Matt Dees of cult California estate Jonata tells Gerrie Lim how he came of age as a soil scientist who enjoys the vagaries of winemaking.

Winemaker Matt Dees may have achieved cult status, but he prefers spending time with his 30 hectares of vines in Southern California’s Santa Ynez Valley, near his home in Santa Barbara, than fixating on accolades. Nevertheless, his 2007 vintage scored impressively enough with Robert Parker, with many wines garnering 95 to 98 points, immediately boosting the standing of his estate, Jonata, the sister winery of Napa Valley’s more famous Screaming Eagle. Both are owned by sports mogul “Silent” Stan Kroenke, whose empire also includes the NBA’s Denver Nuggets, the NFL’s St Louis Rams, and English FA Cup winners Arsenal.

Under Kroenke’s famously hands-off tutelage, Dees and his team (led by estate manager Armand de Maigret, viticulturalist Ruben Solorzano and consultant Michel Rolland) create wines that vie well for parity of attention with the more high-end Screaming Eagle, inspiring claims that “Jonata delivers the same quality for a fraction of the price.” That bit of braggadocio led me to discover Dees’s work via his gorgeous 2005 El Corazon de Jonata, a silky-smooth Syrah-Cabernet blend that defied the usual high-octane California wine style, and later I also found similar elegance and restraint in his other reds: Le Sangre (Syrah-Viognier), El Desafio (Cabernet Sauvignon), and El Alma (Cabernet Franc).

His best professional achievements, he believes, are his 2008 vintages of Le Sangre and El Alma, though he’s also proud of his own Pinot Noir and Chardonnay projects, The Hilt and The Paring, both of variable assemblage, the grapes harvested from the Santa Rita Hills. Indeed, the 25-year-old Dees as an unusual prodigy: he came to wine not as an oenologist but as a soil scientist from the University of Vermont, and his off-cellar hours are occupied by music (he plays guitar and mandolin). He loves Jacqueline du Pré’s version of the Elgar Cello Concerto in E Minor, but also David Bowie’s Live Santa Monica ’72, and so I learn how he found his voice and sustained his rhythm.

People have compared your wine to a Brandenburg Concerto but I don’t think of Jonata in terms of Baroque music at all. No, I think we’re more like Talking Heads. Or even jazz, actually, a little bit Cannonball Adderley. Our wines are classic but more like hard bop.
do think of wine in terms of music and even musical instruments – our Chardonnays can have a brawny trumpet character. I don’t make decisions based on that but I do think that way. I occasionally will drink a wine and music will come to mind. I consider myself a musician and not a composer or conductor. I especially since sound science is my background, but music defines my life, so it has to, in some way, influence my wine. That’s why our wines are classically structured, with richness of fruit but combining an Old World feel and a New World site.

In the way that a lot of John Coltrane is classically structured, perhaps compared to, say, Art Pepper? Yes. I don’t think our wines are that abstract. They’re less riff upon classical structure. Our focus is on structure, on acidity, on farming the land, so there’s an earthy quality to our wines. Our 2005 E Corazon that we drank over dinner last night, the one you love, to me that took all of the earth’s been always approached the vineyard as the key ingredient in winemaking – always, always, always.

I understand from [vintner] David Abreu’s team, and that to me was the beginning I worked for Staglin from 2001 to 2003, and in 2004 I decided to move on and see the other parts of the world. I worked in New Zealand during some of those years, with another of my mentors, the late Doug Water at Craggy Range, and then the opposite vintages. In 2004, Andy helped me find my position as the head winemaker of Jonata. I showed up there in June 2004 and made the 2004 and 2005, and then in early 2006 the owners of Jonata purchased Screaming Eagle.

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In terms of winemaking, there’s the whole issue of making sure you have small, small berries that can result in density. Do you know what you had to work with going in? Absolutely. The beauty of this industry is, for all the wackiness we might accrue, from all the experience we see and all the good intentions we have, at the end of the day the essence of this industry is that Mother Nature is at the controls. We can do everything we want and we might have rain at the right time and we can have huge yields even when we don’t choose to. The beauty of Jonata is that the card is in the deck and the puzzle is a melange and a puzzle with all those wonderful types of soils. At Jonata, we have sandy soils and cool climates. We share these unique expressions of terror and are an owner who adore us to express them to their fullest potential. When I tell him I need to cut the production, he says not to worry and just do it.

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