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Smaller, better in Sebastopol

BY PEG MELNIK - October 25, 2014

A mysterious apple tree taught Paul Sloan his first lesson in winemaking when he was 10 years old.

“For whatever reason, that tree with the smallest apples had the flavors that were the most intense,” he said.

Today Sloan and his wife, Kathryn, are the vintners of Small Vines, a Sebastopol brand that is based on the Burgundian model of winemaking and vineyard management. The philosophy embraces the practice of getting smaller yields from higher-density, European-styled spacing of vines.



Small Vines Wines owners Paul and Kathryn Sloan (JOHN BURGESS/)

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The Sloans say they reap fewer pounds per vine in order to produce higher quality fruit. It’s a nod to the tasty apple tree Sloan grew up with on his family’s 250-acre ranch in Santa Rosa.

The couple sit beneath a grove of redwoods on their property in Sebastopol. It’s a 12.5-acre spread, and they’re in the midst of building a winery not far from their house, the historic Barlow homestead that dates back to 1897.

The Barlows were prominent apple and berry farmers. Today the family name is well known for its apple processing plant in Sebastopol, which has been transformed into a food and wine haven with wineries, retail shops, artisan studios and restaurants in the mix.

Kathryn, 45, said living in a historic house suits the family, most especially their two children: Dakota, 11, and Savannah, 8.

“Instead of a Queen Anne Victorian, it’s a farmhouse. . . . We’re humble farmers. I live in an old house. I wear my grandmother’s ring and we value traditional winemaking methods.”

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Small Vines Wines owner Paul Sloan works on special imported tractors from Europe designed to work in his narrowly planted vines. (JOHN BURGESS/ PD)

It all began with a fascination of pinot noir.

Sloan, 42, was a 19-year old busboy at the Kenwood Restaurant, and then owner Susan Schacher had a daily ritual of reveling in a glass of pinot noir at closing time.

“I said to myself, ‘This pinot noir varietal has to be very special,’ ” he said.

In 1993, Sloan began working for John Ash restaurant in Santa Rosa, and within six months he became assistant wine steward there. “There was a wine library at John Ash, and I was really engaged,” Sloan said. “I devoured the books.”

While working at John Ash, Sloan was offered a taste of a \$3,000-plus bottle of Burgundy — the Domaine de la Romanee Conti.

“A man poured me a generous glass and he said, ‘Enjoy this throughout the evening. It may just change your life.’ ”

The pricey Burgundy did just that. “Things just started churning inside me and I wanted to make wines of the highest level of purity and authenticity.”

After working for the late Warren Dutton of Sebastopol’s Dutton Ranch and studying viticulture at Santa Rosa Junior College, Sloan was at a crossroads. He was accepted to study at California Polytechnic State University, but he was eager to begin his brand.

Dutton, who mentored the couple, encouraged them to travel to France, since they wanted to follow the lead of the French. After several research trips, the Sloans founded Small Vines in 1998.

The husband and wife team seems to be the perfect yin-yang for the operation. Sloan covers farming and winemaking, while Kathryn tackles the business side of the operation. Meanwhile, both continue to be adventuresome, which isn’t surprising considering they began their courtship as rock climbers.

“Paul is one big adventurer,” said Kathryn. “Rock climbing, surfing, scuba diving. It’s hard to keep up with this farmer who has a lot of energy.”

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