

Lompoc Valley

MAGAZINE



Women in Wine

A WOMAN IN WINE

BY KRIS CURRAN



Trying to find a shady parking spot to ensure my four German Shepherds' comfort while lunching at Sissy's restaurant with fellow winemakers, I encountered one of the beautiful murals that adorn many buildings here in Lompoc. I noticed the quote regarding Mrs. J. B. Pierce and the vigilante women who, like most women of the time, objected to their husbands' and the community's consumption of alcohol. They had apparently "strung a rope around a building, yanked it off its foundation and pulled it for a block, booze spilling out as it went."

At first I questioned how many women it would take to perform this mighty feat, then I wondered if they were stronger than modern day women. Logically, I also questioned the size of the building and the lack of stringent building codes of the day. More humorously, I wondered whether they dragged that ole' house anywhere near what is now Industrial Way and I chuckled at the thought that the spilled booze may have laid the foundation for a burgeoning community of wineries here in the Lompoc Valley.

Lompoc, once a temperance colony, is now home to numerous wineries producing arguably some of the best wines in the country, and therein lies the irony. The fact that women initiated this very radical act to eliminate alcohol from their community and that women now make up a good percentage of the workforce in our local wineries shows a dynamic change in societal attitudes and a fortunate realization that wine is unavoidably becoming part of the fabric of our culture.

Introduced to the wine industry by Bruno D'Alfonso in the early 90s, I fell in love with the community and the lifestyle that this

industry embraces. You see, unlike alcohol in general, wine is a holistic venture, one that revolves around family, friends, food and conversation. In the absence of any of these elements, wine ceases to be the thought-provoking enjoyment that it is. It is a social endeavor, a passion meant to be shared and experienced with the greater community of mankind. It is because of this experience and working harvest at Sanford Winery while attending Santa Barbara City College that I pursued a career as a winemaker. After completing my degree at Fresno State, I was fortunate to come home and land a job as assistant winemaker at Cambria Winery in Santa Maria. I left in 1998 to start Koehler Winery on Foxen Canyon Road. During this time I also launched my own label, Curran.

I was then hired as winemaker for Sea Smoke Cellars in 2000. I never imagined that I would be crafting our estate-grown Pinot Noirs in the town of Lompoc. Bob Davids, Sea Smoke's owner, had been working for several years on architectural plans for his new winery slated to be built on property he owned in Buellton. While traveling on a train from Paris to Dijon on a research mission to taste some of France's great Pinot Noirs

(really, I was working), I voiced concern that the new winery would not be completed in time. Bob agreed and suggested that we find a warehouse to become our "temporary" home if construction was not completed prior to harvest. I located some vacant space in Morris Sobhani's Industrial Park here in Lompoc. Fast forward six years, five harvests and numerous expansions, and Sea Smoke is now at home in "the Ghetto".

"The Ghetto" refers to the wineries located in Sobhani's buildings. The name came about one day when someone called me requesting a catered lunch and wine tasting. It was obvious that they had never seen our facility as it was during a very cold spell in the middle of winter. It is often colder inside the cellars than outside — great for the wines but not for our guests or the winemakers! I explained that, unlike many other wineries, we did not have guest facilities (not even heating!) and that our winery was not located in a picturesque vineyard. I thought that our location was something akin to a ghetto; a group of winemakers (after all, an odd minority of society) huddled together in metal buildings perfectly functional for winemaking but not conducive to fancy



Above: Sea Smoke Cellars vineyard in Sta. Rita Hills.

Left: "Chicks on Lifts" – Winemaker Kris Curran in the driver's seat along with other winemakers (from left to right) Karen Steinwachs, Kathy Joseph, Deborah Hall, Chrystal Clifton and Lorna Kreutz.

occasions. I imagined our guests arriving with linens and fine china, mounds of delicious food and elaborate centerpieces, but no coats, mittens or earmuffs!

At last count, there were 30 wine labels produced in the city of Lompoc. Besides those in "the Ghetto," several are now located off Central Avenue. Known collectively as the "West Enders," they include "Pinot Prison" and "Pinot West," located in industrial buildings and making great wines even if the buildings aren't much to look at! We all value our proximity to other wineries and winemakers here in Lompoc. We can borrow equipment, ask for and offer advice and, best of all, gather to share amazing meals, great conversations (even if we have friendly disagreements over winemaking philosophies) and fabulous wines. What more can you ask?

There is something unique about our area. Lompoc is close to the Sta. Rita Hills AVA (American Viticultural Area), a specific winegrowing region recognized by the Alcohol, Tobacco and Trade Bureau in 2001. In this cool growing region, some of the finest Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays are produced. Winery and vineyard owners,

many of them winemakers from Lompoc, launched the Sta. Rita Hills Wine Growers Alliance several years ago to promote their wines through consumer education.

Recently SRHWGA collaborated on "Wine and Fire: Igniting the Passion," a two-day event at La Purisima Mission and Rancho La Viña. Rob Dafoe's "From Ground to Glass" was screened at the Mission Church on Friday night, following a wine and wood-fired pizza reception courtesy of American Flatbread. Guests nibbled on pizzas and sipped wine while local winemakers and vineyard owners talked about their vineyards, wines and the region. On Saturday everyone met at Rancho La Viña to attend formal tastings hosted by SRHWGA members. These "seminars in the round" gave guests an opportunity to learn about our relatively new wine region, with panels of six winemakers rotating among four tents. The afternoon was topped off by lunch from New West catering. Spit-roasted lamb and roasted Cuban pork were served with salads of locally grown produce, such as heirloom tomatoes from Tutti Frutti Farms and Rancho La Viña, walnuts from Rancho La Viña and walnut oils from La Nogalera,

a group of local walnut growers producing oils from their own fruit. The SRHWGA members mingled with the guests during lunch, catching up with old friends and making new ones. A beautiful day overall.

The Sta. Rita Hills AVA encompasses more than 30,000 acres, less than five percent of which is planted. As wines from this region continue to receive high accolades worldwide, we will see the planted acreage increase. This gives Lompoc the opportunity to be home to even more world-class wineries. We are becoming a vital part of the economy and the community of Lompoc, which has done an about-face from its origins as a temperance colony. Strangely enough, while attending CSUF I researched the economic development of Lompoc and was asked to predict the major components of its future economic possibilities. Never in my wildest dreams did I see wineries, especially my own, as part of the growing economy of Lompoc. That irony is definitely not lost on me.

Kris Curran is the winemaker for Sea Smoke Cellars and Curran Wines.