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WINE

THE PURPLE PINOT MAKER

Winemaker Alex Cose pushed cult wines aside to make bargain bottles

By W. Blake Gray

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Alex Cose's last employer, Peter Michael Winery in Calistoga, embodied the dream of the Wine Country lifestyle.

As production manager, he helped make tiny amounts of \$150 Chardonnay, among other wines, for a place that hired sculpture interns to beautify the grounds. He spent \$3,000 in an afternoon on Montrachet wines just to taste the competition. "Peter Michael was like Disneyland," Cose says. "You don't always realize it when you're working at Disneyland. But I'm glad I got out after six years, because the real world's not like that."

Cose, 38, now makes \$9 wines by the warehouse load for Purple Wine Co., a name few people outside the industry know. But if you buy wine by the glass in restaurants, you may have heard of its brands, especially Mark West Pinot Noir.

"Mark West is the hot wine right now. Everybody's got it," says Robert Wellbeloved, general manager of Betelnut restaurant in San Francisco. "Pinot Noir right now is so tough to come by. For the \$10 to \$14 bottle of Pinot, there's not a lot out there. Mark West is filling in the shortfall caused by a short vintage."

But forget the single-vineyard expressions of terroir typical of Peter Michael and other high-priced wineries. Cose blends Chardonnay into Mark West Pinot Noir, and Santa Barbara County Syrah into Avalon Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, also from Purple Wine Co.

"When we started the company, I was a pig on roller skates," Cose says. "I didn't know what I was doing."

He does now. Cose uses a modified pool cleaner to stir Chardonnay lees. Purple owns the world's largest barrel cleaner. And the competition has changed from castles in Burgundy to Castle Rock.

Cose's career path is the exact opposite of what most winemakers choose. The classic progression is to break in at a large winery; Napa Valley is full of people who once worked at E. & J. Gallo Winery in Modesto or Robert Mondavi Winery in Woodbridge. From there, most winemakers seem to aspire to work at places that make less wine and charge more for it.

Regrets? Hardly. Cose, a former banker, likes owning a stake in Purple Wine Co., which has grown to 500,000 cases (half of it Mark West Pinot Noir) in just five years.

"I kind of like being a company man," he says. "I've got a piece of the pie."

He likes being able to walk to work in Graton, where he lives with his wife and two daughters. His daughter Grace, 6, recently embarrassed him by telling one of her teachers that Daddy was teaching her to make cocktails.

Cose says his own family never drank wine. His father was an accountant; his mother was a teacher. Cose studied finance at Cal State Hayward (now Cal State East Bay) and worked as a banker at Wells Fargo for six years during the early boom years of the Internet.

"We were making lots of money," Cose says. "But I asked, 'What is it I want to do? What is successful for me?'"



He took an unpaid cellar rat job at Monticello Cellars in Napa and enrolled at Cal State Fresno to study winemaking. By 27, he was cellar master at Peter Michael.

"He had no experience, but I saw his passion," says Mark Aubert, the then-Peter Michael winemaker who hired him. "I saw his drive and determination."

Now he applies that passion to blending wines purchased cheaply from all over California - often wines that just aren't good enough on their own - to make surprisingly delicious end products with the glee of a 12-year-old in love with his first chemistry set.

"Peter Michael was about knowing one piece of land extremely well," Cose says. "Now I get to work with fruit from everywhere. I want 100 spices in the spice rack, not two."

Many winemakers seem happiest with the opposite: a few highly priced grapes from a few carefully chosen vineyards.

Consider Aubert, who hired Cose at Peter Michael. As winemaker at Rutherford Hill, he made 120,000 cases. His next three wineries got successively smaller: Monticello Cellars, Peter Michael and Colgin. Now he's gone even smaller with his own mailing-list-only brand, Aubert Wines

"Usually everybody wants to go higher and higher up the ladder," Aubert says.

Other Peter Michael alumni have taken similar paths: Original winemaker Helen Turley is one of the most highly sought consultants in California, and also has her own label, Marcassin. Luc Morlet left Peter Michael to be winemaker at another prestigious palace, Staglin Family Vineyard.

"The winery is very proud of our winemaking alumni," says Peter Kay, director of sales and marketing for Peter Michael. "We've had lots of people who went on to do great things, and Alex is one of them."

Still, Cose's great things are lower priced than the others', though they may be more profitable. Cose says Peter Michael lost money for 10 years, while Purple Wine is already in the black.

Purple Wine was founded by Derek Benham, who with his brother Courtney Benham created Blackstone Merlot in 1991, making about 400 cases of it from cheaply purchased bulk wine and selling it all at Cost Plus World Market. Ten years later, the Benhams sold Blackstone to Constellation Brands for \$144 million.

Derek Benham says on the day of the sale, a colleague asked him what he planned to do next. He sketched out a business plan for Purple Wine Co. on a blackboard.

"I thought the next opportunity was in Pinot Noir," says



Chronicle / Craig Lee

Benham, who may have timed the boom and downturn in Merlot better than anyone else.

But he needed a winemaker. Cose says he only interviewed for the Purple job because a friend insisted he do it. But he was interested, and impressed by Benham, so he took the job.

One of Benham's innovations was to have different brands for different varietals: Until it was already wildly popular, Blackstone just meant Merlot.

Avalon is the brand name Purple uses for Cabernet Sauvignon. Cose makes two versions: a California appellation wine for \$9, and one of the stars of its portfolio: a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon for \$14.

Tasting samples of 32 potential component wines of the 2006 Avalon Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon with Cose shows how his winemaking has changed. At Peter Michael, the top Cab-based wine is Les Pavots, made only from Bordeaux varietals grown on a single vineyard.

For Avalon, there was delicious, complex juice from Howell Mountain and Calistoga.

"Some of these are \$75 wines at other wineries - same vineyard, same grapes," he says.

But that might eventually be blended with Cab from Paso Robles that tasted like roasted fruit, green-tasting Merlot from Oakville and super-ripe Santa Barbara Syrah, among other things. Some of that fruit will make it into the Napa Cab; some will wind up in the Avalon California Cabernet Sauvignon or the Blue Jean red wine blend.

"They're not all rock stars," Cose says. "For what I charge for that wine, trust me, these are really good lots."

Federal law only requires that 85 percent of the fruit in a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon be from Napa Valley and 75 percent be Cabernet Sauvignon. Winemakers whisper that plenty of Lake and Mendocino county fruit finds its way into Napa Valley Cabernets; Purple Wine Co. is just more honest about it than most. And that honesty is often brutal.

"Rutherford (fruit) is boring, but it's perfect for us," he says, about a region from which some wineries charge more than \$100 a bottle. "If we had nothing but aggressive stuff from the mountains, it wouldn't work. The Rutherford balances it out."

Even with 15 percent of the grapes from other places, Avalon still requires a lot of fruit from the most expensive area in California. The average price for Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon in 2006, according to the California Agricultural Statistics Service, was \$4,126 per ton - more than 2.5 times the average price for Cab in neighboring Lake County. This is the reason that most entry-level Napa Cabs cost more than double what Avalon Napa Cab costs.

And here's the thing: Avalon Napa Cab is good. The 2004 Avalon Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon and the 2005 Mark West California Pinot Noir were two of the best wines on The Chronicle's Bargain All-Star wine list in July. So how does he do it?

Creativity is important. The toasty note in the Mark West Pinot Noir actually came from 2 percent Chardonnay - a highly unusual and innovative addition.

"It needed more oak, and I had quite a bit of oak on the Chardonnay," Cose says. "I'm not so concerned with the

specifics as I am getting to the right flavor profile."

Finding bargains on grapes is also key. Cose says he pays half the average price for Napa Cab grapes because he knows where to look.

For example, the Howell Mountain appellation is defined by elevation; vines have to be 1,400 feet above sea level to qualify. Cose buys grapes from a vineyard that straddles the elevation line; the grapes above the line go for a much higher price to another winery.

He saves 25 percent of his grape-buying budget for opportunistic buys in harvest season, when growers often find themselves with extra grapes beyond those they pre-sold in the spring.

"I'm not going to make any friends with what I offer for those," Cose says.

From famous, expensive wineries he buys "press wine" - the wine produced when grapes are crushed, as opposed to "free run" wine, which flows out of the grapes without mechanical pressing.

"The French are big believers in using press wine," Cose says. "At Peter Michael, we separated it early and usually sold it off. At a winery like that, that's part of the cost of doing business. That's an opportunity for wineries like us. It might be really good juice and it may have had really expensive oak on it. But it's a little gritty and it needs a little work."

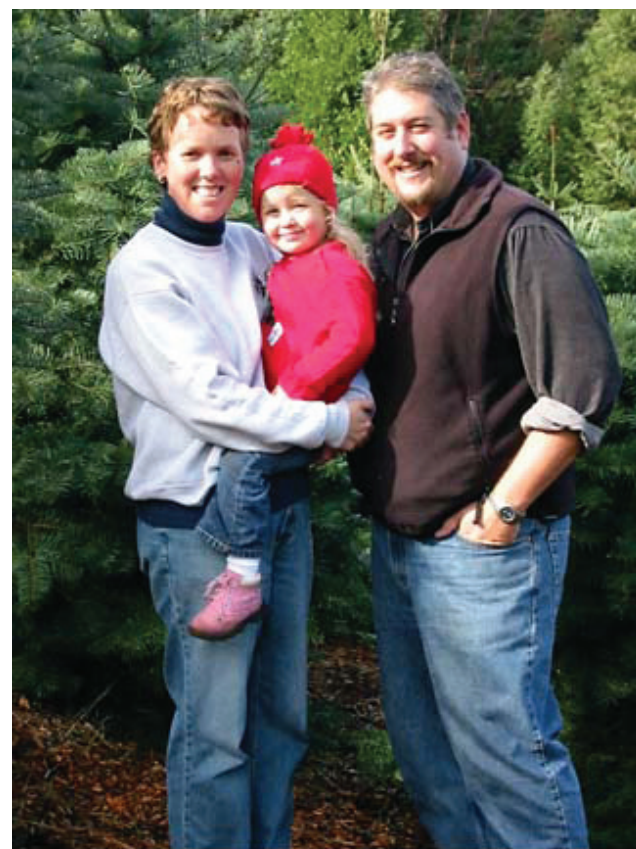
About that work: Cose may be a pragmatist making wine for the Marriott (Mark West is the hotel chain's official Pinot Noir nationwide), but he still uses many of the techniques he learned in the high-end world, with modifications for cost. He uses expensive French oak - but in staves, strips of wood inserted into a stainless steel tank, as well as barrels. And while many large-volume winemakers quickly toss all the Cab together in one big tank, Cose keeps all his small lots separate until very late in the winemaking process so he can have as much flexibility as possible.

At the same time, he is not shy about using micro-oxygenation, in which small amounts of oxygen are introduced to the wine during fermentation or afterward, to make the wines easier to drink right away by reducing green flavors and softening tannins.

His goal for all of the dozen wines in the Purple Wine Co. portfolio isn't high ratings or high prices. It's for customers to buy a second glass.

Purple's business plan is different from most wineries. More than 60 percent of its production is sold to restaurants, and most of that is targeted for by-the-glass programs. That's part of the reason Purple is relatively anonymous in the industry: So that when a customer at a restaurant in Cleveland sees Rock Rabbit Syrah or Bex Riesling by the glass, she doesn't know what the bottle costs, and thus can't complain about restaurant markup. In fact, Purple demands that stores that do sell its wine not advertise discounts.

The restaurant focus affects Cose's winemaking. He removes the skins from fermenting red wines earlier than most winemakers; skins are the source of tannins. If that leaves a wine deficient in color, he blends in a darker lot, such as that Santa Barbara Syrah.



Courtesy of Monica Cose

He also works to keep all of his wines under 14 percent alcohol, in part by picking some vineyards earlier than the current norm.

"I don't think you can have a by-the-glass wine and be 14.5 (percent alcohol)," he says. "I do a good job if someone has a second glass. If they're being obliterated by glass one, I failed."

"He's very practical," Derek Benham says of Cose. "He's not one of those fussy artist types who are hard to work with. He comes from a business background. But he is passionate about making fine wines."

Cose makes wine in five places in California (three owned by Benham). He also flies each fall to Germany to make sure the locals leave enough residual sugar in Bex Riesling for the American palate ("I might personally like it a little drier, but I'm not making it for me," he says). He made six trips to Corsica in the last three years to find Pinot Noir grapes to keep the Mark West coming when he ran out of California-made wine much faster than expected.

Still, one of the best wines Cose makes today is a throwback to his Peter Michael days: Mark West Chardonnay.

He makes a good one from Central Coast grapes for \$10. And to keep his creative side happy, he made 300 cases of a superb 2005 Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$30) with methods and grape sources very similar to what he had at Peter Michael - which means more expensive fruit and barrels and much less intervention.

"I don't do that much to it at all. I hardly pay attention to it. I guess I just know how to make Chardonnay," he says, laughing. "It was just a chance to do something fun, and the vineyard opportunity came my way. The beauty of how we operate is that each year tends to lend itself to something new and fun." ■



Tasting notes

Because Alex Cose makes wines primarily to be sold by the glass, all of these save two (noted below) are below 14 percent alcohol. They also share generous fruit flavors and should hold up well. Cose says he tests his blends by leaving the bottle open overnight at room temperature, as they would be at a bar or restaurant, to see how well they taste the next day. These tasting notes are from freshly opened bottles.

2004 Avalon California Cabernet Sauvignon (\$9) This simple, food-friendly wine has aromas of dark cherry, wheat toast and fresh herb. It tastes of ripe cherry, fresh herb with a hint of aged beef. While the flavor is straightforward, the provenance is anything but: It's 78 percent Cab with 17 percent Syrah, 4 percent Merlot and 1 percent Tempranillo.

2004 Avalon Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$14) The impressive thing about this wine (especially after learning how it was made, including 7 percent Syrah) is that it really tastes like Napa Valley Cabernet. Its nicely balanced flavors of cherry and toast with hints of cassis and its long finish put it in the same league as many Napa Cabs that cost five times as much.

2005 Bex Mosel-Saar-Ruwer Riesling (\$12) A Qualitätswein in the German classification, this wine delivers ripe apricot, green melon and peach flavors with a note of wet stone and brown sugar on the medium-length finish. The stoniness is more noticeable in the aroma, along with a hint of petrol. It contains just 10.5 percent alcohol; try it with spicy food.

NV Blue Jean California Red Wine (\$8) Though this is essentially a grab bag blend of wine lots that don't fit into any other Purple Wine Co. products, this wine both has a focus - being soft and easy to drink with a slight fruit sweetness - and achieves it. It tastes of ripe and sweet blueberries with notes of vanilla and cherry in the aroma, and is good for the style.

2005 Mark West Central Coast Chardonnay (\$10) Aromas of toast and ripe pear get toastier with air. The mouthfeel is fat, but not over the top, with flavors of toast, ripe pear and golden apple. The long finish makes it taste expensive.

2005 Mark West Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$30) The first thing you notice is the expensive French oak, with its distinctive yet not overpowering grilled

wheat-toast flavor. French butter pear emerges on the rich midpalate and expands on the very long finish. With air the wine also reveals notes of mineral and licorice. Cose made 300 cases of this wine, but none in 2006.

2005 Mark West California Pinot Noir (\$10) Unlike many in this price range, this wine really tastes like Pinot Noir, with flavors of cranberry and toast, a little soy sauce and some earthiness in the aroma. It's food-friendly and simple and kept going up in my estimation the more I sipped it. It's made of 85 percent Pinot with 13 percent Syrah and 2 percent Chardonnay.

2005 Mark West Sonoma County Pinot Noir (\$25) A complex aroma of raspberry, earth, blackboard chalk, asphalt and graphite leads to similar flavors; the fruit gets brighter with air. Unlike the California appellation Pinot, this wine was not made for by-the-glass programs and is 14.8 percent alcohol.

2005 Rock Rabbit Central Coast Sauvignon Blanc (\$9) Cose uses mostly Monterey fruit to give it grassiness in the aroma, for people who like the New Zealand style. But you don't taste the grass: instead you taste thirst-quenching pineapple and grapefruit along with notes of green papaya and mango on the medium-length finish. Cose says the tropical fruit character comes from Santa Barbara fruit, and he blended in 9 percent Monterey Gewurztraminer for slight floral hints. Some fatness in the body is nicely balanced by crisp acidity.

2004 Rock Rabbit Central Coast Shiraz (\$9) An appealing aroma of cherry, raspberry, pepper, raw meat, blueberries and sage leads to a palate of bright fruit - raspberry and cherry - with interesting undertones of sage and raw meat. You only notice the chewy tannins on the medium-length finish. Cose says he tries to make the wine in the style of Pinot Noir, using the same yeast as for Mark West Pinot and processing it gently. The wine even includes 1 percent Pinot, as well as 4 percent Cabernet Sauvignon