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On Silver Mountain

The estate that Jerry O'Brien built expands its tasting territory

By Christina Waters



Photograph by Curtis Cartier

MOUNTAIN MAN: Jerry O'Brien's Silver Mountain wines showcase the essence of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

THE GLASS of syrah I'm sipping exudes pepper, blackberries and the elusive terroir of the Santa Cruz Mountains. It is one of the reasons the new Silver Mountain Vineyards tasting room is a connoisseur's destination. Even though he's been ahead of the pack in local winemaking for 30 years, focusing on pinots and an estate of organic vines, Jerry O'Brien continues to reinvent the ways in which the public can experience his Silver Mountain wines.

At the end of 2009, O'Brien closed his longtime Cannery Row tasting room in Monterey and moved into one of the coveted Ingalls Street slots. In Monterey, O'Brien contends, the tasting room was simply one more tourist attraction. "Here," he grins, "people come just to taste wine." Especially on weekends, when the cluster of tasting rooms next door to Kelly's attracts crowds of inquiring wine tasters. O'Brien's sleekly crafted tasting room delivers a wide range of vintages by the taste, glass and bottle. At any given time there's a quintet of pinot noirs, as well as a syrah, an estate chardonnay and some bordeaux blends to sample—five tastes for \$5.

But O'Brien—a ringer for the late British actor Stewart Granger—refuses to play favorites. "I don't like to influence people's assessment," he smiles. He lets the wines do the talking. To further level the playing field, he's priced all the pinot noirs at a single \$36 rate. The price sheet doesn't telegraph any privileged vintages or qualitative distinctions among the wines. The proof is in the tasting. "The best wine, I tell people, is the one they buy."

As I admire a beautifully nuanced Muns Vineyard Pinot Noir 2006 brimming with black cherry, currants and clove, O'Brien reveals how pleased he is with this new location. "This is a terrific area to show the wines," he says, adding that there are few such concentrations of small tasting rooms anywhere in California. Oh, maybe Healdsburg, but precious few in a state bulging with wineries.

With the new tasting room up and running, the silver-haired winemaker has one more hurdle to clear. Right now O'Brien is working to get the permits in place so that his winery, located near Summit Road at 2,100 feet, can be open to the public every Saturday. "The wine industry is one of our only growth industries," he says. "It's just what this county needs right now."

I comment on the Muns Vineyard fruit. "Silver Mountain is the key purchaser of their grapes," he says. "We have always bought grapes from them."

O'Brien says he also makes each of the pinots, regardless of grape source, using the same methods. So what I'm tasting has everything to do with the place, the terroir itself. Another taste of Sonnet, a second house label of wines made by Silver Mountain consultant Tony Craig from Russian River grapes, shows an entirely different, more fruit-aromatic aspect of the mercurial pinot noir grape.

The small tasting room, wrapped around a U-shaped polished granite bar, offers easy access to Silver Mountain's wines and promises to help cultivate a whole new crop of fans for the estate chardonnay and pinot noir, as well as the wines made from other top Santa Cruz appellation grapes. O'Brien is on hand to pour and provide answers to questions about grapes and vineyards, from oak to clones, at least one day each weekend. And this summer the patio in front of Silver Mountain's boutique tasting room will blossom with tables for al fresco sipping and for enjoying food catered by Kelly's.

Sounds like a holiday destination to me.

Silver Mountain Vineyards Tasting Room

402 Ingalls St., Suite 29, Santa Cruz.

Thu–Sun noon–5pm

831.466.0559

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