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NOVEMBER 2015

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p. 38

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Blending Politics and Wine

GAVIN NEWSOM, CALIFORNIA'S LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR, IS ALSO ONE OF NAPA VALLEY'S MOST ACCLAIMED WINERY OWNERS. HERE, HE DESCRIBES HIS PASSION FOR PINOT NOIR AND POLITICS AND REVEALS WHAT HE'LL BE POURING FOR THANKSGIVING.

INTERVIEW BY RAY ISLE



Newsom (right) at his eco-minded Odette winery with winemaker Jeff Owens.

Q. You were in the wine business well before you got into politics. What drew you to it?

A. It was a way of connecting with my father [William Newsom, a former judge and the former manager of the Gordon P. Getty Family Trust]. My political advisers would suggest I get a better answer, but it's the truth. Even though he's a third-generation San Franciscan, my father's very European in some ways, and he loves wine. When I was young, he'd often say, "Hey, smell this. Taste this."

Q. Did you ever travel to explore wine with him?

A. We used to go to the medieval horse race, the Palio, in Siena every few years, right when all those crazy Super-Tuscans were becoming popular, Solaia and Sassicaia and Tignanello. I was a teenager, so while everyone on the trip was jumping up and down about the wine, I was drinking my Diet Coke. Then, a few years later, when I was 23, there I was opening a wine store, PlumpJack Wine & Spirits in San Francisco.

Q. How did you evolve from vintner to politician?

A. That wine store is actually the reason I got into politics. When we were applying for our permit, city inspectors came in and slowed everything down because we didn't have a mop sink. I was like, "The whole store is carpeted. Why the hell do we need a mop sink?" I was one of those "mad as hell and not gonna take it anymore" guys, and eventually when [Mayor] Willie Brown heard about me, he said, "I'm sick of this guy complaining—I'm gonna make him part of the solution by appointing him to the Parking and Traffic Commission." That was the impetus for my whole political life. That wine store. And that damn mop sink.

Q. Is the sink still there?

A. Yes! Even when I became the mayor of San Francisco, I couldn't change the building code. Twenty years later, that sink is still there, and it's never been used for anything except watering potted plants.

Q. Speaking of water, how is the drought in California affecting wineries?

A. In the southern and central parts of the state, a lot of growers are, I think, very anxious, and understandably so. But it's perverse in some ways because the drought has coincided with the best back-to-back vintages for Napa Valley Cabernets in decades—'12, '13 and '14. Still, even here, if you go into the fifth or sixth year of this kind of megadrought, it's extremely anxiety-inducing. That's one reason why, at our new winery, Odette, we invested quite substantially in what we call a large bathtub. It's a big cistern, right below our vineyard, to capture some of the rain and storm water in the winter.



Q. You make primarily Cabernet, but what other wines do you love?

A. I tend to go through phases. Lately I've been drinking a lot more Pinot Noir, and also Zinfandel. The other night we opened an El Molino Pinot Noir, which I hadn't had in a while—I'd forgotten how racy and wild their Pinots are. And Rafanelli Zinfandel. In the early '90s, Patty Rafanelli used to drop off the wine herself at my store. But she's tough—I got in trouble with her one time when her wine ended up on our list at Plumpjack Café, and she'd sold it only to the store. I learned from that! It's one thing to have the Alcoholic Beverage Control people come down on you, but they're nothing compared to Patty.

Q. What's your plan for Thanksgiving?

A. Not surprisingly, I'm usually in charge of the wine. But we always try to concentrate on a specific type. Last year was Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which I think is actually the perfect Thanksgiving wine—it has that peppery ripeness that matches so well with a range of spices. But two years ago, I was going through a Burgundy phase, and that was great, too. I pulled out two bottles of Dujac and, of course, everyone loved me. This year, I don't know. But if I knew this was my last Thanksgiving ever, I'd definitely be pulling out some old Cheval Blancs.

Q. You're friends with John Hickenlooper, the governor of Colorado, who was originally a craft-beer maker. Do you ever debate which is better, wine or beer?

A. No, because it's not a contest! It's not even an interesting debate. But despite the, let's say, obvious inferiority of John's product versus wine, I do admire the baseline experience of running a brewery. We both think running a bar or restaurant should be a requirement before you take a political position. It's the best training in the world.

Newsom introducing Hillary Clinton at a San Francisco event in 2008.

7 wines to try now

2014 HONIG SAUVIGNON BLANC (\$17)

"This crisp, affordable California bottling, from a family-owned producer in Napa Valley, reminds me of the dry Italian white wines I love."

2013 FINCA VIÑA (€20)

"Indigenous grapes such as Treixadura and Godello go into this aromatic white from the little-known Ribeiro region in northern Spain. It's great if seafood is on the Thanksgiving menu—or any time."

2013 GREGORY GRAHAM CARNEROS CHARDONNAY (\$30)

"I think Thanksgiving is the perfect occasion to break open a buttery, oaky Chardonnay from California. Gregory Graham's luscious version, from Sonoma County's acclaimed Sangiacomo vineyard, is a total crowd-pleaser. It always seems to disappear from our house before I've even realized it's open."

2012 PALI RIVIERA PINOT NOIR, SONOMA COAST (\$19)

"With this concentrated wine, Pali overdelivers at a good price. I like it whenever I want a Pinot that has a little more punch."

2011 FAMILLE PERRIN LES CORNUDS VINSOBRES (\$22)

"The family that owns the great Château de Beaucastel also makes this Rhône Valley red blend. It's bold and rich and, at a quarter the price, not a bad substitute for Beaucastel itself."

2013 ANTHILL FARMS SONOMA COAST PINOT NOIR (\$40)

"This winery is one of the best of the newer Sonoma producers, definitely one to put on your radar. Their Pinots always walk an amazingly fine line between richness and real delicacy."

2012 DOMAINE DU GALET DES PAPES CHATEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE (\$43)

"This wine brings back memories of my last trip to the Rhône Valley; we couldn't drink enough of it. It's silky and rich, with plenty of red berry fruit and that classic 'garrigue' character—evoking the wild herbs that grow on the Rhône hillsides."

Cost of the mop sink that the city of San Francisco required Newsom to install in his first wine store:

\$27,000

Number of times it's ever been used for a mop:

0