

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Central Coast winemaking whiz kid Andrew Murray splits from his parents and strikes out on his own



Chronicle / Craig Lee

How do you top yourself if you've reached the pinnacle of your career at age 25?

For Andrew Murray, 35, of the eponymous vineyard in Santa Barbara County, the answer is to lose the farm, flirt around with new vineyards and train for a triathlon. Oh, and make even better wines.

A decade ago, Murray was tagged as one of the youngest -- and most talented -- winemakers in America.

The Los Angeles Times, Bon Appetit and Appellation magazine praised him soon after he exploded onto the scene with world-class bottles of Viognier and

Syrah, Rhone varietals that almost no Americans were planting. By 1999, when he was 27, The Chronicle named him a Winemaker to Watch.

The question then was: Is Andrew Murray a flash in the pan?

In 2002, two of his 1999 Syrahs were recommended by The Chronicle's tasting panel. In 2004, Food & Wine magazine named him first on its list of Tastemakers under 35. In 2006, The Chronicle Wine section awarded three stars to his 2004 Tous les Jours Syrah.

Murray's family owned a 200-acre ranch and vineyards, and before he was finished with college, his father entrusted him with making

wine, and the young whippersnapper quickly mastered the lesser-known varietals they grew.

The question now is: What will the next 10 years look like? Will he be able to live up to the reputation he established?

The grown-up wunderkind has had the very terroir he was known for pulled from under his feet. His parents gave him a loving boot out of the nest, handing him the Andrew Murray brand and the winery's equipment and assets, but selling the ranch that had been the site of Andrew Murray Vineyards in the Santa Ynez Hills.

Murray now joins the growing group of maverick, peripatetic winemakers who don't own land or farm their own grapes. Perhaps as a measure of his coming-of-age, though, he has been hired as a consultant by Xavier and Nicole Rolet, new owners of the former Domaine de la Verriere in the Gigondas region and its neighboring area in France. Their soon-to-debut label, Le Chene Bleu, will appear on Viognier, Syrah, Grenache and other Rhone bottlings that buck France's hallowed appellation system.

"I was famous for being young -- I got pretty tired of it," he says now, still recognizable as the geeky, tall, rail-thin, UC Berkeley intellectual he was before he transferred to UC Davis to study enology.

He seems to relish the idea of being vineyard-less. He embraces the challenge to prove he is much more than the moniker of "the youngest," and that a winemaker can excel, sans estate. While the move astonished many, it was, like most of the decisions Murray made, based on firm foundations.

It isn't astonishing at all if you know the Murray family, tout ensemble; above all, if you know how they trust Murray's remarkable palate.

James and Francis Murray, Andrew's parents, were successful owners of eight restaurants in the Los Angeles area. The teenage Andrew sulked in the car when his parents drove him to a beautiful ranch outside Santa Barbara to gaze at a wave of sunlit rolling hills. James, a self-made entrepreneur, wanted to "retire" from the restaurant business, buy the ranch and, he announced to the family, plant a vineyard and make wine.

Once the restaurants were sold, James purchased the ranch and

moved the family to the Santa Ynez Valley. Then the Murrays went to France to indulge their passion for fine food and wine.

"We took Andy along because he could translate for us," says mother Fran. "We knew we were in trouble when he stopped translating and started having conversations with the winemakers."

Andrew himself remembers an epiphany of sorts at age 15 while visiting the Rhone Valley appellation of Condrieu and conversing with Philippe Faury, whose name is whispered in reverent tones by Rhone lovers.

The Murrays, led by James, decided that they would grow Rhone grapes in Santa Barbara because they loved the Rhone, and because few Americans were growing Rhone varieties in the 1980s.

Pere and mere Murray had dreams of a continuing their restaurant dynasty and sent young Andrew to a summer culinary apprenticeship. He returned with a resounding "no" to the career of a chef.

Australia's influence

Instead, he went to UC Berkeley, where he flitted among English, archaeology and paleontology. When he wanted to switch to Davis, his academic adviser told him to go to Australia to catch the growing season in the Southern Hemisphere.

The three-month internship at Capel Vale Wines in Western Australia lasted nine months, and Murray quickly rose from barrel cleaner to assistant winemaker. He made his first wine there, at age 19. To this day, the dual influences of French Rhones and Aussie Shiraz inform his palate.

"My style has the politeness of the French, and the brashness of the Australians. I walk the razor's edge."

Back at Davis, he was happy to bounce around disciplines and avoid hard science courses. Urged by his wife (then girlfriend) Kristen, to complete a degree, he relented and wrote a paper to justify the courses he had taken (in enology, viticulture and business) in order to earn his bachelor's degree.

However, when he thought about a master's and then a doctorate, his father intervened. "There's your master's and Ph.D.," James Murray said, waving at the family vineyards.

Even during university and certainly afterward, the praise rolled in. In 1999, Robert M. Parker Jr. called the winery "one of the shining stars in the Santa Barbara firmament."

In the '90s, the Murrays decided to move their tasting room to Grand Avenue in downtown Los Olivos, after they realized their remote location made them hard to find.

In off years, when Andrew was not satisfied with the grapes off his own ranch, the family bought grapes from nearby farms, and Andrew forged his first relationships with growers. While the farming and winemaking all flowed from family discussion, everyone deferred to Andrew's palate.

Meanwhile, even as the elder Murrays began a gradual handoff to their son, Andrew chafed at collaboration. Fran Murray clearly realized that her son needed to make all the vineyard and winemaking decisions.

The reality of breaking up the business so that the older Murrays

could retire, selling the land and bequeathing the winery to Andrew, hurt. Over the course of about a year, a buyer was found. In January 2006, the formal papers were signed. The elder Murrays retired to the neighboring town of Solvang. Andrew was on his own.

Standalone vintner

"I literally matured -- physically, emotionally and professionally -- on that ranch. I grew up on it." Yet he is not maudlin about the loss. "When you literally spill sweat -- and sometimes real blood -- on a farm, it becomes very special to you."

Immediately after the sale Andrew leased an old brewery on the property of nearby Firestone Winery and installed a state-of-the-art winemaking center. Meanwhile, he had quietly been making wines for friends and will continue to do so, among them Oak Savanna Vineyard, Great Oaks Ranch and Vineyard and Calzada Ridge Vineyard. There is also the consulting gig for Le Chene Bleu.

He is between the 2006 and 2007 vintages: the earlier one with some of the grapes coming from the former estates; the latter from grapes purchased from various vineyards -- with none of his former estate grapes whatsoever in barrel.

In early March, he was working with some of the best vineyard consultants in the area, among them Ben Merz of Coastal Vineyard Care Associates. Merz oversaw Murray's estates in the past and now advises him on which fruit to purchase. The plus side of not owning vineyards is that Murray feels liberated from what had been pressure to use his own grapes. "Now I can put more energy on winemaking and rely on

relationships with growers," he says.

More important, the capital that he used to plow back into farming can now be plowed into his new winery. What he used to have to spend on the farm, he can now spend on the larger, cutting-edge winemaking equipment and a bottling line. Those vines, he points out, contain the early mistakes the family made as neophyte growers.

"I'm in my flirtatious period -- I'm having affairs with vineyards, not women." In the meantime, he can spend time with his children, 8 and 6, and he can train for a triathlon. Bicycling hundreds of miles allows him to meander among his vines and commune with them in peace, he says. Riding slowly through the vineyards, he can examine the plants in some detail.

The taster

Fran, Andrew's mother, says that from early on, he tasted alone. The son of avid cooks, he considers every block of grapes a spice in a "spice rack."

He used to think of his own estate in blocks of flavor, he says. Now, with the freedom to pick and choose from the best in all the surrounding appellations -- Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Maria Valley, Santa Rita Hills and Paso Robles -- his spice rack has expanded.

Whether he is bottling a single-vineyard wine or a multi-vineyard effort, "I am always blending. Every cluster I choose for my single-vineyard wines is a blending of the grapes I pick. I am always blending for taste."

Tasting and tweaking the wines in the lab -- and more importantly, once the blends are in barrels -- is now a daily ritual before bottling and release. "It's after the juices

marry and sit together ... I can get my head around the wine."

What does he think of the wines in barrel -- those with none of his original estate fruit -- to be released in 2008? "Some vineyards I preferred to our own. Some made me miss our old ranch."

A few of them, from the Great Oaks Ranch Syrah and Watch Hill Syrah, to a Paso Robles Grenache promise magnificently big, single vineyard wines. (The Grenache will also go into Eleven, a red blend.) They are lush and opulent on the palate, overarched by a subtle and transparent elegance, in classic Andrew Murray style.

There are more changes planned. When pressed, he says that indeed he hopes to have a vineyard and estate in his future, perhaps on the farmland of his in-laws. Terroir draws him back.

There, he is planning to plant Viognier and Pinot Noir (Murray loves the challenge of such a difficult grape) and erect a "farm stand," which sounds like camouflage for a tasting room. With or without a farm, however, he's going to make wine as he likes it.

Meanwhile, he knows what it's like to push himself to the edge, as he trains 70 to 100 miles on his bicycle. Getting back to the land is a faraway dream, and he is pedaling for the long haul.



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story about two losers and a plot with nothing redeemable. Which is why he signed the agreement to allow his bottles to be filmed and his wines named in the dialogue. It is a testament to Murray's business sense that though he thought the movie wouldn't amount to much, he didn't think the product placement would hurt.

A few other vintners dismissed the movie out of hand, and wouldn't sign on at all.

The movie gave Murray a small boost. " 'Sideways' woke up folks within driving distance from Los Angeles and Santa Barbara who would normally go to Napa," he says -- especially younger wine drinkers who are learning about his wines. Still, Los Olivos is no Yountville: "No matter how we've arrived, we still haven't arrived."

Like most Los Olivos regulars, Murray now avoids the restaurant and tasting room featured in the movie, now peopled by tourists. He says his core audience is still people who drove up the dirt road to his vineyards in the '90s and discovered him. "Those are the people I make wine for."

-- Olivia Wu



Chronicle / Craig Lee

On 'Sideways' and big wine

Two topics make the normally quick-witted Andrew Murray hesitate and squirm: the higher alcohol in his wines and higher profile he received after the movie "Sideways."

About the 15 percent alcohol that is almost common in his reds now, Murray passes on the blame. "I believe in low-alcohol wines, but they're not commercially acceptable." He says his distributors began to express discomfort when he released a 13.5 percent Syrah. And distributors, he says, go by wine critics. The fault is in the system, he believes. "If you taste a low-alcohol wine after an afternoon of in-your-face high alcohol wines, it tastes flat."

He adds, "Wine critics have killed softer wines. If they taste 50 to 100 wines at one sitting, the high alcohol ones will come out on top." In some ways, he intimates, he can't argue with the results: "Robert Parker Jr. has been generous to us. We certainly make some unabashedly big Syrahs that collectors love." His own heart, he suggests, lies with lower alcohol levels.

When asked about "Sideways," he says, "I thought 500 people were going to see this film."

The producers gave him the script to read before shooting; and he concluded it was a



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Andrew Murray Vineyards wines

2004 Andrew Murray Enchanté Santa Ynez Valley (\$22) A white blend of 60 percent Roussanne and 40 percent Marsanne. It opens rich, with nutty flavors, but there's lean fruit and acidity to balance it out. The use of older French oak and malolactic fermentation rounds out the Roussanne, without turning it oaky or too fat.

2005 Andrew Murray Tous Les Jours Central Coast Syrah (\$16) Murray's everyday wine is big and hulking -- at 15 percent, it's even more weighty than the 2004, though it manages decent balance despite that. Slightly floral nose, and there are bright red berry highlights reminiscent of Grenache (though it's 100 percent Syrah) along with more typical salty flavors.

2005 Andrew Murray Esperance Central Coast (\$22) Murray's southern Rhone-style red is based around Grenache (60 percent), with Syrah (25 percent) and Mourvedre (15 percent) making up the rest. His skill is evident in the blend -- it's dark and leathery, with broad fruit across the palate, plus pepper and cured meat overtones. The 15.1 percent alcohol is evident on the finish, but soft tannins help cushion the ending. Available in June-July.

-- Olivia Wu