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NORM ROBY

Value in small wineries

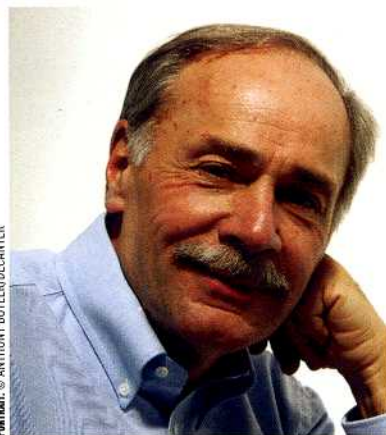
THOUGH RECENT NEWS has focused on corporations snapping up other wine companies, the independent spirit is alive and well in California. Back before Merlot became popular, brothers Derek and Courtney Benham formed Codera Wine Company, offering wines under the Blackstone label. Initially, they purchased ready-made Merlot wines from several California appellations and brought them to a winery in Sonoma County for blending. Operating on the proverbial shoestring budget, they invented themselves as Merlot specialists.

By the late-1990s Blackstone had become synonymous with good-value Merlot and the wines were everywhere. Even when phylloxera reduced the quantity of Merlot available, Blackstone secured enough wine and maintained good quality. Though focusing on only one wine, the Benham brothers saw Blackstone become a major success story.

When Constellation made them an offer they couldn't refuse, they didn't. Constellation has since grown Blackstone into a line of varietals while keeping the focus on value. Check out the 2002 Sonoma County Syrah and, yes, Merlot.

But the Benhams thrive on start-up operations. Derek bounced back quickly and in 2002 created a company named the Purple Wine Company. Based in Sonoma County, it has several labels, but two are playing to rave reviews. One is Rock Rabbit which focuses on Syrah, and the other is Mark West, a Pinot Noir specialist. The Rock Rabbit 2002 Syrah from Paso Robles and its neighbouring appellations sells for \$10 and delivers character and immediate accessibility. The 2003 is similar and selling like mad by the glass in many restaurants. A brisk Sauvignon Blanc is also part of the Rock Rabbit line.

Founded in the late 1970s, Mark West Winery changed hands a number of



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY BUTLER/DECANTER

times before Benham acquired the trademark if not the winery. The original winery developed a reputation for Pinot Noir. Brought back to life by the Purple Wine Company, Mark West makes two Pinot Noirs, one from Sonoma County, the other from Central Coast. Selling for under \$20, the 2002 Sonoma County's bold complex, earthy-mushroomy style compares well to Pinots selling for twice the price. At \$15, the Central Coast Pinot offers superb value.

Just when prices of Syrah and Pinot Noirs are climbing fast, The Purple Wine Company provides well priced options. And consumers are noticing. No doubt the wine giants are also taking note.