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Restaurants

The New San Pasqual

"It's daunting if you're a young businessman. You take everything so personally."

Crush

By Matthew Lickona

Published September 14, 2006

[Crush from [previous weeks](#)]

Erik Humphrey was a beach-city beer drinker. Then, ten years ago, his father started finding San Diego a bit crowded and decamped for Napa. "He was renting a place up there," explains Humphrey, "and the owners, who grew grapes, had some old winery equipment in the basement." Dad got leave to use it, son came up and joined him for crush, and they set about making a Zinfandel from the landlord's fruit. "It was the same Zinfandel that Ravenswood uses -- good stuff. I think that's what really got me hooked. The planets were aligned or



Erik Humphrey

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something -- everything

went perfectly. We were just reading from a book -- 'This much yeast; this much sulfur' -- and it was a great wine. I wish I'd saved a few bottles."

Father and son never quite replicated the magic of that first vintage. "To a certain extent, it depends on the grapes you can scavenge." But once was enough. Back in SoCal, Humphrey discovered the San Diego Amateur Winemaking Society and, through them, some of San Diego's commercial winemakers -- "especially Mick Drago at Belle Marie. All the wineries were very open and friendly to people interested in winemaking. That kind of encouraged me."

Still, when the e-mail came to SDAWS members, asking if anyone was interested in buying San Pasqual winery from Paul Marx -- the man who had revived the name -- Humphrey hesitated. "I'm not a millionaire. But then, I was really looking for something to do on my own. When I saw that it wasn't buying an estate with vines and a chateau, that it was buying equipment and supplies and the name and back inventory, I said, 'I could probably pull that off.'"

Humphrey thinks that Marx was selling, in part, because of difficulties with distribution -- getting product out there. Marx was making the wine in Escondido, but the spot wasn't zoned for retail sales. A La Jolla tasting room had proven highly expensive. And while he had made it into some restaurants and markets, he was still running up against the local hesitancy to embrace San Diego wine. (Marx was not alone in his distribution troubles. Says Humphrey, "When I was talking to wineries, they said that getting your product out there was the biggest problem of all.")

So, he looked up a couple of old high school buddies to get their take on the matter. One of them, Steve May, was already a partner in San Diego Coffee, Tea & Spice, a local coffee-roasting operation, and also owned a *U-T* distributorship. As they went over the details of small-business ownership, May began to get interested. "He said, 'Oh, I want to do this, too. I'll be a partner.' It's a good match. The coffee company also does tea and spices -- it's sort of a gourmet package. We're still working on the synergy of that."

Synergy or no synergy, May already distributed product to "something like 120 markets, liquor stores, and restaurants. I asked, 'How many do you think would carry our wines?' and he said, 'I bet half would.'" That was enough for Humphrey. The other friend came in as a silent partner; they moved the winemaking operation next door to the coffee business in a PB industrial park and set about tinkering with the brand.

"We're continuing what Marx started as far as naming the wine after places and historical figures in San Diego," says Humphrey. "The Del Mar Chardonnay, the Ramona Sauvignon Blanc." But they decided to shift the emphasis away from San Pasqual's original location -- the old label featured the mountains around the San Pasqual Viticultural Area in

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Escondido -- and "make it more generally encompassing of SoCal history." They traded a designer wine for work and ended up with a label that shows a bell tower seen through a wineglass-shaped keyhole. "We're not shooting for the elegant, European look, or the upscale Napa Valley. We want it to be local, something midmarket." (Prices run \$8--\$16.)

The idea of tying the winery to local Mission history -- it was at the Mission that California saw its first vineyards planted -- also led Humphrey to shift emphasis to Spanish varietals. Besides bread-and-butter wines like Cabernet and Merlot, Humphrey plans to make Tempranillo, Grenache, and a Grenache rosé. He couldn't find any Albarino, so he's sticking with Sauvignon Blanc for a white. "Plus, maybe a couple of flagship blends." The fruit comes from Baja, courtesy of Belle Marie. "Mick is sort of a broker for a lot of wineries. I just place my orders through him. I trust him to guide my winemaking a bit, too." Dad's basement winery was one thing, "but on a commercial level, I sort of follow his lead." The winery's current release of Monte Soledad red was actually made at Belle Marie -- Humphrey was still getting his own operation in order. (The Baja grapes come in a little riper than Humphrey would prefer, "but the thing that helps is that they get them really cold when they bring them up. It stops everything in its tracks.")

Market penetration is proceeding, slowly. "It's daunting if you're a young businessman, because you take everything so personally. I'm learning not to do that. In a lot of places, the market is so geared toward the Central Coast, or Napa, or the hot wine of the moment -- Chilean or Australian -- that there's no place for a small, local winery. I can understand that. But then there are others that are very receptive, very much into the local product, the homeyness of it. I think there's a trend starting to emerge in grocery markets and restaurants: going for that local produce. We're trying to home in on those places, and they've been receptive. We're at the Linkery in North Park, the Mission San Luis Rey, Café Secret and the Del Mar Café, and a few other restaurants."

Meanwhile, plans are afoot to open the sort of retail sales location that Marx envisioned. "I was up at Witch Creek, and that gave me the idea that I could pull off a warehouse with a tasting area. There was a steady stream of people coming in. We had this little space in front with a junky desk, and we thought, 'It's summer. There's lots of tourism. Maybe we can get some groups in here, make a little extra on top.'" The desk went out, the tasting counter and cooler came in, and Humphrey started pouring on the weekends. "It was worth doing, but it made us realize all the more how much we really need this to be in a place where people are going by. Here, it's hard to find, and you have to drive to it. We'd like to move further into PB, someplace like Cass Street. The neighborhood is a congregation spot for twentysomethings, and I think they'd be looking for something like this. A wine bar that would be like a microbrewery, where you could see the tanks, see us making wine."

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