

Bob 'Taz' Steinhauer, the Beringer Blass vineyard manager with a devilish streak, has the chance of a lifetime—his own line of wines and a new growing region to get the grapes for his Pinot Noir.

By LINDA MURPHY, CHRONICLE WINE EDITOR

**C**HUCK ORTMAN CAN'T QUITE REMEMBER WHEN IT HAPPENED OR WHOM TO CREDIT, YET HE CLEARLY RECALLS THE MOMENT.

"Bob Steinhauer came shooting down from Napa Valley to Meridian," says Ortman, who recently retired as the Central Coast winery's winemaker. "We were in the scale house and Bob rushed in, got on the computer, then dashed to the chalkboard and started to draw, saying rapidly, 'We're going to plant this variety at White Hills Vineyard and this variety at Riverbench and this grape goes here—'

"Then he was gone.

" 'There goes the Tasmanian Devil,' one of us said, and Bob Steinhauer has been 'Taz' ever since."

Steinhauer is a tornado who rarely touches down, blowing through vineyards to spot that one vine in 1,000 that is struggling, then storming to the vineyard office to ask what's to be done about it. His energy is boundless, his meticulousness legendary, his temper quick and his recovery quicker...

Nicknamed for the voracious, whirling-dervish Looney Toons character that is based on an actual marsupial found on the island of Tasmania, Steinhauer has his paws deep into the dirt of a relatively new (2001) American Viticultural Area (AVA) in Santa Barbara County that has winemakers excited about the Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs being produced there. It's an eminently cool growing region called the Santa Rita Hills, and Taz is not just growing grapes there, he's making wine, too.

On Sept. 2, Beringer Blass will launch a new brand, TAZ, releasing a combined 7,500 cases of 2002 Santa Barbara County Pinot Gris, 2001 Santa Barbara County Chardonnay, 2001 Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir, 2001 Santa Barbara Syrah and 2001 Santa Barbara County Merlot. TAZ is a tribute to Steinhauer's accomplishments in 24 years with Beringer and also the base from which he expects to produce superb Pinot Noir.

Steinhauer and TAZ winemaker Jon Priest believe that the wines from the Santa Rita Hills, and specifically their 5-year-old Fiddlestix Vineyard, will, as Priest says, "be different than anything else out there." Adds Steinhauer with a chuckle: "And, hopefully, the Pinot people will think so, too."

"Taz" was responsible for planting every vine in the four vineyards used to make TAZ wines... Along the way, he took notice of the Santa Rita Hills, the coolest growing area in the county and, to Steinhauer's thinking, the best for Pinot Noir.

Then he met Kathy Joseph, owner/winemaker of Fiddlehead Cellars, who had a similar vision. The two worked out a partnership in which Joseph purchased a 150-acre property—across the road from the famed Sanford & Benedict Vineyard—that was to become Fiddlestix Vineyard. She and Steinhauer planted Fiddlestix to six different Pinot Noir clones and a selection of rootstocks in 1998, and now that the vines are producing, they share the fruit. Steinhauer's half goes to TAZ; Joseph keeps some of her grapes and sells to other wineries.



Bob 'Taz' Steinhauer

It's an unusual partnership in that they planted 33 separate blocks within the vineyard, divided up the blocks for the first harvest and swap blocks each year. "It's worked extremely well," Steinhauer says.

"We knew immediately that this was the place (for Pinot Noir) when we saw it," he says. "And we tasted a Sanford & Benedict Pinot and it was pretty damn good."

Fiddlestix is just 10 miles from the ocean, on the western end of the Santa Ynez Valley. The valley runs east-west, drawing cool breezes from the Pacific into the vineyard. It's this chilling morning and evening influence, Priest says, a very long growing season and a "painter's palette" of soils that create intense fruit flavors, deep color and brisk acidity in the grapes.

"Growing Pinot Noir here is intensive," Steinhauer says. "We'll average just 2 tons of fruit per acre this year, as all our clones are low producers that develop small clusters (and more concentration). We work hard to avoid vine disease, which delays maturity, and we prune and train the vines so that leaves don't overlap and all are fully functioning. We want slow maturity so that sugar levels in the grapes don't develop before the flavors."

While the 2001 TAZ Pinot Noir is primarily from Fiddlestix, with some Riverbench Vineyard fruit blended in, the 2002

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bottling will be all Fiddlestix. Steinhauer and Priest intend to produce a vineyard-designated wine each year.

Considering the youth of the vines, the 2001 TAZ Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir is a great start. Its black cherry, raspberry and strawberry fruit flavors are ripe and lively; there's a complexing hint of spice and the brisk acidity gives the wine a clean finish.

The TAZ Pinot Gris and Chardonnay were made from grapes grown in the Cat Canyon and Cat Canyon Annex vineyards in the Los Alamos area; Syrah and Merlot are grown in the warmer North Canyon Vineyard on the Santa Maria Bench, north of the famous Bien Nacido Vineyard...

"Bob has been a big asset to the Central Coast because he brought knowledge here that he gained in Napa Valley," says Priest, 41, who knows the territory after making wine for Wild Horse Winery and Adelaida before joining TAZ in March. "We're a fairly young industry in the Central Coast compared to Napa and Sonoma, and he's saved us from making a lot of mistakes."

Other colleagues say Steinhauer is driven, sets high standards for himself and those who work for him and lets people know exactly how he feels. Although he might get his knickers in a twist over a vineyard issue, when the day is done, they say, Taz is one of the most unassuming guys around.

"He always apologizes if he blows up," says one, "even if he's right."

Steinhauer has been given full credit by Beringer winemaker Ed Sbragia for giving the winemaking team the grapes that have made the winery famous. The wines they've made together are world class - Beringer's Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignons, Private Reserve Chardonnays and Bancroft Ranch Merlots among them. As Beringer has acquired and built brands, including Meridian, Steinhauer has taken charge of the grapes, from Beringer's heavy investment in Knights Valley in Sonoma County to Chateau St. Jean's acclaimed Cinq Cepages Bordeaux-style red blend; from Etude's Pinot Noirs to Stags' Leap Winery's Petite Syrahs, from St. Clement's Oropas red blend to Chateau Souverain's classy yet affordable wines.

"My time with Bob goes back to 1979, when things got a lot better in our vineyards and we focused on becoming the best in Napa Valley," Sbragia says. "He's tough and demanding, yet he's the most generous, kind guy. Every bottle I've made would not have been as good if Bob weren't there."

Chateau Montelena winemaker Bo Barrett, who as a kid attended viticultural seminars given by Steinhauer, calls him "a great teacher."

"I have so much respect for him," Barrett says. "He's a tireless worker and an unselfish guy, not a 'look at me' guy; attention turns him pink in the face. "

So it was with some initial embarrassment that Steinhauer learned that Beringer Blass had created TAZ in his honor.

"I was genuinely surprised, shocked, pleased and proud," Steinhauer says. "I'm proud that people in the vineyards get to be recognized for making really good wine and not just the

winemakers. I'll be more pleased if the wines are successful. The story isn't about me, it's about everyone's commitment to making great wines."

Steinhauer, who jokes that if a vineyard were to be named after him it should be called B.S. Vineyard, was kept in the dark on TAZ until after the wines had been bottled and labeled - too late to back out... TAZ now has its own winery in Santa Maria, where Steinhauer and Priest will press grapes together...

... Steinhauer remains on the Beringer Blass executive committee, is on the board of the Wine Institute, is vice president of the Napa Valley Vintners Association and will be president next year, and is on a state board that addresses control of Pierce's disease and the glassy-wing sharpshooter...

### THE SANTA RITA HILLS AVA

One of California's newest American Viticultural Areas (AVA), the Santa Rita Hills region, is also one of its most exciting. Designated an AVA in 2001, the 100-square-mile area in Santa Barbara County, east of Lompoc and west of Buellton, is being recognized as a supreme location for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

The AVA - Santa Barbara County's third, joining Santa Ynez Valley and Santa Maria Valley - is located on the western end of the Santa Ynez Valley. The Santa Rosa Hills to the south and Purisima Hills to the north flank the east-west valley, which sucks in cold breezes and fog from the Pacific Ocean some 10 to 15 miles away, making the Santa Rita Hills one of the coolest growing regions in California - some 15 degrees cooler in summer than the eastern end of Santa Ynez Valley, east of Highway 101. Most of California's valleys run north-south, with mountain ranges blocking the marine influences. No such barrier exists in the Santa Rita Hills.

The cool climate makes for a long, eight-month growing season and produces intense flavors, great complexity and firm natural acidity in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes. Still, there is enough daytime warmth at the end of the season to fully ripen the fruit. The soils are a mix of loams based on dune sand, marine deposits, alluvium and terrace deposits.

The petition for federal AVA status, drafted by Wes Hagen of Clos Pepe and delivered by Richard Sanford of Sanford Winery, stated that the region produced "top-rated" Chardonnays and "sumptuous" Pinot Noirs and proclaimed it to be "probably the greatest grape-growing area anywhere in the United States, particularly when it comes to great Chardonnay and Pinot Noir."

That boast would get a challenge from the folks in Carneros, Russian River Valley, the Sonoma Coast and Oregon, yet recent media hoo-haw about Santa Rita and the rush by other producers to the area seems warranted. In a recent tasting, The Chronicle panel singled out two lively, delicious Chardonnays from the region - the 2001 Sanford Santa Rita Hills (\$18) and the 2001 Lafond Santa Rita Hills (\$28).

Top producers also include Andrew Murray, Au Bon Climat, Babcock, Clos Pepe, Jaffurs, Longoria, Melville, Rusack and Bonaccorsi - ex-Spago sommelier Michael Bonaccorsi's label, which includes a Fiddlestix Vineyard Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir. TAZ Vineyards' first Pinot Noir, the 2001 Santa Barbara County, is made primarily of Fiddlestix fruit; the 2002 vintage will be 100 percent Fiddlestix. — L.M.



## TASTING NOTES FOR TAZ WINES

The Chronicle was given a sneak preview last week of TAZ Vineyards wines, which will be released nationally on Sept. 2. Here are tasting notes from the first vintage:

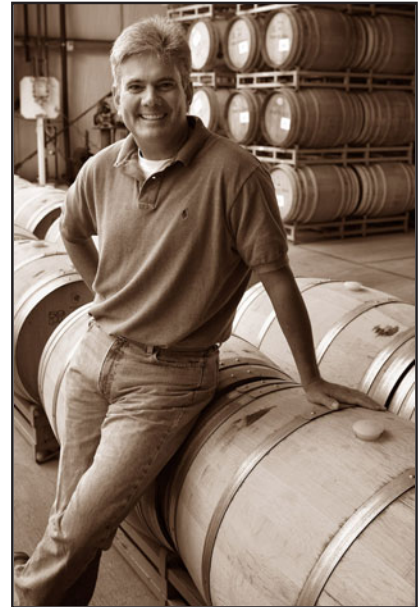
**2002 TAZ SANTA BARBARA COUNTY PINOT GRIS** – What a start. This is a simply delicious Pinot Gris, with richness balanced by great texture and firm acidity. There are hints of apple, mineral and spice on the nose and lush, mouth-filling flavors of crisp apple, lime and spice and a citrusy finish. The grapes came from the Cat Canyon Annex Vineyard in the Los Alamos growing region; one-third of the fruit was fermented in oak barrels, the remainder in stainless steel tanks.

**2002 TAZ SANTA BARBARA COUNTY CHARDONNAY** – Here's a Chardonnay that lands midway between an oaky butter bomb and a lean, mineral rendition. It is toasty on the nose with spiced baked apple and ripe pear, and has similar flavors tinged with butterscotch, almond, stone fruit and mineral notes. It is medium-rich and smooth in texture, almost custardy, yet finishes with refreshing acidity. From the Cat Canyon and Cat Canyon Annex vineyards, the wine was 100 percent barrel fermented in French oak and underwent partial malolactic fermentation.

**2001 TAZ SANTA BARBARA COUNTY PINOT NOIR** – This Pinot favors elegance and restraint over upfront ripe fruit. It has a slightly stemmy nose plus black cherry, violet and a whiff of vanilla; on the palate, the black cherry, raspberry, strawberry and baking spice flavors are somewhat lean in the firm-textured wine that comes to life with its zingy acidity. The Fiddlestix Vineyard in the Santa Rita Hills and the Riverbench Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley contributed the fruit, which was fermented in small open-top fermenters and aged in French oak barrels.

**2001 TAZ SANTA BARBARA COUNTY SYRAH** – This wine is in direct contrast to the Pinot Noir, immediately accessible with ripe, jammy fruit flavors and a strong shake of black pepper. Juicy blackberry, plum and blueberry notes hit the mouth with a rush, then the spice kicks in for complexity, and the brisk acidity refreshes for another sip. As winemaker Jon Priest says, "It's lush yet has nerve." The grapes were grown in one block of the North Canyon Vineyard on the Santa Maria bench; the wine was aged in French oak barrels for 14 months.

**2001 TAZ SANTA BARBARA COUNTY MERLOT** – Cool-climate Merlots are being successfully made in Carneros and the Russian River Valley, and Steinhauer is out to prove that his North Canyon Vineyard can produce them, too. His first vintage of Taz Merlot is on the right track – a crisp, complex, fully ripe wine with black cherry, black plum, cocoa and earth aromas and flavors that are defined by clean acidity. Aged in French oak barrels for 16 months. — L.M.



*TAZ Winemaker Jon Priest*

