

Someone's in the Wine Cellar

Something Different Every Year

By **RICHARD** and **AMANDA PAYATT**
Special to CASA

ONE OF THE MOST PLEASANT THINGS ABOUT SETH KUNIN'S WINES ARE THEIR HONESTY. A lot of winemakers make their mark by creating a product that is consistently the same year after year. There will be some variation, of course; but, if you open a bottle of Mondavi cabernet, you have a pretty fair idea of what you are likely to have roll over your tongue. And this is certainly not a bad thing. But Kunin Winery takes a very different, refreshing approach. It is an approach that we both really enjoy. To wit: *One field, one grape, one wine.*

Seth has picked out what he thinks are the six best vineyards for five different kinds of grapes, and then lets nature take its course. Not unlike the French *appellation d'origine contrôlée* system, wherein the grapes in a given bottle come from a narrowly defined area, Kunin uses the grapes from only one given vineyard. This means that the general taste of the grape will be of the terroir of the field, as well as the character of the varietal itself. But this also means that from year to year, the wine will show the marks of a warmer or cooler summer. Foggy days, late rains, chilly mornings will all leave their special qualities on the grapes. Once the fruit is harvested, Kunin leads the grapes through the normal course of winemaking. But then he does something that is very gutsy, he puts the wine in the barrel for the absolute minimum amount of time. In the case of a red wine, that is between ten and twelve months. He also scrupulously avoids any of the regular winemaking magic

tricks to tweak a vintage into a more consistent product from year to year. In short, he is distilling the essence of the grape into the bottle. Seth doesn't want the wine to taste the same every year. He wants to feature the grape for the unique, ever changing, natural thing it is. Lovely.

Once in the bottle, he will lay the wine down for a few years to let it mature, and to let the character show through. When he releases a wine, it definitely shows well, and is amply balanced for immediate consumption. If you do want to drink them now, decant them first, as they will be very robust. But, should you lay the bottles down for a few years, more wonders await you. Where some wineries are releasing almost exclusively 2008 vintage reds this year, Kunin is releasing a lot of 2005 vintage reds this year. In short, Kunin is an old fashioned winemaker.

And it is well that Kunin ought to be an old fashioned wine maker. He studied with some of the best winemakers in Santa Ynez. He also studied in the old school way of working the harvests, in the thick of it, rather than going off to a university to learn the art. Seth wandered from his home in Manhattan to UCLA, intent on studying medicine. But, his college job of working in restaurants took him in a very different direction. Recruited out of Westwood by no less a restaurateur than Doug Margerum, he took up residence as general manager of the Wine Cask in 1990. Well, you couldn't spend much time at the Wine Cask without being sucked into the world of wine. Margerum's passion for wine is infectious. Kunin

found himself spending lots of time with both Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat winery, and Frank Ostini of the Hitching Post restaurant, which is also famed for its own wines. He also started fooling around with making his own wines. Then, after creating and opening Cuvée Restaurant with Margerum, it was time for Seth to do something different.

In a stroke of good fortune, Gainey Winery happened to need a new team of winemakers in 1996. So, Seth stepped in to assist Kirby Anderson in the formative years when Anderson put his stamp on Gainey. The shift from restaurateur and wine hobbyist to commercial winemaker was now complete.

In 1998, Kunin had worked around the process to the point that he wanted to make his own wine. The first batch was based upon eight tons of zinfandel grapes. It was pretty good. The next year, he decided to make the big jump, and start his own full-blown winery. Since then, the winery has grown, and Kunin has grown with it. He produces about 5,000 cases of wine a year from just six varietals: viognier from the Stolpman vineyard, syrah from the Alisos vineyard, a syrah from Paradise Road vineyard, a zinfandel from the Cushman vineyard in Paso Robles, and a Rhone blend with grapes from Lerner and Rancho Santa Margarita vineyards. He has been working with these vineyards for more than ten years, and every year, the wine is a little different. But it is always delightful.

A year or so ago, he opened a lovely tasting room in one of the old VA bunkhouses at 28 Anacapa near the beach. He shares the space with Westerly for whom he used to be winemaker. It is kind of funny that, at least for the moment, most of the wines on both sides of the room reflect his handiwork.



Seth Kunin

While the tasting room is usually pretty busy on weekends with out of town visitors, we fortunate locals can go there mid-week when we are likely to run into Kunin himself. He seems sincerely interested in meeting his customers, so drop by and tell him what you think. You might also meet his wife, Magan, who runs the tasting room. And if you are very lucky, catch his 16 month old daughter. She helps out with the items on the lower shelves. This is a family run operation, you know.

The **Kunin Wines Tasting Room** is located at 28 Anacapa St and is open daily from 11-6pm. Contact them at 963-9696.



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