

# Michael Havens

Winegrower

Havens Wine Cellars, Oakville

5,000 case production

## On Making Wine, particularly Albariño

On his first trip to Europe in 1969, Michael Havens developed a love for white wines that are light, crisp and especially wonderful with food. Michael was just out of high school when he traveled to Holland, to Paris, and the Swiss canton of Vaud, where he and various fellow students drank carafes of local wine as they sat and talked and ate--mostly simple (and cheap) fondues. The carafes were usually of Chasselas, a wine which goes perfectly with fresh, light meals and is grown on the steep hillsides of southern Switzerland (Michael also met his future wife, Kathryn, in Vaud--she is from Bakersfield, Michael grew up in Wheaton, IL). From Vaud, Michael traveled west and south to Maconnais and eventually to Spain, tasting wine all the way.

That fall he went to Seattle Pacific University in Seattle where, in his junior year, he began homemaking wine from “ye olde English recipes”, with locally grown apples and berries. And he said to himself, ‘You know, I think I might be able to do this. But I’m not so good I think just anybody can do this.’ After graduation he went to Boston

Theological Institute on a Rockefeller grant and continued making wine from local fruit—now beach plums and cranberries. After Boston, Michael spent five years at Syracuse University. Besides wine and a methode champenoise sparkling cider, Michael made bread and beer and found it much more difficult to make good beer than good bread, and easier to make great beer than wine. He bought his wine grapes, Seyval and Riesling, from what became Glenora Wine Cellars in Finger Lakes, NY. John Williams (now of Frog’s Leap) was Glenora’s first winemaker. Mike was learning a lot about winemaking and winegrowing. He almost stayed in New York but that region of the state was still pretty much of a hinterland then.

Michael went to Los Angeles and taught at UCLA for three years, and continued to make wine. He and Kathryn frequently visited John Williams and his wife in the Napa Valley—John had come out to start Frog’s Leap while working at Spring Mountain Winery--and Michael picked Napa Valley grapes wherever he was allowed. He picked into old lugs, crushed into plastic juice transporters and drove 60 gallons of must to Los Angeles, punching down at the rest stops. Their extra bathroom at home was devoted to fermentation and aging. Michael made mostly reds: Cabernet, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Carignane, Colombard and a popular big, oaky Chardonnay. Michael says he was making ‘way too much wine.’

He spent his last years in academe at UC Davis where he taught for five and a half years. For the class Michael gave on technical writing for students taking viticulture and enology, he got to work with Professors Cornelius Ough and Ralph Kunke. Meanwhile, winemaking-Michael was pitch forking fruit from gondolas into the crusher at Casseyre Forni Cellars in Rutherford, assisting winemaker Mike Forni any way he could. Casseyre Forni made Chenin Blanc, a type of wine that Michael considers under appreciated, as well as Zinfandel and Cab. In 1984, with friends Russell and Jon Scott and his family as limited partners, Michael started Havens, custom crushing at Casseyre Forni. The Chardonnay fruit came from Tony Truchard in Carneros, Sauvignon Blanc from the southern end of Napa, and Merlot from mid-Valley and Truchard. Kathryn designed and made the Havens label with her image of Chardonnay just leafing out.

When Clarke Swanson bought out Casseyre Forni in 1986, Michael custom crushed at different cellars while he helped Tony Truchard plan and build Truchard Winery. He became its first winemaker and in 1990 custom crushed his Havens there and stored the wine in a former apple juice factory on 8th Street in Napa (now William Hill Winery). In 1995, Havens bought the old Lakespring Winery. Its equipment has been replaced, but the footprint’s the same. They left 7.1 acres in Chardonnay and replanted the rest of its



PHOTOGRAPH: PRISCILLA UPTON

warm, deep, gravelly soil to Cab and Syrah. Michael thinks you don't really start to learn about the wines and how they get that way until you walk in the vineyards-- repeatedly, really paying attention--and begin to associate weather, the windy, cooler days, with wine qualities. And, while it's a good idea to find out what grows best in an area, Michael thinks it's always good to imagine what might grow there: "I think our Valley's [topography and climate] diverse enough, we ought to grow all kinds of wines: Algeria to the Rhine. On the edge of the differences. In Carneros for fresh, aromatic whites. Wine drinking is a lot less fun with few wines."

In 1996, on a trip from France around the Pyrenees Michael and his wife discovered Albariño in Spain. Most Spanish wines are red. The white Albariño was more like those Swiss wines of Vaud--high in acid, aromatic, with light alcohol, no oak, and perfect with seafood. Albariño in Galician means "white Rhine", but that German monks brought this varietal to Santiago de Compostella, Spain on a pilgrimage from Germany Michael calls "purely mythological". He says the wine grape is native to Galicia, that it is grown both there and in Portugal, where it is called Alvarhino, and that Portuguese Alvarhinos are very good and often used as the dominant blend in Vinho Verdes. Albariño is grown in the Minho River valley--the Minho separates northern Spain and Portugal, and in the Rias Baixas region of Galicia.

The Havenses fell in love with Albariño, Kathryn in particular, and as Jancis Robinson has observed, quotes Michael, 'I like drinking wine and I want to find more ways to drink it.' So, what should they do about Albariño? Should they import it, bring in sticks? They found budwood--from the Morgadio Estate in Galicia, from a small nursery in Lompoc, CA at Bryan Babcock's, and possibly from John Alden. They bought buds and persuaded Doug Hill to plant three acres to Albariño on the Stewart Ranch in Napa.

As in Galicia, the Albariño in Napa is planted on 101-14 rootstock. The ranch soil is heavy clay there, which reduces the vigor of the vines so the canopy, on cross arms, is small. The Albariño leaf shape is similar to Riesling's, although smaller, and the fruit looks like Riesling--the clusters are similar in shape and fairly tight, but the berries' skin is slightly thicker. In 1997 the vines were up the stake in Napa and in 1999 Havens made a little wine--15 cases--the very first commercially made American Albariño, which they registered as a variety in 2000.

Havens makes Albariño as simply as they can, respecting the varietal as much as possible. A lower sugar of 21.5 keeps the alcohol low with 12 grams/liter TA (Total Acid). Havens presses whole cluster as cold as possible, at first light right after it's picked; with virtually no settling, the must goes to stainless tanks, is inoculated with a Portuguese yeast, and is fermented to dryness in two weeks at around

50 degrees. It then goes to a 1,000 gallon upright oak tank. Oak allows the wine to breathe, as it is very steely when it's young. Havens blocks malolactic fermentation--there is no lees stirring. It is heat stabilized with bentonite. They sterile filter to the bottle in February, with a release in April of 500 cases. The release coincides with Kathryn's birthday, which they celebrate with Albariño, fresh crab and Hog Island oysters, and then sell any wine that's left over.