

MADROÑA VINEYARDS & RUCKSACK CELLARS

Off the Beaten Path

BY KK ROBERTS
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n the discussion of winemaking, almost more than in any other profession, you will hear the word passion used as the ultimate attribute for the conception of wine. There is a reason for this. “Passion is essential to the creation of wine that is an expression of the land from which it is grown. You can’t be in this business for the money,” says Paul Bush, winemaker at Madroña Vineyards in Apple Hill. “It has to be a passion.”

If you are privileged enough to visit the breathtaking expanse of vineyards that encompass Madroña Winery, you will find much more than just excellent wine. You will find camaraderie, kindness, hospitality and wines that reflect the vintners’ philosophy of life. Paul and Maggie Bush, owners, are second generation winemakers at Madroña, a family-run business established in 1973 by Paul’s parents, Dick and Leslie Bush. Now comprised of three vineyards—Madroña in Apple Hill, and Enyé and Sumu Kaw in Pleasant Valley—with another in the works, the Bushes oversee 85 acres of organic vineyards, using sustainable farming and production practices. “Our grapes are 100 percent estate-grown with varietal characteristics that are expressive of this region, the Sierra Foothills,” Paul notes.

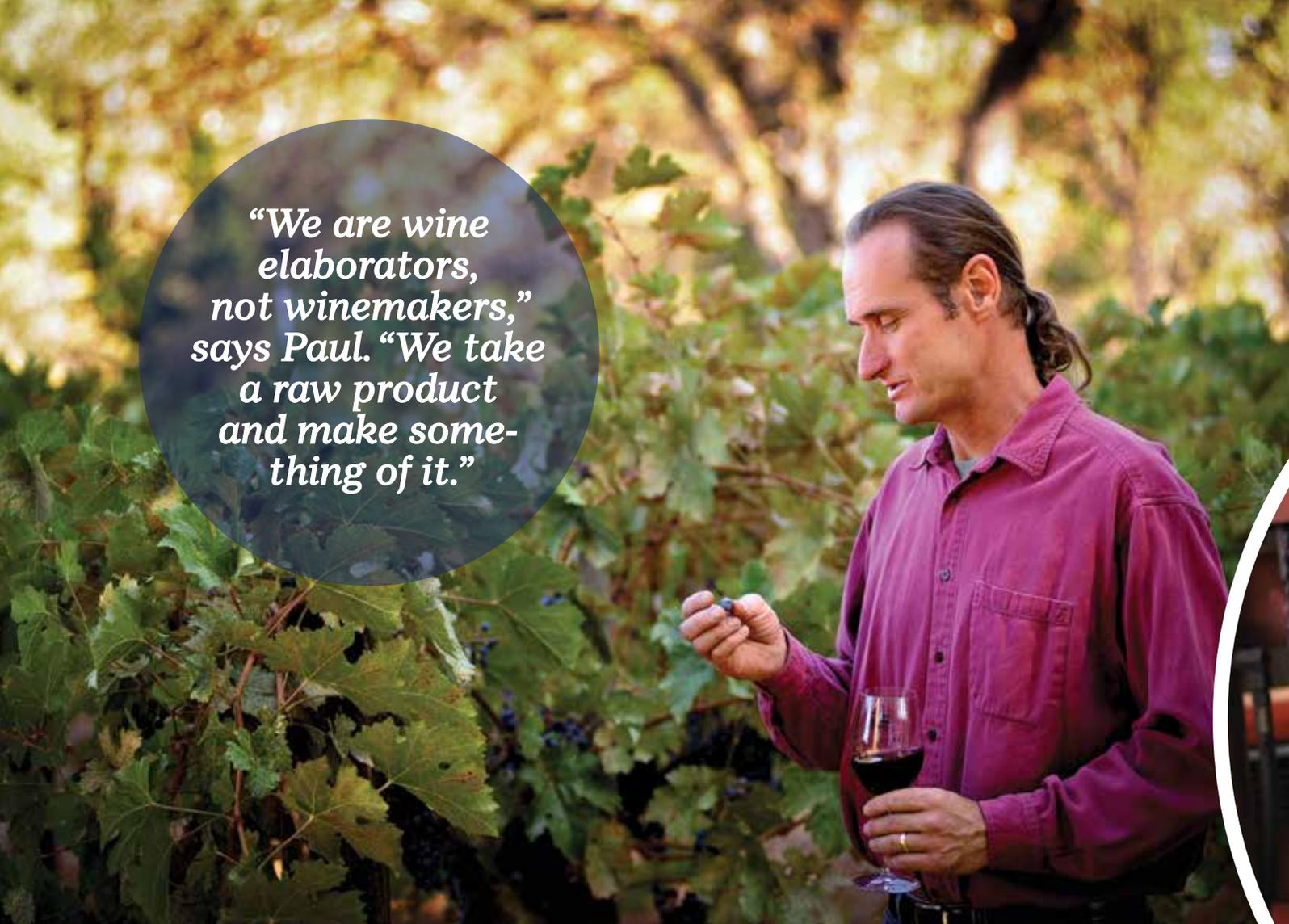
The Bush family pioneered high elevation grapes in California by planting at a 3,000 foot elevation and, as the vines matured, they opened the winery in 1980. Growing up, Paul and his siblings were involved in helping out with all the components of winemaking. When he left for college, Paul majored in economics,



Maggie and Paul Bush

“Accept what life offers you and try to drink from every cup. All wines should be tasted; some should only be sipped, but with others, drink the whole bottle.”

PAULO COELHO
BRAZILIAN LYRICIST
AND POET



“We are wine elaborators, not winemakers,” says Paul. “We take a raw product and make something of it.”



vowing never to go into the wine business. “It’s a really difficult job,” he says. “It’s rough, a 24/7 work week.” Eventually, though, he found that home was where the wine was.

After his parents retired, Paul and Maggie, married in 1999, took the reins at Madroña. “Second generation transition can be very difficult in small family farms,” Paul says, “but my parents stepped back and let us take over.” They are still involved, particularly with tasting, but in a much smaller role.

Maggie, with a background in corporate finance, serves as the general manager, overseeing all the business aspects of Madroña, including planning events, marketing and managing the wine club which, incidentally, showcases the customers’ devotion to the ever-changing varieties of wine by their allegiance to membership in the wine club. “We have over 50 members who have been with us for more than 20 years,” Paul says. “Most of our members have been with us for more than 10 years, which is rare for wine clubs. It’s a testament to their enthusiasm for tasting wines across the board and a willingness to try things they haven’t before.”

Despite his casual demeanor and laid-back vibe, it is obvious that Paul is a very committed and professional winemaker, a label that he is quick to refine. “We are wine elaborators, not winemakers,” says Paul. “We take a raw product and make something of it. The grapes are terroir driven, unique to the foothills.” When asked what the importance of passion is to creating and developing wine, Maggie simply states, “Just listen to Paul talk.”

Paul, quick to acknowledge that Maggie “has a critical palate,” is resolutely eloquent in describing the development of wine. There is dichotomy in the business between producing a commodity and creating an expression of the region from which the vines grow. “It’s a very hard business, brutal, and you have to believe in what you’re doing and have ownership all the way up—from the soil to the vine to the product, a product that is subjective in itself,” says Paul.

“We make what we like to drink and hope that others will follow us there.” Given the loyalty of the wine club members, that philosophy appears to be more than sound.

As overseer of both the vineyards and the winemaking, Paul has enthusiasm that clearly pours forth. “You get in this business for the passion,” he says. “It’s a three-legged stool of environment, community and business. All three legs of the stool need to be in place for it to work.” In this vein, the Bushes are deeply involved with the local community. Maggie, a devout member of the Kiwanis, says one way they help is by donating wine to large charity fundraisers, such as events to benefit nonprofits like CASA. “We can’t write a big check,”



“There comes a moment on a journey when something sweet, something irresistible and charming as wine raised to thirsty lips, wells up in the traveler’s being.”

PATRICK MACGILL
IRISH JOURNALIST,
NOVELIST AND POET



she says, “but we can donate cases of wine that can be turned into money.”

Maggie and Paul feel that giving back is the least they can do for the privilege of living in such a unique and tight-knit community. “It’s a great way to meet people in the area, and it feels good to give back,” Maggie says. “The point of it is truly not advertising. We love to support the community.”

Although they are big fans of international travel, it is the local region that keeps them down to earth. It is also the impetus behind the development of another new winery,

one that is thematically meant to be different from Madroña. The Bushes saw an availability of connected land and purchased 21 acres at a slightly lower elevation.

“When we travelled internationally, we realized that only Americans use the term ‘backpack,’” says Paul. “All across Europe it is a ‘rucksack.’ We decided to name it Rucksack Cellars in the spirit of getting off the beaten path and making discoveries. Instead of being about our stories, Rucksack is really about the Sierra.”

The need to pair soil with variety is vital to this endeavor, according to Paul. “The Aiken clay loam soil is really great for elegant wines such as cabernet franc. On the other side of the property, the soil layer is very shallow and we can focus on chenin blanc.”

The labels chosen for Rucksack bottles represent this concept of travel; these feature depictions of the various areas of the foot-

hills and rock as well as bearing a passport stamp and luggage tag. There is even faint handwriting around the edges, evocative of old school postcards, a touch that exemplifies the attention to detail.

“We want to embrace who we are, and stop comparing grapes from one region to grapes from another,” Paul says. With this in mind, both Paul and Maggie feel that wines should be reflective of the soil in which they are grown. “They are all different, not better or worse, just different,” Paul says. “We source all our own grapes. We don’t follow trends, and even if we did, they’d have passed by before we could bottle it. We find it’s much more fun to be innovative.”

Paul, who talks about grapes as if they were his friends, finishes with this thought. “It is a blessing that we are able to do this,” he says. For the Buses, it’s apparent the journey is more important than the destination. With each new discovery off that beaten track, they can add one more memory to their already bulging rucksacks.

