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# California: Exploring Obsession at Rhys Vineyards



By MATTHEW LUCZY © Apr 18, 2024



There is no shortage of well-heeled wine lovers who dream of owning a vineyard and winery. However, the individual who can create a genuinely world-class operation without compromise is rare indeed. Accomplishing this at the highest level is an enormous undertaking that requires not just a visionary but someone hands-on and involved in every detail, every step of the way.

The appeal of such a project is obvious, but the reality is foreboding. Cutting corners is tempting, and logistics are easy for someone in this position to outsource. There are countless examples of such a dream resulting in ostentatious wineries that produce uninteresting wine while the owner sits on the sidelines writing the checks.

Rhys founder Kevin Harvey is the former, not the latter. To make wines with the seriousness he envisioned, he needed to control every variable from the ground up, which he does with an uncompromising exploratory obsession that rings through every facet of Rhys.

Through vertical integration and first-principles reasoning, no stone, even pebble, is left unturned in pursuing world-class, age-worthy wines that sit confidently next to the iconic bottles that inspired them. The Santa Cruz Mountains' combination of high elevations and oceanic moderation offers the climatic baseline necessary to create structured, Old World-influenced wines, and the dazzlingly complex geology has allowed him to develop a diverse overview of this massive and nuanced region.

Low yields achieved via high-density plantings are a constant in the Rhys portfolio to achieve the desired flavor concentration and age-worthy structure. Through continuous experimentation and iteration, each site is planted to as high a density as is feasible, with earlier sites being updated and replanted as more knowledge and perspective is gained. This constant reinvestment has resulted in 120 acres of estate vines between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Anderson Valley.



*Horseshoe Vineyard*

The first site was the quarter-acre Home in 1998 near Woodside, the experiment that eventually led to Rhys's creation. Since expanded to 1.3 acres, it is located on the North American plate just 400 yards from Family Farm, across the San Andreas Fault on the Pacific plate. The proximity but immense geologic difference between the two sums up much of Harvey's vision in microcosm and echoes through the centerpiece sites, Alpine and Horseshoe.

Alpine was planted in 2000 to six-feet-by-four-feet spacing and has become a testing ground for the others. It sits on a four-million-year-old Purisima formation, while Horseshoe, planted in 2004 just a half mile away with sections at tighter spacings, sits on 15-million-year-old Monterey shale interspersed with limestone. Skyline followed in 2007, located just below the winery at 2,360 feet in elevation and planted to the extremely dense two-feet-by-three-feet spacing. 2008 saw an expansion to Anderson Valley with the 32-acre Bearwallow and, within it, Porcupine Hill at a similar density to Skyline. The newest site is Mt. Pajaro in Corralitos, planted in 2012 and, as such, the most well-informed, with an average spacing of 3.5 feet by 3.5 feet.



ALPINE  
VINEYARD



*The entrance to Alpine Vineyard*

Due to the region's rugged topography and the close spacing of the vines, the vineyards must be farmed by hand, for which Rhys employs a year-round crew led by viticulturist Javier Tapia Meza. Farming practices are strictly organic. Biodynamic practices were used in the early years and were abandoned due to their overly prescriptive and scheduled nature, which the team felt was unneeded given each vineyard's isolated nature and pristine soils.

Jeff Brinkman, equally exacting, curious and relentlessly focused on improvement as Harvey, directs the work in the winery. The vinification philosophies are as uncompromising as they are straightforward, aiming for gentle treatment that minimizes variables and keeps the delineation of each site as pristine as possible. The winery itself is a sprawling 30,000-square-foot cave complex that maximizes efficiency to the nth degree.

Pinot Noir is harvested at night and immediately sorted upon arrival at the winery. Whole-cluster decisions are made at this time and have gradually been refined since early vintages: Bearwallow and Horseshoe are completely destemmed; Mt. Pajaro includes 15% whole clusters; Alpine and Family Farm include around 35%; and Home, Skyline and Swan Terrace are fermented entirely whole cluster.

Rhys takes the concept of micro-vinification to an impressive level, utilizing over 100 separate one-ton stainless tanks and a limited number of two-ton French oak vats from Tonnellerie Rousseau. This allows for unmitigated control over each section of each vineyard and illuminates the numerous nuances between them. This process is responsible for the Swan Terrace bottling, which Harvey and Brinkman decided to bottle separately after seeing its consistent distinctiveness from the rest of Alpine.



The grapes undergo a five-day cold soak at 50 degrees Fahrenheit before gradually increasing to 88 degrees Fahrenheit to facilitate fermentation. Grapes are gently foot-treaded twice daily, reducing as fermentation approaches dryness. Rather than pump-overs or punch-downs, juice is drained from the bottom of the tank and poured over the cap.

All red wines are basket pressed and transferred by gravity to four-year seasoned François Frères barrels toasted between medium and medium-plus. Along with whole-cluster amounts, the percentage of new wood is the only variable between vineyards, with more tannic, structured sites seeing higher proportions: Family Farm and Home see no new oak, Bearwallow less than 5%, Skyline and Mt. Pajaro 25% to 30%, with Alpine and Horseshoe receiving 35%.

The blending process involves extensive blind tastings over several months. This rigorous selection ensures the vineyard-designate wines express their full potential and also creates a stellar set of appellation wines formerly bottled as Alesia. After 13-14 months in barrel, the blends are finalized and settled in stainless steel before returning to barrel for another three to four months. All wines are bottled by gravity, unfiltered and unfined.

Chardonnay is whole-cluster pressed using a four-ton bladder press, with three pressings kept separate: free-run juice contains the most acid and finesse, the middle pressing brings power and depth with fewer mineral notes, and the last cycle is the heaviest and usually not included in the finished wine. The juice settles overnight before being gravity-fed to barrel for fermentation. Again, a single cooper is used: Dany three-year seasoned with light-long toast, 15% new across the board. Élevage lasts 12 months without bâtonnage before the wines are racked with their lees into stainless tank for another six to eight months, where they finish malolactic fermentation.



The Rhys wines benefit greatly from time in the cellar and often demand it upon release. It is necessary to point out that despite their influences and many of their techniques, the wines are not “Burgundian” in any sense; they are Santa Cruz Mountains, through and through, approached with the seriousness and age-worthiness of the best Burgundies, which makes for a captivating and recalibrating

All wines result from human decisions, whether they hail from hallowed centuries-old vineyards and cellars or more recent upstarts. Those who can break down and understand the endless variables involved while continuously referencing their inspirations will make wines that more fully realize their vision. Two decades into its existence, Rhys is proof-positive that any perceived chasm between Burgundy, California or elsewhere is as much about meticulous planning and obsessive attention to detail as raw materials and potential. In this regard, they are leading the way in closing the gap and should be a benchmark for winemakers on both sides of the Atlantic to constantly examine and push their methods and perspectives.

**NOTE:** This is one of three reports on the wines from the Santa Cruz Mountains published in this issue, along with [California: The Undervalued and Overperforming Santa Cruz Mountains](#) and [California: Four Decades of Mount Eden Vineyards](#).



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