

A lofty goal: Exquisite, affordable wine



Jayson Woodbridge feeds his dog, Commander Roo, some cabernet sauvignon grapes in his hillside vineyard along the Napa Valley on Monday, October 12, 2009. Christopher Chung / PD

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Jayson Woodbridge is not a man who takes shortcuts. It's what has made him very successful at producing a much-sought-after, super-high-end Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon under the whimsical name Hundred Acre, which sells easily for \$250 and up a bottle.

"When you look at the genesis of something, you could make a hundred little shortcuts that would save you time or money or whatever," he said. "All those little shortcuts turn into a mountain of shortcuts and will kill you. You're never going to reach the absolute peak you could hit."

At the high end of winemaking, he's not alone in his zeal. But he's one of a very few with this climb-Everest-or-die-trying mindset who are also making wines for \$15.

"It's got the perfect name, the image it conjures up is automatically attractive," said Martin Reyes, wine buyer at St. Helena Wine Center. "It sounds delicious and sure lives up to it, always full and luscious wines, you get a lot of bang for the buck."

His inspiration is personal. A few years ago, Woodbridge, who didn't grow up with money, felt that with Hundred Acre he was betraying the memory of his humble Sicilian grandparents, who made wine at home as well as pizzas and cakes by hand. So he came up with another line of wines, Layer Cake, made as precisely as Hundred Acre but for a much more reasonable price.

“I realized my grandfather never could have afforded a bottle of Hundred Acre,” Woodbridge said. “It would have been out of his reach ... that I had never made a wine that the everyday man could buy and enjoy with his family, that didn't break the bank.”

He started tasting hundreds of wines in the \$15-\$20 range, finding himself ultimately unimpressed. The offerings were dominated by huge corporate wineries with large overheads and little imagination. With his lean, mean team and maniacal approach to pursuing perfection, Woodbridge figured he could do better.

So he began to search out fruit sources in some of his favorite wine regions of the world, places he felt he could get great fruit at reasonable prices. He would still rely on high-end winemaking techniques, employing the same people who make Hundred Acre to make each and every Layer Cake wine.

He then sat down and designed a simple black-and-white label to evoke the lovingly prepared cakes he recalled his grandmother making for him as a boy — the ultimate symbol in his mind of something handmade with love. He placed the details of his grandfather's homespun, home-winemaking teachings on the back.

“My grandfather said to me the vines live in the ground and the ground has layers in it like grandma's cake,” he explained. “It goes down into those layers and pulls the chocolate and mocha and blackberry jam and strawberries and all these flavors out of the ground, and he explained the taste and smell of it was layered, too.”

The core Layer Cake wines include a shiraz from South Australia, an old-vine primitivo from Puglia, Italy, and a malbec from Mendoza, with a Cotes du Rhone syrah added in 2007 along with a Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon. Woodbridge and his team of winemakers, including Helen Mawson and Hundred Acre consultant Philippe Melka, see the choices as a type of passport, a way for people to explore and taste from some of their favorite wine-growing areas.

“There's never been one label made by the same team flying around the world and doing this,” Woodbridge added. “My personal mission is to make something really affordable and really stunning and show the wine world this is what can be done at this price point.”

He explains the key, in addition to low overhead, is that he takes a lower profit on the wines, taking that money to buy better fruit and induce the farmers with whom he works to let him pick when he wants to pick. He also thinks he's better attuned to know what an American wine drinker will like in an Australian shiraz, Argentine malbec or Italian primitivo, a varietal genetically identical to what we know in California as zinfandel.

The project requires at minimum four harvests a year, a pace Woodbridge welcomes as a chance to absorb a constant flow of information. He likens it to having the chance to live four times the average life span. The wines are made, bottled and labeled in their country of origin and then shipped to the United States, where they land in specialty retail shops or high-end grocery stores. At this point, the demand far outweighs what Woodbridge and his team can supply.

Despite Layer Cake's runaway success, as with Hundred Acre, if Woodbridge isn't happy with the end results in any given year, he simply won't make the wine. It happened in 2007 with the Australian shiraz; a 2008 vintage is out now. The quality, he says, just wasn't up to his standards.

Woodbridge looks at it instead as a chance for people to try his other wines, the dark and brooding malbec grown at 4,500 feet elevation in the Andes mountains, or the inky, spicy old-vine primitivo from Puglia. Or even a Napa Valley cabernet, made in a fashion similar to the way Hundred Acre is made and aged in the same French oak barrels used to age the pricier wine.

Never one to pass up an interesting opportunity, Woodbridge has just finished bottling a 2007 pinot noir sourced in part from Carneros' stately Stanly Ranch that will go by the label name “Cherry Pie.” His grandmother made those, too.

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