat in the meat" (though she admitted she wasn't sure how he meant it). I've used the same analogy, but not in a complimentary way.

To my taste, drinking a wine with a high level of alcohol is like biting down on a piece of steak covered with a layer of chewy fat. That fat doesn't deliver flavor; it just gets in the way of my enjoyment of the meat. Excessive alcohol works in a similar fashion, like a rubbery, flavorless membrane between what I think of as a wine's essence and the taste receptors on my tongue. When the alcohol level is lower and less obtrusive, I can fully taste the wine. But that's just me.

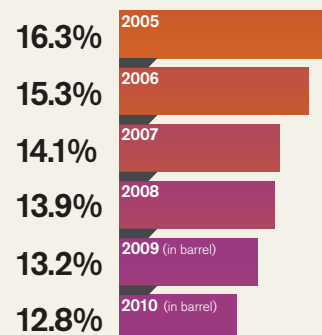
At this point, the debate has become so heated that it's difficult for the two sides to talk without throwing insults. (See Parker's sneering quote.) But taste in wine, like taste in music, is more than a simple preference—

How low can you go?

One winemaker's search for the ideal level of alcohol.

Jamie Kutch began his winemaking career enamored of the high-alcohol "new-wave" style. But as his career developed, his tastes shifted. By carefully managing his Sonoma Coast vineyards and picking his grapes before the sugar levels begin to spike, he's seen a steady dramatic decline in alcohol levels. With the 2010 harvest, he admits, he's gone as far as he wants to go. "For me, the sweet spot is in the low, 13 percent range," he says.

ALCOHOL PERCENTAGES FOR THE PAST SIX VINTAGES OF KUTCH'S PINOT NOIR



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Taste in wine, like taste in music, is more than a simple preference—it's a cultural signifier. It speaks not only to what we like, but also to who we are. In other words, it's personal.

The truth is that this conflict is less about alcohol itself than about what it represents. Elevated alcohol levels tend to define a wine that is soft, big in dimension, and ready to drink upon release. Such a wine rarely exhibits any sense of the vineyard where its grapes were grown, and it often overpowers any food that might accompany it. Wines high in alcohol are unlikely to improve with age—or even to age well at all. On the other hand, wines with lower alcohol levels—generally under 14 percent—tend to have fresher, brighter flavors and sharper acidity. Sommeliers like these wines for their natural affinity to food and their often elegant expression of terroir. Though wines with lower alcohol levels require time in the bottle before they're ready to drink, they can become more complex and flavorful with age.

This is not to say that the alcohol itself has no impact. A difference of 2 to 2.5 percent alcohol in a glass of wine may seem small, but those who favor low-alcohol wines say that it adds up. As the *New York Times*' Asimov wrote recently, "My preference is almost always for less alcohol, if only so I can drink more wine without feeling its effects too quickly. I wouldn't presume to tell a winemaker how to make a wine, but it is a factor when I decide what to buy and drink." Of course, those who prefer the heavier style—what has come to be called "new-wave" wine—consider the difference in alcohol insignificant, particularly if you're drinking only a glass or two.

What's not insignificant is the role of critics, especially Parker, in driving the popularity of these wines. There are those who believe that one of the key reasons why mainstream critics prefer high-alcohol wines is that the conditions for professional tastings are stacked in their

favor. It's not unusual for critics to taste dozens of wines in a day, side by side; sometimes blind, sometimes not; often with nothing but a little roast beef and bread to cleanse their palates. Under those circumstances, it makes sense that the sheer power of young, superripe, fruity wines engineered to show well at the moment they're released will overshadow more subtle wines made to complement food and to be more delicious in five years than they are in the months immediately after release. Perhaps the major critics came to love the new-wave wines after consistently seeing them dominate these tastings. I've judged wine this way many times, and it's true that nuance and potential can be difficult to appreciate when your palate is being hammered by massive amounts of alcohol.

This past September, I visited Jim Clendenen at his Santa Maria Valley winery, Au Bon Climat, and found him in a holy rage against superripe wines. Clendenen insisted that it isn't the fact that Parker and the other prominent critics have snubbed his wines that irks him. He's angry, he said, because those same critics champion wines that, in his opinion, are made specifically to pander to their palates.

"There are still grapes at a vineyard where I picked six weeks ago," he ranted. "It's not my goal to say that somebody who makes a 16-percent-alcohol wine is making a mistake. What I would love to know, and I have to know one day: What would allow someone to walk through a vineyard where the grapes are desiccated, dehydrated, shriveling, losing dollar value to the grower, losing quality for the winemaker, and say on any level it's not ready.... It's just like deciding if you're going to overcook steaks or undercook them. People have the right to make their own decisions. But when it's palpably to the detriment of wine quality in every sense except [to please] one stupid man's palate...I can't even understand the insanity that would allow you to destroy the quality of the fruit you have and the condition of your vineyard by waiting—unless you're appealing for Parker points."

On the other hand, making lower-alcohol wines requires a certain courage and a willingness to take risks with little financial and critical incentive. It also requires a vineyard of rare quality.

Kevin Harvey studied pinot noir growing conditions in California and in France before founding Rhys Vineyards in 2000 on sites in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "One of the keys is shallow or rocky soils, which are the same as the best terroir in France," he says. "A lot of people think [the climate is] the reason California wines have such high alcohol levels. That's not the case at all. In fact, many California regions are cooler than Burgundy. The reason we've found is that deep soils don't offer sufficient drying at the root zone to promote ripeness. What happens [in these soils] is that the grapes stay green and continue to produce sugar. By focusing on soils that are naturally depleted, we get ripe grapes with lower sugars."

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The problem is that such sites are few and far between. "If you intersect the zone that has the right climate for pinot noir and the zones that have really shallow, rocky soils, you have very few areas to choose from," Harvey says. He looks for the poorest soils in cool climates so that his vines will, at some point in the late summer (the earlier, the better), shift their energy from growing leaves to ripening grapes.

Fruit is a plant's reproductive vehicle; as the stresses of lean soil, cool temperatures, and limited water threaten their ability to reproduce, the vines will ripen earlier, before environmental pressures put them out of business. Rich soils, which are abundant in California; unlimited water, through irrigation; fertilization; and lots of sun take away a vine's motivation to shift its focus to reproduction and ripening.

The absence of early fall rain in California (showers rarely start before October or November) gives winemakers little incentive to hasten their harvest. Instead, they can let grapes hang, losing much of their moisture as their sugar levels rise. Then, once the grapes are picked, they replace that moisture by adding water and fix the acidity in the winery, with no fear of being downgraded by the critics who enjoy the soft, jammy wines that result from these practices.

Cobb, the winemaker for Hirsch Vineyards and for his family's Cobb label, remembers the risks he took back in 2006 when he decided to pick Emmaline Vineyard to make a pinot noir with an astonishingly low (for California) 12.8 percent alcohol level.

This particular vineyard, west of Sebastopol, receives a great deal of shade and fog. "The grapes were on the edge of ripeness," Cobb says. "I couldn't have done this from a different site. It was very cold; everything was meticulous; the clusters were manicured week after week after week." He adds that he was "pretty nervous" about the harvest, which he scheduled for October 10. "I did a full cluster sample the night before, because I was a little worried. There were some clusters

CONTINUED ON PAGE 107

California's top producers of low-alcohol wine

Au Bon Climat Winery: Jim Clendenen's pinot noirs and chardonnays from Santa Barbara County are benchmarks for the low-alcohol style in the state. La Bauge Au-Dessus pinot noir, 2007 (13.5%, \$35), Santa Barbara County chardonnay, 2009 (13.5%, \$20); AUBONCLIMAT.COM

Copain Wine Cellars: Wells Guthrie primarily mines the Anderson Valley to capture its distinctive terroir for his pinot noirs. Les Voisins pinot noir, 2009 (13.3%, \$36), Tous Ensemble pinot noir, 2008 (13.5%, \$20); COPAINWINES.COM

Corison Winery: Cathy Corison has been one of Napa's biggest champions of balanced cabernet sauvignon since she started making wine in 1987. Napa Valley cabernet, 2007 (13.6%, \$70), Kronos cabernet, 2006 (13.8%, \$98); CORISON.COM

Kutch Wines: Jamie Kutch makes his eponymous pinot noirs from vineyards on the Sonoma Coast and in the Petaluma Gap. Sonoma Coast pinot noir, 2009 (13.5%, \$39), McDougall Ranch Vineyard pinot noir, 2009 (13.7%, \$48); KUTCHWINES.COM

Wind Gap: Under his new label, Pax Mahle is producing some intriguing California wines from a variety of regions. Gap's Crown & Griffin's Lair pinot noir, 2009 (12.5%, \$36), Wind Gap trousseau gris, 2009 (13.3%, \$21); WINDGAPWINES.COM