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## Winemakers to Watch: Jeff Ames

Jon Bonné, Chronicle Wine Editor  
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When Jeff Ames needed cash during graduate school, he walked into the Memphis wine shop where his parents had shopped and scored an interview. One question seemed reasonable enough: What did Ames drink?

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The glitch - he was a total wine novice. "At that point all I knew was my mom drank Sutter Home White Zinfandel out of magnums, so I told him that. He looked at me and said, 'Yes, but what else?'"

Ames, 35, has gotten a chance to figure that out. He now makes wines for longtime wine executive Tor Kenward from some of Napa Valley's most impressive vineyards, including Chardonnay from Lee Hudson's Carneros plot and Cabernet from the legendary To Kalon. Tor's 2005 Tor Mast-Cimarossa sailed into our Top 100 Wines, the latest praise after a long string of dazzling scores from Robert Parker. Under his own label, Rudius, he makes three Syrahs from different blocks of the Alder Springs vineyard in Mendocino. And he recently began making wines for a Knights Valley project, Knights Bridge.

If Ames' wines are plenty powerful, they have a distinct nuance lacking in many highly concentrated Napa Cabernets. The 2006 Mast Vineyard Cabernet, sourced from an old Inglenook vineyard in Yountville, tops 15 percent alcohol but brims with violet-driven finesse.

Things weren't always so lofty. Ames' time selling wine hooked him enough that he abandoned his master's in education, sat down at his parents' house and fired off 150 resumes to any winemaker who would listen.

He got two replies. One came from Lynn Penner-Ash who, unbeknownst to Ames, had a reputation as one of Oregon's emerging Pinot Noir stars. She agreed to give him a shot, so he packed up his Civic and drove from Alabama to the Willamette Valley.

"Gosh, I didn't think you'd actually show," he recalls her saying when he arrived.

Ames worked the 1998 harvest for Penner-Ash, who was then at Rex Hill. Then he made his way to Napa Valley, where he picked up work at tasting rooms, plus freelance writing assignments for Decanter magazine.

In 2001, his friend Thomas Brown was leaving Turley Wine Cellars and Ames joined him as an assistant, working for such labels as Outpost and Schrader. Brown initially made the Tor wines, but Ames increasingly helped and by 2003, he took over as Kenward's winemaker.

Still, those early Pinot days linger. "The way we make Cabs actually has a lot in common with Burgundy," he says. Like his use of open-top fermenters, more common to Pinot or Syrah, which blows off some alcohol and allows him to more delicately punch down the must rather than pumping it over.

And he insists on fermenting each block separately to preserve its individual character - so that, for instance, each of his three To Kalon parcels remains unique until he and Kenward can start blending. The same is true of the Rudius Syrahs. Though from the same vineyard, the higher-acid West Block, made with whole green stems, shows little in common with the sleek, peppery Emerald Pool.

"I want to make something that leaves a mark, that people go back to," Ames says. "Like when I go back to the old Heitz Martha's or the old Diamond Creek or the old



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Mayacamas. I go, 'God, that guy did a good job.' That's what I want."

This summer Ames moved to the east side of Napa, into a house newly purchased with his girlfriend. Sometimes his schedule isn't that different from his first day in Oregon, which he spent unloading barrels, as evidenced by his pickup on a recent fall day, parked out front and stacked above the cab with empty barrels.

While he might be a big deal in Wine Country, he still hasn't sold his own wines back in his home state, which makes him think he's due for a trip to Memphis to see his old friends.

"They can't quite understand how in the world this happened," he says. "It doesn't make sense to them either."

## The wine

**2006 Tor Mast Vineyards Yountville Cabernet Sauvignon (\$75)** This new bottling, to be released in April, flourishes with perfumed notes of violet and toast, leading into deep cassis and plum fruit. Amazing vivacity and finessed tannins. Has a true seamlessness.

**What he does:** Makes superstar Napa Valley Cabernet and Chardonnay with true character, plus his own Mendocino Syrah.

**Weeknight wine:** 2007 Chateau St. Cosme Cotes du Rhone

**Quote:** "You look at the scores and the reviews, and you're like, are you seriously tasting what I'm tasting?"

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