

Pursuing a Dream

An Interview with Jamie Kutch,
Owner and Winemaker, Kutch Wines LLC

EDITORS' NOTE For Jamie Kutch, the good life has little to do with corporate America – at least not anymore. Kutch, a former NASDAQ trader from Merrill Lynch, traded Wall Street and stocks for the Sonoma Coast and pinot noir in 2005. In true fairy-tale fashion, he decided to pursue his passion for wine and make it his full-time job. Based on his recent 93-point score from Wine Spectator, his efforts seem to be paying off. “I was tired of wearing a suit every day and chasing a buck,” says Kutch. “I wanted to follow a dream to produce something with my own two hands.”

COMPANY BRIEF At Kutch Wines (www.kutchwines.com), the focus is on making 100 percent pinot noir, using classic old-world techniques. The company pursues a minimalist philosophy in wine making, which is reflected in the use of indigenous yeast, minimal acid adjustments, and the absence of color-enhancing agents.

When you look today at the awareness of Kutch Wines in the market, are you happy with the recognition?

Yes, I am thrilled so far with the awareness of the brand in the market. I jumped off a cliff to come out here and pursue a dream, having no education in wine making, let alone in viticulture. I depended on Michael Browne of Kosta Browne to assist me, and he was magnificent in guiding me early on. That said, in life I've always depended on myself, and I kept pushing on doors until they opened. And, so far, it has been a heck of a ride.

In the beginning, did you know that Russian River and Sonoma were areas you wanted to focus on?

I did. One thing I brought to this position is an extremely strong palette, which I really depend on. For me, the greatest wines in California, of the pinot noir variety, are definitely produced in the Russian River Valley and along the Sonoma Coast. The soils, the topography, and the climate create beautiful, sensual wines. I'm trying to create food-friendly, balanced, and harmonious wines, and it seems to be working.

Does technology have an impact on the way you produce your wine?

I actually shun technology in wine making; I believe in old-world techniques. People have been making wine for hundreds of years, and



some of the greatest wines were made back in the '40s and the '60s, when they actually used very little technology. So I do everything very carefully, by hand, and with gravity. I don't use the new techniques for either pushing wine out of a barrel or pumping wine out of a tank. One thing I pride myself on is that my production is so small that I can actually take my time and make a true artisan product.

It's such a crowded market today, at all price points, and many new players have come into the market. Can you get the message across about what makes an individual wine or brand unique?

Yes. I think it's important to stay true to a philosophy. It's important to have a very dedicated work ethic and to put a lot of thought into the direction of the brand and the quality of the product. I try to purchase the highest quality fruit, and I don't put a price point on the fruit. They say wine is made in the vineyard, and I can attest to that after making three vintages of pinot noir, because the better the vineyard, the older the vines, and the more radical the soils, the more unique in character the wine is going to be. I think that pursuit is what can set one apart from another, whether it's knocking on doors, putting letters in mailboxes, or going through the Russian River Valley Web site and calling phone numbers to try to find vineyards. It's just a lot of hard work. Branding is also important. I tried to make it classic in style and in appearance. I think being out there and hanging out with the consumer, drinking, and enjoying dinners are other important ways to know what's in the interest of the consumer.

Many who have had the opportunity to try your wine have wanted to accumulate or buy it, but your production is limited. Is it sometimes challenging to turn people away?

Without a doubt. Every other day I sit in front of the computer going through e-mail, and it's tough explaining to people that I don't have any wine. That said, it's also driving and invigorating to try to increase the amount of wine, but

ever so slightly. Right now I'm doing 400 cases of wine, and I would like to eventually get up to about 1,000 cases. But I want to do it slowly and methodically and make sure that I can handle that. I don't want to increase production until I can find those great vineyards. But that certainly is a challenge, and it's hard to deal with.

When you look back now on how things have developed, have they been what you expected? Have there been many surprises?

It's conservatively 100 times more than I would have ever expected, and I'm blown away by the sheer interest in the wines and the recognition I've gotten this early. Last week, I wrote to *Wine Spectator* to say that I'd like to drop off my wines, and Jim Laube, the magazine's California wine expert, asked me if I'd like to go to lunch. So these types of things are, for me, incredible when I think about the number of brands that are in California. It has certainly been way more than I could have ever imagined.

Is it challenging to manage the business as it grows? Do you like to be actively involved from A to Z?

Yes. That's a downfall trait of mine right now, and I need to rectify it, because I've seen other businesses implode because of it. But right now, I do have my hand on every single piece. I am the only employee, so I handle everything from marketing to designing, from managing the Web site to making the wine, as well as checking the vineyards and trying to source new vineyards. It's hard because it's seven days a week. Maybe an assistant wouldn't be a bad thing, because I could use some sleep or a vacation. But I really do thrive on doing it myself.

Do you ever miss the trading desk?

Not a day goes by when I miss it. I tend to not even read the newspaper anymore, because I've just disconnected. Life is pretty good in California. This is easily the best decision I have ever made in my entire life. ●

Jamie Kutch amongst the grapevines at MacDougall Vineyard