

Wine Spectator

Risk and Reward

Jeff Ames charts his own route to winemaking success

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Issue: April 30, 2016

After logging nearly 200,000 miles driving throughout Napa Valley, Jeff Ames' green Toyota pickup isn't quite ready for the junkyard, but it's close. The stereo recently died, taking with it Ames' favorite '80s mixtape.

But despite his friends' pleas that he get rid of the vehicle, Ames remains attached to the first truck he bought with his cellar hand's salary. It has become a memento of his beginnings as a winemaker in the region. "That truck and I have been in a lot of vineyards and it has never let me down," says Ames. "It may sound weird, but I just wouldn't feel right about ever selling it."

In just over a decade, Ames, 43, has become one of Napa's rising stars, running his own label, Rudius, and working as winemaker for top Cabernet producer Tor. He is part of a new breed of winemakers that includes his mentor Thomas Brown, Failla's Ehren Jordan and others who learned wine hands-on without the aid of formal winemaking education.

Harvests and tastings were Ames' classrooms. He likes the fact that he didn't go to school for his vocation, arguing that too much knowledge can sometimes get in the way, making one feel compelled to use it even when unnecessary. "The model that was set before me was to get big, rich fruit, plush flavors, and not fine or filter if you don't have to," he says. "That's where it starts. That's how I make wines."

Ames grew up splitting his time between divorced parents, living in Memphis, Tenn., and Mobile, Ala. For a time, Ames was sure he'd follow in his father's footsteps as an attorney, but shifted his focus to education as an undergraduate, and later a grad student, at Memphis State. Two years prior to arriving in Napa, he had never tasted wine.

"I grew up Southern Baptist and went to an Episcopal high school. Alcohol wasn't around," he says with a subtle Southern drawl.

Short of money in the summer of 1997, just before his senior year of college, Ames applied for a job at a liquor store down the street from his house in East Memphis. When the manager asked him what he knew about wine, he replied that his mom sometimes drank Sutter Home White Zinfandel from magnums. "He gave me this look and asked, 'What else?'" jokes Ames. Fortunately for Ames, the owner of the store liked him enough to hire him.

Ames was captivated by his job and began setting aside chunks of his paycheck to purchase wine, stashing treasured bottles of Caymus, Duckhorn and Silver Oak Cabernet in a small wooden box in his closet. He eavesdropped on meetings with distributors and sat in on as many tastings as he could.

Before finishing his master's degree in education, Ames sent his résumé to hundreds of West Coast wineries. He received only two responses, one of which came from Lynn Penner-Ash, winemaker for Rex Hill Winery in Willamette Valley, Ore. Penner-Ash explained that she couldn't guarantee Ames a job, but if he came out, she would give him an interview. Ames took his chances, packed up his car and drove cross-country to Oregon.

Penner-Ash was so shocked when Ames actually showed up that she hired him on the spot. "My first day, I spent the afternoon unloading empty barrels from a tractor-trailer, and I loved it," says Ames. From then on, he knew winemaking was his calling.

Unfortunately, Penner-Ash couldn't keep him on full-time, so after his first harvest he returned to Memphis to work at the liquor store again. Undeterred, Ames saved money and drove across the country again, this time to Napa.

Ames arrived in Napa in April 1999. "I had no bed, no couch, I slept on egg-crate foam for the first six months before my mom visited and bought me a futon," he says. But Ames insists he's always been comfortable living modestly, an arrangement that allows him to focus on work.

Ames took on various jobs, from freelance wine writing to online wine auctions to working in tasting rooms. He started attending tasting groups and wine pick-up parties. "My natural tendency is to be not super social and outgoing," he admits. Still, whatever interpersonal shortcomings he thought he had don't show today; he's effusively chatty, with a mild-natured disposition that makes him easy to like.

His fortunes improved when he met Thomas Brown, then the winemaker for Turley, at a party. Ames, itching to get back into production, learned that Brown was looking to leave Turley. Brown brought on Ames to work with several of his projects for the 2001 harvest, including stints at Schrader, Maybach, Outpost and Tor.

"Getting that first winery job is hard because nobody wants to train you," says Ames, expressing gratitude that Brown took a chance on him despite his lack of experience. Ames worked harvest, focusing all of his efforts on learning how to make wine.

"I saw Jeff working his butt off," recalls Tor Kenward, of Tor Kenward Family Wines. "We were experimenting with whole-cluster for our Rhône wines, but didn't have the right equipment, so Jeff did it completely by hand and foot. [He] nearly broke his back trying to make those wines."

Things started falling into place for Ames in 2003. After just two harvests, he took over as Tor's full-time winemaker, at age 31. "It was a gamble, but all things are," says Kenward. Once Ames got his chance, he worked hard, moved quickly and never looked back. "If I were Tor, I wouldn't have kept me on," jokes Ames. Kenward disagrees. "Looking back, the wines that we've made together

have proven that maybe the gamble wasn't really a gamble after all," he says.

As winemaker for Tor, Ames now has the luxury of working with some of Napa Valley's best vineyards, including Oakville's Beckstoffer To Kalon and Howell Mountain's Cimarossa Vineyards. And he's a stickler for making sure the wines express their site foremost, rather than a particular winemaking style.

"For all the wines I make, I of course want them to all taste great. But I also want them to taste like where they came from," he says, citing Howell Mountain Cabernet's distinctive grip and structure, Eastern Oakville hillside Cabernet's lead pencil and earthy profile, St. Helena Panek Cabernet's fruit-forwardness, and the cool-climate characteristics of Farella Cabernet from Coombsville.

But Ames' ambitions extended beyond Cabernet. "I always wanted to make Rhône-based wine that had some earthiness and funk," he says. During his first years as a cellar hand in Napa, unable to afford the wines he was making, he stocked up on 1998 Domaine du Pégau Château-neuf-du-Pape for \$33 a bottle. The inspiration he gleaned from this and similar wines convinced him to start Rudius in 2005 with varieties he loved-Grenache and Syrah-without breaking the bank on Napa grapes or new oak.

Ames bet the house to start Rudius, literally, selling his home in downtown Napa to help fund the start-up. "People thought I was crazy, but I told them I didn't come to Napa to own a house, I came here to make wine," he says.

Producing fewer than 2,000 cases annually, Rudius is named for the wooden sword that was presented to a gladiator when freed by the emperor of Rome. To Ames, the symbol represents his mission to make wine in his own style. He uses whole-cluster fermentations whenever possible for his site-specific Rhône wines, creating distinctive, bold bottlings that reflect the terroir, whether mixed blocks from the 100-plus-year-old Bedrock Vineyard in Sonoma or Grenache from various sites along the northern coast of California. His Cabernets from the label can show power and finesse, balancing rich fruit with deep, supple textures and fine-grained tannins.

Between Tor and Rudius, Ames has achieved 14 classic ratings on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale, and dozens more outstanding ratings. And the impressive scores keep coming. Ames, however, remains humble. Brown told him to think of winemaking as a bell curve. "Here's the peak," Ames motions, leaving one hand hovering at eye level. "I'm right about here," he says, dropping his other hand about as low as it can go. "At the beginning, you have to recognize that you're always trying to get to the top of the bell curve."

His profile is steadily rising. Recently, he has displayed a deft hand with distinctive, richly flavored Chardonnay, releasing examples from Tor and Rudius that eschew new oak and employ native yeast fermentations to highlight the vineyard. "I have always told folks that I could pay less for fruit and just nuke it with oak, but I want them to taste the vineyard, not barrels."

Ames has also lent his know-how to a handful of newcomers in Napa Valley, including Anthem, a brand with an estate vineyard on Mt. Veeder that recently notched two outstanding ratings; Nem-

erever, a vineyard and winery on the Oakville Cross Road, right across from Groth; and Boich Family, run by John and Marcella Boich, who purchased the Wall Vineyard on Mt. Veeder.

Ames has also branched into Washington, consulting for Va Piano Winery in Walla Walla Valley, a brand he has been working with since 2007. The winemaker is looking to buy a property in the region for Rudius. His 2013 Stoney Vine Syrah from the area sources its fruit from Sleight of Hand Cellars vintner Trey Busch, a friend who owns a vineyard in the Rocks region near Cayuse. Ames says he has a pretty good grasp of how California Syrah evolves in barrel, but saw the Walla Walla Syrah go through crazy phases of good, bad, worse and amazing. “When we bottled it and it tasted exactly how I wanted it to, I have to admit it put a big smile on my face.”

Despite his far-ranging endeavors, Ames is careful not to stretch himself too thin, allowing himself ample time to walk the vineyards with his wife, Brittany, and their young daughter, Kaley Elizabeth. Ames calls Brittany the brains behind Rudius, and he recently released his Kaley Elizabeth cuvée, dense, rustic and built to age. Ames hopes to toast his daughter with it when she’s older.

Before the 2014 harvest, Ames gave Rudius a new home, purchasing a house with a 1.7-acre Cabernet vineyard on Howell Mountain. “I can’t believe I have a vineyard around my house now,” says Ames, adding that the only thing missing is his own winery. Otherwise he has everything he needs to make wine, including his trusty pickup. “I love that truck,” he says. “I wonder if I can be buried in it.”