

Someone's In The Wine Cellar Urban Wine Trail Goes Municipal

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Special to CASA

WE ALL HOPE TO ONE DAY have the legendary Moment of Clarity, when we suddenly realize what it is that we have to do with our lives. Few ever have that moment. For those that do, it doesn't usually come during a sixteen-hour airplane flight to Australia. But, amazingly enough, that is what happened to Don Potter of Municipal Winemakers. This is the story of how he became a winemaker.

Don was an undergrad at UCSB, heading along a path that would put him in law school. It is true that he had spent a summer working at Sunstone Winery in Santa Ynez. Under the direction of Blair Fox, he had worked in the tasting rooms, but also did some work down in the cellars. He had scrubbed barrels, rolled racks, and watched the process of making wine. It was intriguing work. Don loved it. But law school was his aim. The LSATs were in the cards, when he decided to take a vacation trip to Australia. Somewhere between here and there, he had that epiphanic moment that made him revisit his life plan. By the time the plane landed, he had made up his mind, and he headed for Perth, to enroll in the Agribusiness and Wine Science program at Curtin University. A month later, he was taking classes. So much for vacation!

Three years later, he graduated. He stayed on in Australia, working the harvests. Then, through connections in Australia, he flew to France to work the harvests there. He saw how the French harvested and handled their grapes. For several years he bounced between France, the US, and

Australia, doing multiple harvests a year, rather than the single harvest he might have seen if he had remained in one hemisphere. In effect, he doubled his knowledge and experience each year. Between Chateau de Mont Faucon in France, and Henschke Cellars in Australia, he honed his craft. From Mont Faucon, he learned a love of Rhone style wines. From Henschke, he came to admire the flavors of hot climate grapes. Out of this also rose a respect for the tradition-based winemaking in France, and an appreciation of the science-based winemaking in America and Australia. He prefers to know the numbers of wine science. But, he doesn't let the titrations and sugar numbers push him around. "You have to like what you taste," he says.

One of the things that we like about his approach is his use of screw caps on his very admirable wines, as well as the use of bottle caps on his absolutely delicious sparkling wine. These caps are coming into more common usage, but are quite a gutsy departure for a new winery. It is fairly well known within the industry that caps preserve the bouquet, fruitiness, and character of wine while avoiding the 'one bottle per case' of spoilage that comes from using cork. Nonetheless, much of the public still hasn't gotten over the image of cheap wine coming in a screw cap. When Don was at Henschke Cellars, he did a vertical tasting of twelve years of vintages in a blind taste test. Twelve years of the same wines were kept in cork. Twelve years were kept in caps.



Tasted blindly, 92% of the tasters preferred the capped bottles over the corked bottles. The test changed his perceptions forever.

For Don, and for those in the know, the caps preserve the primary flavors of the grape for much longer than cork. The flavors of the fruit itself stay on, becoming smoother, but not vanishing. As for sparkling wines, few people know that even in the great houses in Champagne, bottles are sealed with bottle caps for the aging of the vintage. Only at the end are corks put into the bottles. Chandon Vineyards, in Napa, has been selling its premier marque of sparkling wine in bottle caps for a few years, even though its regular sparkling wines are sold with corks.

Municipal Winemaker's own sparkling wine, a sparkling shiraz labeled "Fizz", comes with a bottle cap. Sparkling red wines are almost unheard of in America. They are, however, well known in France and Australia. They are designed for hot summer days, when a regular bottle of wine just won't slake that thirst. And, they are magnificent for picnics. The wines themselves are very savory wines. They are not jammy, or lush, if you will. They are focused on balancing the acids nicely, to give a round, full flavor that is crisp, bright, and has a nice long finish. The names on the wine bottles will tell you much more than any battery of wine writers or marketing geeks could ever say. "Bright White" and "Dark Red" are just two names that beg the curious to taste them.

Municipal Winemakers will be opening their tasting Santa Barbara tasting room on February 20th. They will become part of the Urban Wine Trail. You can find them tucked off of an alleyway



Don Potter of Municipal Winemakers

in a funky old building on Anacapa Street behind Kunin Wines, just a block or so from the beach. Don is working on giving us a fun tasting room, just right for the Funk Zone, full of recycled materials, with a lovely deck outside for sitting and enjoying a Santa Barbara afternoon. Bottling only 500 cases of wine a year, Municipal is a delightfully small operation. You can expect to find Don standing behind the counter at the tasting room on weekends. He is a charming fellow, seemingly a natural for this work and we are grateful to him for making it ever easier to enjoy eating and drinking 'local.' We highly recommend that you visit him when his tasting room is open. We are sure he will be interested in listening to what you have to say about his creations. Better still, he will be there to tell you what he was thinking about when he made the wine. This is an opportunity you should not miss, as we think that Don's wines are heading for big headlines. They are certainly heading for our table!



Amanda and Richard Payatt combine their considerable writing skills with their incredible knowledge and experience of fine dining to bring you this column.