



# Nurturing Nature

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 newer Pinot Noir and Chardonnay projects, The Hilt and The Paring, both of variable assemblage, the grapes harvested from the Santa Rita Hills. Indeed, the 35-year-old Dees is 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 Pre'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. I

do think of wine in terms of music and even musical instruments – our Chardonnays can have a brassy, 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 farmer and not a composer or conductor, especially since soil science is my background, but music does drive 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 loose riffs upon classical structure. Our focus is on structure, on acidity, on farming the soil, so there's an earthy quality to our wines. Our 2005 El Corazon that we drank over dinner last night, the one you love, to me that tasted of the earth. I've always approached the vineyard as the key ingredient in winemaking – always, always, always.

**I UNDERSTAND FROM [VINEYARD OWNER] GAREN STAGLIN THAT HIS WINES PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN YOUR EARLY CAREER. WHAT'S THE STORY THERE?**

I tasted a bottle of the 1995 Staglin Family Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from Rutherford and it changed my life. I just felt deeply in love with that wine. There was a

phone number on the back of the bottle and I just called them up. I bought a ticket to fly out there but they didn't have any jobs, because at the time they were making their wine at a different facility and were just building what is now their exquisite winery. And they had just hired a new winemaker named Andy Erickson. They saw my CV and told him: "There's this kid from Kansas who went to school in Vermont and he wants to make wine with us."

**ANDY ERICKSON LATER WENT TO SCREAMING EAGLE, BUT IT WAS PRETTY BOLD OF YOU TO COLD-CALL THEM LIKE THAT.**

Yes [laughs]. Andy put me in the vineyard with [viticulturalist] 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'd worked in New Zealand during some of those years with another of my mentors, the late Doug Wisor at Craggy Range, doing 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.

**YES, THE "SISTER WINERY" CONNECTION, THOUGH YOU DON'T SHARE THE PRICE POINT. SCREAMING EAGLE IS NOW AROUND HK\$18,000 A BOTTLE!**

No, we do not share the price point! They have their degree of respect in the industry that they deserve and in the marketplace, there's nothing else like it. While the production teams are different, the approach to quality and the attention to detail at both properties are the same. What we share, most importantly, are two things – phenomenal *terroir* and unique sites that don't exist anywhere in the world. Screaming Eagle, with all its remarkable soil types, is a *mélange* 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 *terroir* and also an owner who allows 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.



*"Our wines are loose riffs upon classical structure"*

edges nice, or you can take a giant hammer and take giant chunks out of this beautiful statue by being clumsy. I really do view our role as winemakers as such.

**IN TERMS OF WINEMAKING, THERE'S THE WHOLE ISSUE OF MAKING SURE YOU HAVE SMALL CLUSTERS, SMALL BERRIES THAT CAN RESULT IN INTENSITY OF FRUIT. DID YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAD TO WORK WITH, GOING IN?**

Absolutely. The beauty of this industry is, for all the wisdom 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 cards in the deck are stacked on our side. With no vigour, with little water availability, we're able to stress the vines at the right time resulting in small yields of intensely flavoured and balanced fruit. We're set up for it but that's the joy, the vagaries of nature.

**WHAT ADVANTAGES DO YOU THINK BEING A SOIL SCIENTIST HAS FOR YOU, COMPARED WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS**

**A DEGREE IN WINEMAKING?**

Every bottle of wine starts at its roots, literally, with your subterranean environment. I also think approaching the sand from a different angle, which is all we have while others have clay or limestone, has allowed us to succeed. And working with Ruben Solorzano, who is the greatest vineyard manager I've ever met, it's a pretty great system. I'll occasionally throw out something really crazy and Ruben will, in his brilliant mind, make it happen. Ruben is from Jalisco, Mexico, and he just intuitively understands vines. He teaches me something new every day.

**YOU WERE ONCE ASKED ABOUT YOUR WINEMAKING PHILOSOPHY AND YOU SPECIFIED FIVE THINGS: "FIND A GREAT PIECE OF LAND, GET TO KNOW IT WELL, LEARN ITS SECRETS, PICK AT THE RIGHT TIME, AND DON'T SCREW IT UP!"**

Yes, that's true. The "don't screw it up" part is huge. In the winery, we're an experienced team and we know our fruit, we know how to ferment it, and we're getting a handle on it, but it will be a lifetime lesson. To me, when the fruit shows up at the winery I need to taste it because it's mind-blowing – it's already this giant, wonderfully sculpted marble statue and I see the role of the winemaker as having a very fine sanding material and a giant chisel. You can either sand it well and gently make it smoother, make the

**TO WHAT DO YOU ATTRIBUTE YOUR OWN ABILITY TO MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION?**

I can answer that by telling you about a wonderful wine produced in California. On the back label of any wine bottle, you have to write "produced and bottled by" or "produced and cellared by" – that's part of a legal thing. Ours is "produced and bottled by Jonata". Always the company name, never my name, because it's a team effort and about the property. But this one producer from Berkeley, Edmunds St John, says every bottle is "produced and bottled by blind luck and intuition". Isn't that brilliant? To me, for all the science and technology that goes on, we can make educated guesses but so much of it is intuition. You work at understanding your vines, what's going on above in the skies and below in the soils. You make mistakes and nobody's perfect. We do a lot of research but, at a certain point, you need to trust your vineyard and you need to trust your senses. And then you pull the trigger and pick fruit. ■

JONATA WINEMAKER MATT DEES (ABOVE) AND A COLLECTION OF HIS CREATIONS (OPPOSITE PAGE)