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Wines That Favor Balance Over Power

By JAY MCINERNEY

David Ramey was driving on a dusty road through the land of tequila and mezcal when he had what he describes as his “coup de foudre”—otherwise known as his road-to-Mexicali moment—and realized, improbably, that he wanted to make wine. “I suddenly thought, wine makes people happy,” he says. “And it’s the intersection of art and commerce.” For a California guy who’d recently graduated from Santa Cruz with a degree in American literature, there wouldn’t seem to be anything preordained about this choice, which entailed returning to school to catch up on chemistry and other courses he’d disdained as an undergraduate before enrolling in the oenology department at UC Davis, the West Point of the California wine industry. But in retrospect, it was a brilliant decision.

Mr. Ramey turned out to be a natural. After a stint at Château Pétrus in Bordeaux in 1979, Mr. Ramey returned to Northern California with a more nuanced vision of winemaking than the technocentric version he’d been steeped in at Davis, and became one of the leaders of the post-Mondavi generation who helped make the ‘90s a golden age for Napa and Sonoma. Unlike that of some of his contemporaries, Mr. Ramey’s style always favored balance over power. They were never the fattest, or the ripest, or the most alcoholic—Mr. Ramey’s aesthetic seeming more Modigliani than Botero. Tasting a Ramey Chardonnay alongside a Kistler—as I did when I first visited him in the late ‘90s—was a fascinating study in contrast, the Ramey vibrant, chiseled and fresh, the Kistler all tropical, buttery, fleshy and sweet. In the ‘90s the super-rich style was ascendant; now balance and freshness are the new buzzwords. Even Steve Kistler is now preaching the gospel of restraint and finesse. Mr. Ramey never lacked recognition, but he’s now beginning to look like a prophet. Not that he didn’t sometimes question the wisdom of his principles.



“Could I get higher scores by making riper, less acidic wines?” he says, as he sips a glass of his ‘08 Russian River Chardonnay at Spoonbar in Healdsburg, Calif. “Absolutely.” Gruff tends to be his natural tone of voice. He pauses to check out the fashionable, exuberant crowd at the bar. After years as a sleepy backwater frequented by farmers and ex-hippies, Healdsburg is suddenly the kind of place where you see people in Prada eating tapas. “You can’t drink these heavy, fat wines,” he says. “On the other hand, you don’t have to go to the other extreme just because there are wines of excess.” Which is to say that Mr. Ramey’s wines, for all their precision and restraint, tend to be more come-hither than their Old World counterparts, his Chardonnays just a little more voluptuous than the average Puligny-Montrachet, his cabs less tannic than the typical Médoc. Mr. Ramey is proud to be a California winemaker, happy to be the beneficiary of the climate, and while he loves French wines, he’s not trying to imitate them.

After his stage at Pétrus, the mothership of Merlot, Mr. Ramey went to Matanzas Creek, where he made some of the first serious Napa Valley Merlots. Moving on to Chalk Hill, he garnered attention for his Chardonnays. He went on to make acclaimed Cabernet-based wines at Dominus and Rudd, while founding his eponymous winery in 1996. Initially Ramey Cellars specialized in Chardonnay, made from purchased grapes from some of the cooler vineyards in Sonoma. I still remember the first one I tasted at the French Laundry in Yountville, a racy, mouthwatering Hyde Vineyard chard, having been steered to it by the sommelier.

Mr. Ramey continued to work for Rudd, garnering some stellar scores from the critics, before finally devoting himself full-time to his own wines, at a winery he built in the ridiculously picturesque town of Healdsburg in Sonoma. And he’s justifiably proud of the fact that he and his wife, Carla, whom he married at Pétrus, own the whole operation, and that they didn’t start with a large fortune derived from another industry. “You’ve got mega-millionaires buying their way in,” he says, “and you’ve got young, scrappy winemakers making tiny amounts of wine that’s hard to find on the market. Then there are your big corporate conglomerates. By contrast, we’re like a chef-owned restaurant.” Fortunately it’s a chef-owned restaurant which, though not huge, has enough seats to accommodate demand.

Ramey Cellars is too big to qualify as a cult winery and too small to make the Rameys rich. But the conservative business model, which might have seemed a bit frumpy five or six years ago, may be the perfect one for the postcrash economy. Like his winemaking style, his pricing has always been restrained compared with his competitors', given the relative critical acclaim his wines receive. Now, as some wineries that once turned away customers for \$200 bottles of cab are secretly cutting deals and accumulating inventory, Mr. Ramey is more than holding his own. His delicious 2007 Napa Valley Claret, a Cabernet Sauvignon–dominated Bordeaux blend, sells for around \$40, and it's ready to drink at this moment, unlike many of the big cabs from that excellent vintage. (He makes more complex and expensive cabs, too, the single-vineyard Pedregal from Oakville being the rarest and dearest.)

"I've lived through three cycles of the California wine industry," Mr. Ramey says. "We had recessions in '91 and '92 and again in '02 and '03." While he admits that the recent economic slowdown briefly depressed sales, he had his best year ever in 2010. It doesn't hurt that the man whose name is on the bottle is on the road a good part of the year, meeting restaurateurs and retailers. "A lot of my colleagues haven't worked hard enough to establish themselves in the market," he says.

For a winemaker, Mr. Ramey seems to be an uncommonly good businessman, but his decision to make Syrah may have been a case of listening to his heart more than his head. In 2002 Mr. Ramey planted two Syrah vineyards on the cool western side of the Sonoma Coast appellation, inspired by his love for the Syrahs of the northern Rhône. The resulting wines have been lavishly praised by the critics. But, as many of his colleagues have discovered, California Syrah isn't easy to sell, and he's scaled back production since the '07 vintage. (Wine-country joke: What's the difference between a case of Syrah and a case of pneumonia? You can get rid of the pneumonia.) I love Mr. Ramey's Syrahs, which are much more reminiscent of Côte-Rotie than they are of the jammy Barossa Shirazes, and they make the case for this grape as convincingly as any in California. My advice is to try them and buy them while they're still unfashionable. They are great values.

Mr. Ramey is one of those rare winemakers who seem equally adept with both reds and whites, but I have a special fondness for his Chardonnays, which seem to me to strike a perfect balance between the elusive virtues of white Burgundy and the hedonistic pleasures of Chardonnays from the Golden State. Imagine if Christie Brinkley spoke French. Oh, wait, she does. Mr. Ramey should consider hiring her as spokesmodel.