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The Decanter interview: Jamie Kutch

A circuitous route it may have been, but his singular vision and determination to succeed have taken this former New York trader and ‘wine geek’ to fully fledged California winemaker, reports Elin McCoy...



Elin McCoy

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Winemaker Jamie Kutch emerges, wearing a three-day beard, quilted vest, and his trademark grin complete with dimple. His close-cropped hair is flecked with grey, but he looks younger than his 45 years.

Scroll down for McCoy's pick: a taste of the Kutch range

Inside, he shows off shiny fermentation tanks and stacked barrels occupying a corner of the huge, spotless custom-crush facility, and in a small, bare tasting room he pours his latest single vineyard Pinot Noirs. Savoury and terroir-driven, they're 180° different in style from his first one, the ripe, sweet-fruit bruiser with 16.3% alcohol he made back in 2005. With these wines Kutch's transformation from competitive New York financial trader 14 years ago to confident Sonoma winemaker seems complete. His success and evolution from wines of sheer power to those of finesse owes everything to his enthusiasm and willingness to work hard, question everything, experiment, and help create a movement toward more balanced, subtle wines from the coolest parts of California. 'Failure was not an option,' he says. 'September 11th had a profound effect on me and I was determined to live a simpler and happier life.'



The McDougall Ranch vineyard, within the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA, Sonoma County

First steps

'I grew up on Long Island and studied sociology at Fordham University. That's where I first got interested in wine,' explains Kutch. But at the time his obsession was DJ-ing and he spent hundreds of hours mixing music tracks. After graduation, Kutch joined the corporate rat race of Manhattan's finance industry, chained to desktop computer screens, and lived a New York lifestyle with his girlfriend, public relations professional Kristen Green.

'Wine became my serious hobby. I joined a blind tasting group, and devoured as much information as I could get my hands on,' he says. 'I made my first wine in my apartment from juice concentrate.'

In true 21st century fashion, his career change was jumpstarted by the Bulletin Board on Robert Parker's website. Bored with his job, he posted reviews, traded wines, conversed with winemakers.



Pinot Noir sign at a Sonoma Coast vineyard

'The first wine that blew my mind was a La Tâche 1999. Then a tasting of Kosta Browne's Kanzler Vineyard Pinot 2002 showed me what was possible in California, especially from the Sonoma Coast.'

When Michael Browne offered to help him make his Pinot winemaking dream a reality, he grabbed it. Naturally, he'd researched the growth potential for the wine business, especially Pinot Noir, whose fortunes had been boosted big time by the 2004 movie *Sideways*.

Jamie Kutch at a glance

Born 9 February 1974 in Manhasset, New York

Education Fordham University, major in sociology

First career Financial trader at Herzog Heine Geduld and Merrill Lynch

First vintage of Kutch wines 2005

Annual production 3,000 cases

Lives San Francisco, California

Family Married to Kristen Green with one son, Clayton

Favourite Burgundy producers For white, Coche-Dury; for red, Mugneret-Gibourg

On 3 September 2005, he posted on the Bulletin Board: 'My entire life is changed – I'm moving from NYC to California to make Pinot Noir.' Within days 400 fellow posters had signed up to buy his wine, though Kutch hadn't yet moved to California.

When he asked Green to go with him, she said yes, and her public relations skills proved to be another secret to his success.

From bold to elegant

Kutch arrived in California with \$100,000, and for his first vintage he bought barrels of Russian River Valley Pinot from Kosta Browne, proposing to Green as they sorted grapes (happily, she accepted).

But for his next vintage, he wanted lower alcohol than 16.3%. 'I began using native yeasts for fermentation and gentle extraction for more complexity, but the alcohol was still 15.3%.' So the next year, he decided to harvest really early. 'I picked my first grapes 30 days before anyone else,' he recalls. 'The wine was under 13%, but it was so light in body it had no intensity. I realised pick time was crucial.'

Trying to learn as much as he could about Pinot Noir, he began travelling to Burgundy. 'I talked to Aubert de Villaine [of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti] about stem inclusion. I bought old wines and looked at Chalone, Mount Eden, Calera. I had an epiphany about whole-cluster fermentation. When you leave stems in, that adds weight, power and grip. All the wines that aged best were made that way.'

Josh Jensen of Calera and Jeffrey Patterson of Mount Eden, who were advocates of using stems, were big influences. 'I tried 25% to 50% whole cluster in 2009, and saw my wines get more complex. In 2012 my fruit was really great, and I went to 100%, and I've been there ever since.'

At the same time, he was rethinking everything else he was doing. 'My religion in wine is Burgundy. I'm not trying to make Burgundy, but I subscribe to their dogma.' He sorts grapes into open-top fermenters, uses ambient yeast to initiate fermentation, and does punch-downs with bare feet (though I don't know many Burgundians who do that) and presses into old French oak barrels.

'I believe in terroir,' he says. 'So I started hunting down new cooler, rockier vineyards that were dry-farmed.' One is the Bohan Vineyard, three miles from the Sonoma Coast. 'It's a very special place,' says Kutch. 'The family has been there since 1857, the vines are 47 years old, on their own roots.' He lined up fruit there in 2013.



Harvesting Pinot Noir at Bohan Vineyard

Kutch's route to wines that have Burgundian elegance and grace included joining In Pursuit of Balance, an association of two-dozen small wineries founded by Rajat Parr and Jasmine Hirsch in 2011. The goal of the group's tastings around the US and in the UK was to get attention for Californian Pinot Noirs being made in a restrained style far different from big, high-alcohol examples aimed at getting high scores. For Kutch, the tastings were great exposure, putting his wines in the same context as experienced winemakers like Ted Lemon of Littorai.

'Much of my life I've been behind the curve,' says Kutch. 'I was behind on investing in Wall Street, I didn't buy a house during the economic downturn in 2009. But I was right on the Pinot Noir zeitgeist. Like the Paris Tasting, In Pursuit of Balance was a symbol of how times had changed. Seeing the industry shift to our ideas has been exciting.'

Rocky road

Despite determination, drive and high energy, none of this, says Kutch, has been easy. His engaging, persuasive manner belies his ambition and persistence. He doesn't take no for an answer.

At first, with no established reputation, getting his hands on fruit from the best vineyards was tough. He used his finance trading skills, cold-calling owners of vineyards he was interested in.

'I dropped pre-drafted letters in peoples' mailboxes and was told by the postmaster that I was breaking the law, and if I did it again I'd be reported,' he recalls, chuckling. 'And I actually convinced the farmer of Savoy Vineyards to sell me fruit by offering half the payment in advance.'

His worst year, and career low, he admits, was 2008. 'Less than three years in business, severe fires in Mendocino County affect our Pinot grapes. The smoke caused a tainted smell in the wine, and we had to sell off over 50% of it at a huge loss.'

'Kutch Wines finally became profitable in 2010, five years after starting the brand.' Now he makes about 3,000 cases a year.

Looking ahead

Kutch still eats and sleeps Pinot Noir, his enthusiasm seemingly intact. He's settled into sourcing grapes from a solid group of three vineyards on the Sonoma Coast and one in Mendocino's Anderson Valley. The latest additions to his Pinot line-up are a wine from Bohan Vineyard's rocky Graveyard Block, and one from Mendocino's Signal Ridge Vineyard. Chardonnay became part of the mix five years ago, his first from a vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains with the stunning 2014 vintage. And he plans to continue.



Kutch passes on his winemaking skills to his son Clayton

'I'll never be anything other than a wine geek,' he says, 'but my goal is to own a piece of land to live on, plant a vineyard on, and build a winery on. In the past six months there have been two opportunities, including one on Falstaff Road. Both times I was outbid. California is crazy now. But knowing I'll make wine for a lifetime, I'm being patient and awaiting an opportunity – or a recession, which will eventually come.'

He believes he will live longer because he made the decision to move to California. 'Don't get me wrong,' he says. 'New York still has my heart, but California is my soul.'

Elin McCoy is an award-winning journalist and author who writes for Bloomberg News

See McCoy's pick: a taste of the Kutch range

Kutch, Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast, California, USA, 2016

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I don't like this Sonoma Coast Chardonnay quite as much as Kutch's first foray into a white, from the Santa Cruz Mountains. This one, 100% Bohan Vineyard fruit, is powerful and intensely lemony, almost like a lemon-drop candy.

Points

90



Kutch, Falstaff Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, 2017

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This vineyard 13km from the Pacific near Freestone lies just under the fog line where the climate is colder than Burgundy, and its Pinot is always the last one Kutch picks. The wine is dark, rich and super appetising, with lots of exotic Asian spices and an earthy, savoury, almost ...

Points

95

Kutch, Bohan Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, 2017

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This is Kutch's lightest, most delicate Pinot, yet it has a backbone of tannin that allows it to age. What stands out are its gorgeous aromas of rose petal, fruit and mint, its racy acidity and long, sweet red cherry flavours. Kutch's first vintage from this vineyard on a remote ...

Points

93

Kutch, McDougall Ranch Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, 2016

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Located only about 5.5km from the Pacific, this super-cool vineyard sits at about 300m yet is the earliest to be picked, at the end of August. The deepest and most powerful Kutch Pinot, it shows layers of lively red fruit, mineral overtones, and a savoury spiciness.

Points

93

Kutch, Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, California, USA, 2017

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Succulent, bright and charming, this blend from Kutch's single vineyards is the winery's best value. It brims with vibrant red cherry flavours and floral aromas; whole-cluster fermentation has added spice, though it lacks a bit of finish. Despite the October fires, Sonoma Pinot Noir did well in 2017, as grapes ...

Points

90

Kutch, Sans Soufre Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, 2017

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This no-added-sulphites, carbonic maceration wine is Kutch's answer to Beaujolais, though it's 100% Pinot Noir. Fun, fresh, light and pretty, a vin de soif with lush aromatics, bright berry fruit and zingy acidity on the finish. Intended for restaurants, it's also available at retail.

Points

89

