

# Someone's in the Wine Cellar

## A Silver Star on the Urban Wine Trail

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Special to CASA

**EVERYBODY WE MEET IN THE WINE BUSINESS IS INTERESTING.** Everybody has a wonderful story to tell. Everybody knows the ins and outs of the business. But Benjamin Silver is something very different. We met him at a local aikido dojo, where he practices as a third degree black belt. We quickly realized that his martial arts focus informs his professional acumen as well.

Benjamin seems to live and breathe the Central Coast wine business. He knows far more than just the basics of wine and winemaking. He knows the local fields. He knows individual blocks in many of the fields. He knows which winemaker had the block planted in its current configuration, if it was put in within the last 20 years. He knows what kind of varietal is planted there... often which strain, or clone of the varietal. He usually knows what the original root stock is, and sometimes what wines that original root stock serviced. He can quote seasonal weather patterns and their effect on the resultant fruit. And, of course, he knows the local winemakers and their wines like the back of his hand.

In short, talking to Benjamin Silver is like talking to a living wine encyclopedia. And when it comes to making wines...? Well! Turns out, he really does know what he is talking about.

Benjamin grew up the son of an Amherst University organic chemistry professor. As a child, he would hang out in the labs. He loved to conduct experiments and seemed to have a knack for the science itself. In his late high school years, he took summer jobs at the University, doing gardening work and earning the charmingly affectionate title of *Junior Bushman*. Working with the plants began a life long love of horticulture, and a deep understanding of the hand of nature. Moving on to UMASS to get degrees in pre-veterinary science and Italian, he spent time abroad in Sienna, Italy, and in Salamanca, Spain. There, he learned an appreciation for the wines of Europe.

Graduating in 1993, Benjamin went off to Martha's Vineyard for the summer to consider what to do next. He took a job at Chicama Vineyards in Martha's Vineyard, initially the result of dialing the wrong telephone number, but mostly because it sounded interesting. He did all sorts of work there... and got the fever.

In 1994 he sent out resumes to Italy and around America to see if he could get a job working the harvest. He received a letter from the now legendary local winemaker, Dan Gehrs, who was in his explosive years at Zaca Mesa Vineyard. That was enough to tempt him out to California.

Arriving in Santa Barbara, he found himself studying at what some call the Great University of Wine. There, Dan Gehrs was schooling

people like Jim Clendenen (Au Bon Climat,) Mike Brown (Kalyra,) Bob Lindquist (Qupé,) Ken Brown (Ken Brown Wines,) Chuck Carlson (Curtis,) and Lane Tanner (Lane Tanner Wines,) in the fine art of winemaking at Zaca Mesa. Benjamin also took seminars up at UC Davis's School of Viticulture and Enology. But the most important part of that winemaking education came from being around Dan Gehrs. Though it is helpful to look at the chemistry and the numbers of winemaking, Dan taught Benjamin to make wine by the palate. He worked four harvests with Dan, as laboratory technician, and as an assistant winemaker. Then, when Dan left in 1997, Benjamin became Zaca Mesa's winemaker.

Benjamin stayed there until 2000.

In 2000, Silver Wines did its first vintage, crushing 22 tons of Cabernet and Pinot Noir. The reviews were great, and the medals piled up. This has enabled him to focus on making top quality wines.

The lineup at Silver Wines is heavy with Syrahs, Benjamin's favorite grape. There are also Viogniers, Pinot Noirs, Sangioveses, and Cabernet Sauvignons. These wines are rich, deep, and full-bodied in character, comparable to European wines. They aren't meant to be enjoyed young, and so they aren't released until they are ready. Right now, Benjamin is releasing the 2003 and 2004 wines, where many a winery is releasing their 2008 or 2009 wines. As his prices are quite competitive, this should give the reader a worthy pause. And even when released, his wines will easily stand several more years of aging ... if you can resist popping them open right away.

The Syrahs are big, bright, and beautiful. Filled with red raspberries and a creamy orange mid-palate, they are warm and delightful. The Viogniers are a floral bouquet, topped with citrus and stone fruit, and sprinkled with earthy minerals. In short, they are filled to the brim with the qualities that we think Central Coast wines are all about. The quality of the wines is what makes the Silver label one that stands strong in the constellation of the Dan Gehrs School of star winemakers. You can pick up his wines at East Beach Wine, Lazy Acres, or Tri-County Produce. His tasting room in Santa Barbara is by appointment only, but it is very much worth picking up the phone for. His wines are not only wonderful, but listening to him talk about them is an amazing experience.

Silver Wines is located on Reddick, near Milpas. Tastings By Appointment. For more information call 963-3052.



Benjamin Silver



**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.