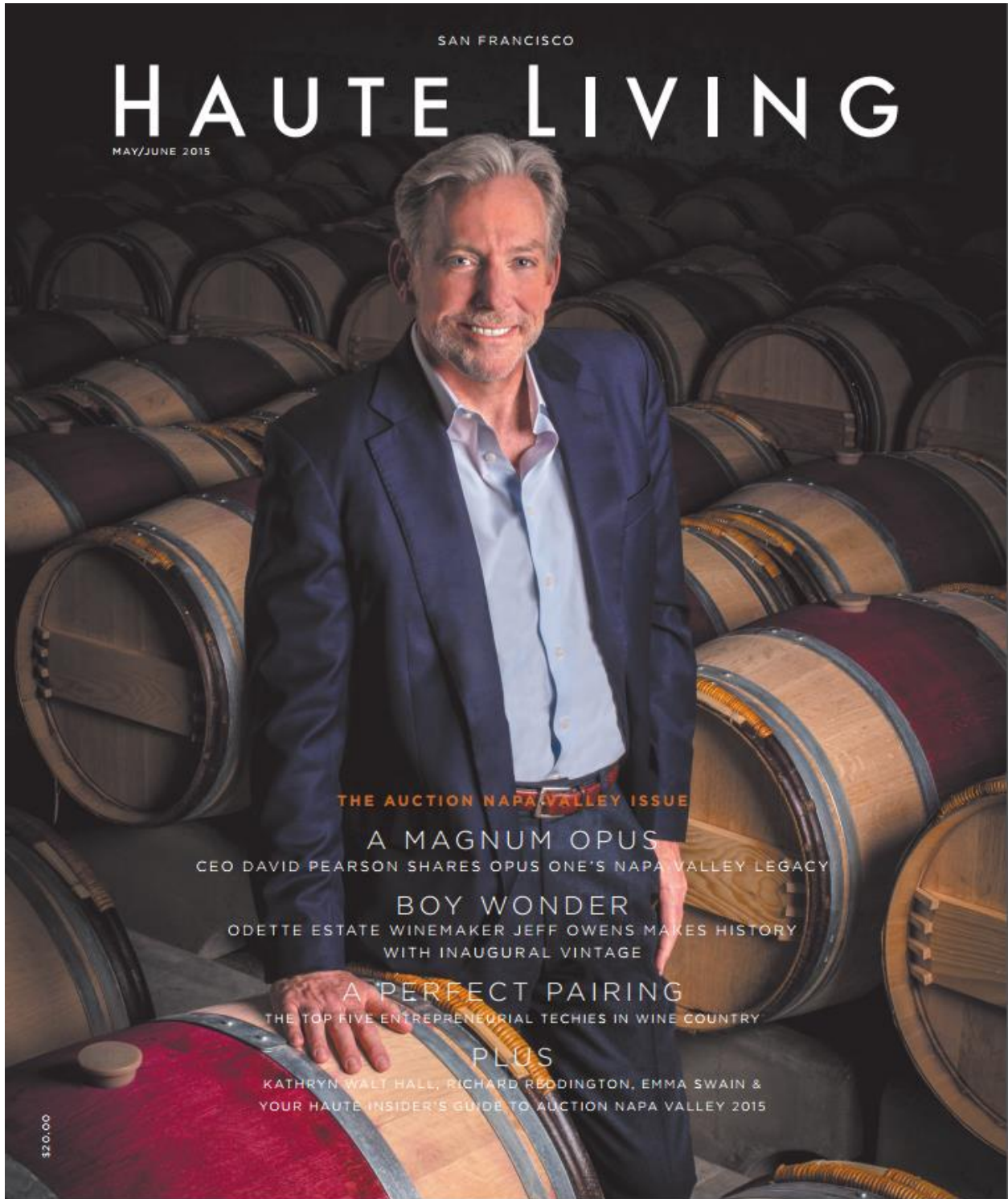


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MAY/JUNE 2015



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ONE ON ONE





The
WUNDERKIND
WINEMAKER

ODETTE ESTATE'S JEFF OWENS MAKES HISTORY
WITH HIS INAUGURAL VINTAGE

BY KELLY E. CARTER • PHOTOGRAPHY JAYMS RAMIREZ

ODETTE MAY BE A HEARTBREAKING HEROINE IN *Swan Lake*, but in Odette Estate winemaker Jeff Owens' world she's historical—and haute.

His 2012 Odette Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon became one for the record books last fall when the *Wine Advocate's* influential wine critic Robert Parker gave it 100 points, making the then 34-year-old one of the youngest 100-point winemakers. Sure, Nick Gislason, 31, garnered a triple-digit rating for his Screaming Eagle 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon, but that was his *second* vintage. Owens was a neophyte; this is believed to be the first time a producer or winemaker has achieved a perfect score in an inaugural vintage.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would score 100 out of the gate,” says the youthful-looking Owens as he sits on the patio of the winery, located on the scenic Silverado Trail in Stags Leap.

It's a remarkable accomplishment for the boy wonder entrusted with the newest label in the PlumpJack Group, which includes CADE Estate and PlumpJack Winery. During Auction Napa Valley, the PlumpJack Group wineries will pour at the Napa Valley Barrel Auction and participate in the e-auction lot, which offers the highest bidder a tasting experience at each property as well as six magnums for their cellar including the coveted, 100-point wine that Parker calls “off-the-charts, mind-blowing.”

That auction lot may be an oenophile's best shot to procure Owens' history-making wine, especially because only 500 cases were made. The wine won't be released until September, but already, “everybody is knocking at the door,” Owens says. “Everybody is your best friend now—people you haven't seen for 10 years.”

ONE ON ONE

Winners at Hand Family Wine

"WE WANTED TO MAKE AN IMPRESSION—A HUGE IMPRESSION. I TRIED TO COME OUT OF THE GATE SWINGING, TO GET THAT GRAND SLAM IN THE BEGINNING."

Wine enthusiasts now flock to Odette Estate, which unveils its new hospitality center in June. While visitors can't taste the Reserve just yet, the 2012 Odette Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, which was released in February, is available. With a 96 rating, it's hardly a shabby second.

Owens was at the winery when Parker's scores were released on Halloween 2014 and, as can be expected, very clearly remembers that momentous day. The winemaker had been given the time the ratings would be posted online but there was a delay. Since it was already a shorter workday, he told his crew there was no need to wait around and sent everyone home.

"I was totally happy and complacent being by myself, just kind of waiting," Owens recalls. "I didn't know if [the score] was going to up or down."

Alone in his office with no one to witness his every move, he pushed the refresh button on his computer over and over and over again—"a thousand times," he emphasizes.

Meanwhile, John Conover, general manager of the PlumpJack Group's three wineries as well as a partner at CADE and Odette, and Sandra Roberts, director of sales for PlumpJack's wineries, were making the rounds from winery to winery before pulling up at Odette.

"I had just pressed refresh and saw the scores," Owens recollects. "I just froze. I was like, 'Is this real? Push refresh again.' [After doing so,] I was like, 'Oh, my, gosh. It's 100 points!' I was so flattered. I was completely frozen. [Conover and Roberts] said my face was white and I was shaking."

The first call he made was to his wife of eight years, Valerie, his college sweetheart. "She started crying immediately and raced up here as fast as possible," he remembers.

Owens was thrilled when his mentor and former boss Tony Biagi quickly arrived as well. The PlumpJack Group team, including the crews, headed to Redd in Yountville, popped champagne and celebrated for a few hours before Owens and his wife took their two sons, Rylan and Declan, trick-or-treating. More champagne, of course, flowed later.

The winemaker calls Odette his third child; if that's the case, his boys get to spend plenty of time with their sister at the vineyard. They eat grapes when it's that time of year and explore the wine caves. Already, the kids are learning about aromatics and grape-sampling [walking the vineyard and picking select clusters to take back to the winery for testing and tasting prior to harvest]. It's a viticulture education that Owens certainly didn't have growing up in Sacramento, where he mowed neighbors' lawns when he was 12 years old.

"In my neighborhood, they were all larger lots," he recalls. "My father had a riding lawn mower. I would mow our lawn and then just drive around the neighborhood and talk to neighbors. [I'd] give my sales pitch and say, 'I can mow your lawn too.' I started to develop a bigger business, and on Saturdays I would drive from house to house."

He also acquired a love for the great outdoors and knew he wanted a career that allowed him to work outside. When the sports nut enrolled as a horticulture major at California Polytechnic State University [Cal Poly] San Luis Obispo with the intent of one day designing golf courses, not only did he not drink wine, but he didn't even know one could go to school for anything wine related.

"I thought [the wine world] was something that you were born into or grew

up with—[that] you had to have some kind of an inside track to be a part of," he says.

When he learned that a friend was minoring in viticulture, he thought it was so cool that he signed up for a course the following quarter.

"I had the most passionate professor," Owens says, referring to the late Keith Patterson. "He was so engaging, and I immediately fell in love. Within five minutes I said, 'There is just so much I can learn my entire life. I'll continue to learn and still never learn enough.' That was fascinating."

Turned on by the mixing of art and science, the student delved into enology and landed a tasting room job on the weekends.

"[Winemaking is] never something that is going to be the same thing over," he says. "I really loved the idea of having a new challenge every single vintage."

Following graduation, he interned at Cakebread Cellars for the 2005 harvest, decided he wanted to remain in Oakville, where Cakebread's winery facility is located, but opted for a boutique winery instead of at one of the larger vineyards.

Biagi, then PlumpJack's head winemaker, lured Owens with the offer of a fulltime cellar position that had the potential of something greater down the road. Starting at the bottom didn't bother Owens in the least.

In the beginning, Owens did "everything that no one else wants to do" from cleaning floors and drains to dragging around hoses. "My professor prepared all of us for that reality. He said, 'You think of all of these glamorous things when you read whatever on the Internet, but the wine industry is not all glamorous. It's really a lot of hard work. There's a lot of cleaning. It's really about 95 percent sanitation, cleaning and prep work.'"

He holds up a glass of wine in acknowledgement, continuing, "The end result—right here in the glass—is all worth it and makes it really fun."

Owens quickly ascended the PlumpJack ladder to become an essential part of the winemaking team. In a year he was promoted to enologist, then assistant winemaker. Prior to the 2010 harvest, he transferred to CADE, then a new addition to the PlumpJack portfolio, as assistant winemaker. On Howell Mountain, he mastered tannin management, a skill that has served him well at Odette. Just because Odette was new didn't mean expectations were low.

"There was already a lot of pressure," he declares. "You already had PlumpJack that was well-established. CADE was up and coming, so I knew that starting out that we didn't want to be left in the dust the first vintage. We wanted to make an impression—a huge impression. I tried to come out of the gate swinging, to get that grand slam in the beginning."

His second vintage is in barrel; he'll bottle the 2013 Estate in mid-June and the Reserve in late July. The wait for the critics' scores comes later.

"I think the wines are phenomenal," he states rather proudly. "I'm really happy. The '13 will be great follow-ups to the '12."

He won't predict a score any more than he would make a wine to please Parker, who favors big, bold flavors.

"I know that people do also make wines that don't align with their own palates to try to garner those scores," he acknowledges. "But really, I'm just trying to make wines that represent the terroir here and wines that I believe in."



2012 Odette Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon