

Frenchman finds his 'place' in Napa wines

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By SASHA PAULSEN, Register Features Editor | Posted: Friday, February 19, 2010 12:00 am | (0) Comments

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Stéphane Deroncourt, who consults for more than 60 wineries in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, has launched his first own label of wines, with grapes from Napa and Lake counties. Submitted photo

Ask Stéphane Deroncourt — who consults for more than 60 wineries in Europe, Asia and the Middle East — what prompted him to choose Napa when he launched his own label of wines, and the Frenchman responds with a smile and Gallic shrug.

“Why not?”

Deroncourt was in town recently for a tasting of the first release of his wines, all 2006 vintage: a cabernet franc, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, syrah and merlot, all sourced from Napa Valley grapes along with a Lake County cabernet sauvignon.

It's the first wine he's made in the U.S. and the next step on a long and productive career that began in 1982, when he hitchhiked from his home in the north of France to Bordeaux, where he took a job as a vineyard worker.

The son of a steel worker, Derenoncourt, then 19, had been working as an auto mechanic, but he said he didn't like it. He was not particularly interested in wines, either. "We drank beer," he said.

For the next decade, he worked in the vineyards of the Right Bank of Bordeaux where he began his study of terroir, the interaction of soil, climate and site that puts its stamp on the grapes. It became the foundation for his approach to winemaking, which he was able to put into practice in the early 1990s when he went to work in the cellar of St. Émilion's Chateau Pavie Macquin. His success there – particularly with the difficult harvest of 1993 — brought him notice, and an offer to be winemaker for La Mondotte, a new micro cuvée from grapes grown on one tiny limestone plot near Pavie Macquin. The first vintage of La Mondotte was a sensation, praised by critics and consumers.

His career soared as he became an internationally sought-after winemaker known for his ability to express terroir in his wines. He His goal, he said, is "to draw out the identity of the locality and imprint it on the fruit," using natural viticultural methods and minimal intervention in the cellar.

For all his acclaim, however, he remains, in his description, a humble man who credits his success to the years he spent in the vineyards.

"I am a drinker, not a taster," he teasingly told the wine writers who came to taste his first vintage, most of which has already sold out.

His Napa project began in 2004 he was consulting on a project on Spring Mountain. "I was impressed with the vines," he said.

He began a study of local vineyards, looking for sources for grapes for what would be his own label — parcels with ideal soil composition, ample sun exposure, high elevation and low yields. The sites he chose: Lee Hudson's Carneros vineyards for his syrah to Stagecoach vineyards on Atlas Peak, to Andy Beckstoffer's Red Hills vineyard in Lake County.

The next step was to find a colleague to oversee the Napa operation full-time, while the globe-trotting Derenoncourt fulfills his other commitments. He recruited H  l  ne Mingot, a winemaker with whom he had collaborated in Tuscany and Bordeaux. He calls her his "soul mate" for her understanding of his views on terroir; in the Napa Valley, he said, she will be "his hands and feet."

He, however, plans to get back to Napa as much as he can. "I love this valley," he said.

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