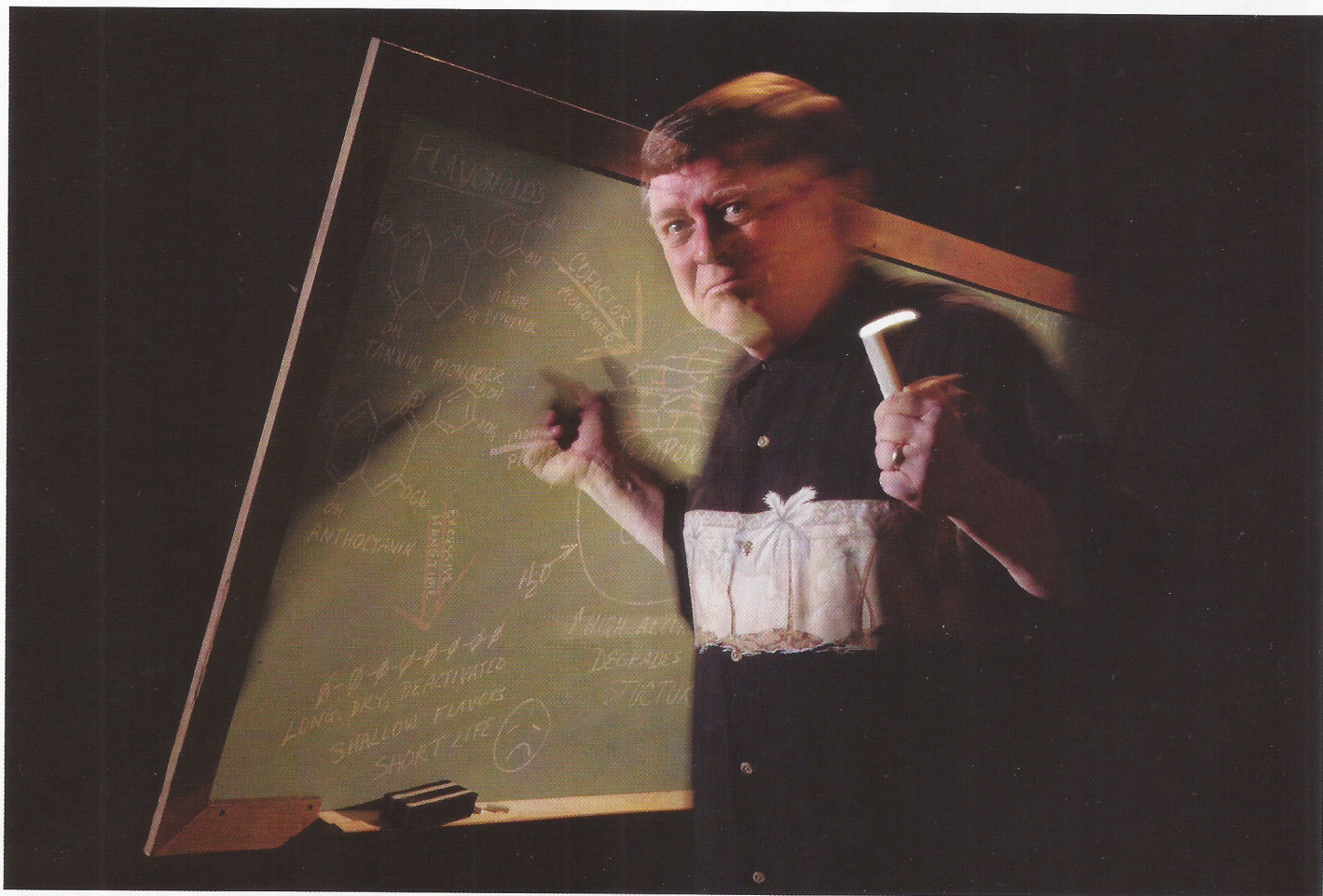


postmodern deliciousness

the world according to
Clark Smith

by David Darlington

photographs by Matthew Farruggio



1 The Persistence of Tunnel Vision

Perhaps the most telling characterization one can make of Clark Smith is that, despite his reputation as a visionary, he found out about Hurricane Katrina after George W. Bush did. On August 26, 2005, Smith and his wife Susan flew into New Orleans to meet with a wine distributor, vaguely aware that something was brewing in the Gulf of Mexico. The next day, as Katrina swelled to Category 3 status and Bush declared a state of emergency for southern Louisiana, the Smiths got the feeling that something was amiss when they went shopping

and saw merchants boarding up their storefronts. A day later, Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the evacuation of the city, but as Smith later told the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, "It was too late to get a car." The couple weathered the storm in a French Quarter hotel, subsisting on canned vegetables and hard-boiled eggs and collecting rainwater as it dripped through the ceiling. They finally escaped with the help of an NBC-TV crew, appearing on the "Today" show to talk about their experience (which Smith said "enriched my life").

To his colleagues and acquaintances in California, this episode said a lot about Smith. "Clark has a certain sangfroid," observes Randall Gram of Bonny Doon Vineyards. "It's a

kind of can-do scientist's mentality—a wonderfully detached view that, even if he's about to die, he doesn't take it personally."

"He's like a horse with blinders on," adds Mark Lyon of Sebastiani Vineyards. "He's not looking at the periphery—he's just going for the race."

Smith is best known as the cofounder of Vinovation, the Sonoma County wine-processing company that adapted the process of reverse osmosis for use in wine. Originally advanced by the U.S. Navy for the desalination of seawater, "R.O." was also used in the 1980s to dealcoholize wine by forcing it across a membrane to separate the flavor and color components from the water and alcohol. In 1992 Vinovation

devised a way for the process to remove acetic acid, the volatile component in oxidized wine that can turn it into vinegar; soon thereafter, he and Vinovation cofounder Rick Jones introduced a method of using R.O. to adjust (as opposed to eliminate) a wine's alcohol content.

These two services—along with Conetech's "spinning cone" column, another dealcoholization process—helped revolutionize modern winemaking, freeing vintners to pick fruit when the flavors are most intense without having to worry about the heat, bitterness and debilitating potential of excessive alcohol. Half of all California wine is now said to undergo some form of high-tech alcohol adjustment, and Vinovation bills itself as the largest wine consulting company in the world, claiming over a thousand clients.

2 Devil or Angel?

On its face "de-alking" is no more egregious a winemaking practice than chapitalization, the technique of adding sugar to underripe juice to beef up a wine's body and soften its mouthfeel. "Every great wine region has to adjust alcohol," Smith told me last December on my first visit to his headquarters. "[The French] just adjust it up instead of down." The controversy surrounding reverse osmosis and spinning cone, however, arises from the nature of the technologies—which essentially take wine

amount of liquid remaining in contact with grapeskins, among purists Smith's innovations have earned him Antichrist status as the wine world's leading enabler of invasive technological manipulation.

Smith seems to perversely enjoy this position. The waiting room of his office displays a prominent "Wall of Shame," where Smith has framed an assortment of articles (also viewable at winecrimes.com) decrying his insidious influence on the industry. As Smith himself has written, "The central debate about... high-tech wine-production innovations is not any more about whether they work, it is about whether we will go to hell if we use them." For that reason, few wineries admit that they work with either Vinovation or Conetech, and Smith is contractually prohibited from divulging the names of his clients.

Within the winemaking world, Smith inspires intense ambivalence. While his method of eliminating volatile acidity has been widely embraced, the issues of alcohol manipulation and artificial concentration remain hot potatoes. Although Smith is acknowledged to be a brilliant innovator (or, at the very least, a clever tinkerer), his ego and his rhetorical style can leave listeners drowning in his wake. "Clark is a lecturer," says Graham (who refers to Smith fondly as "the enological equivalent of Edward Teller"). "He's a professor: He's endlessly talking, explaining, dilating.... He can talk until all the wine is drunk up."

In fact, Smith teaches at Napa Valley Col-

lege, his alma mater was missing wine's main point. His graphic way of illustrating this was a 360-degree "Musical Tone Wheel" that parodied the Davis Aroma Wheel, breaking a symphony orchestra down into 46 different sounds—"blast," "tweet," "chime," "toot," "thud," "oom-pah," et al.

"A conductor doesn't make the good instruments play loud and bad ones play soft," he says with regard to what he views as Davis's obsession with hygiene. "Everybody plays together in a single, unified voice. For an audience member, that's when you say, 'Oh boy, I'm glad I spent a hundred dollars to sit here for a couple of hours.' Profundity isn't based on complexity; it's based on simplicity. The greater the wine, the less people have to say about it, because language is inadequate to describe it."

"Clark has a natural tendency toward holistic thinking," says Havens, who has helped advance Smith's campaign to promote the technology of micro-oxygenation. As an example, Havens points to Smith's publicity poster "Practicing GrapeCraft" (see illustration, p. 67). "It's almost like a medieval shepherd's calendar," Havens observes. "The upside is seeing the whole process—from growing grapes to making wine to appreciating that wine—as connected. But other than producing the best possible product, to assume a relationship between soil and 'soul' is an assertion on the level of religion. Clark aggregates things to where they become

"Clark is the enological equivalent of Edward Teller," says Randall Graham. "I'm not sure if he's Dr. Strangewine, but the interventions he advocates are not aesthetically neutral."

apart and put it back together again. Winemakers debate whether removing a small percentage of alcohol concentrates a wine to any perceptible degree, but it doesn't necessarily stop there.

"The dirty little secret," says one winemaker who has used Vinovation for volatile acidity (V.A.) removal, "is that when you make your adjustment, quite legally, to remove alcohol, you're supposed to put the water back. But a lot of times, people don't." The legal way to do this—whether via R.O. or vacuum evaporation, both popular methods in Bordeaux—is to remove water from grape juice before it starts to ferment. While this might merely be viewed as a more modern version of saignée, the traditional practice of bleeding off juice to reduce the

lege, UC Davis Extension and California State University at Fresno, where he has a reputation for making complex concepts accessible. For a techie, he is surprisingly erudite—a natural and engaging writer, he's also (according to Michael Havens of Havens Cellars) "a perfectly decent traditional singer" with a taste for Celtic folk music and Irish drinking songs. Believing that the goal of the vintner is to put "an opera in a bottle," he's fond of describing wine as a "mysterious, soulful, visceral" experience that exposes the essential "fraudulence" of science. In the mid-1990s, he touched off an academic brouhaha with an article entitled *Does UC Davis have a Theory of Deliciousness?* The premise was that, in its analytic-reductionist ethos (analogous, Smith believes, to the practice of Western

almost spiritual and makes jumps from the specific to the general that aren't justified."

Explaining how he squares the denigration of science with state-of-the-art technology, Smith describes his point of view as postmodern. "Modern [technology] is electricity, stainless steel, inert gas, wine as chemistry and sterile filtration," he says. "All of those things are potentially injurious to great wine. What puzzles me is why they are not all considered 'manipulation.' I think it's because, once we get competent with a tool, it's not called 'technology' any more. Tools are injurious only when they create distance from what we're supposed to be doing—when they distract us, or allow us to get lazy. It doesn't matter if Wolfgang Puck uses a microwave; what matters is whether he uses it properly."

3 Son of Rocketman

Magazine articles about Smith customarily describe him an MIT dropout. An “egghead” good at math and science, he enrolled there in 1969 in the footsteps of his father, an aviation engineer who, among other achievements that ultimately earned him a presidential commendation from Ronald Reagan, helped build the engines for the Apollo spacecraft. At MIT Clark immediately set about trying to “tear down the wall between the arts and sciences and the rest of the world.” One indication of his success at this was his inability to declare a major. Embarking on a hiatus in 1971, he drifted across the country to Berkeley and—having worked in restaurants growing up—managed to get hired as a Chez Panisse bartender by Alice Waters (who later fired him—twice).

Smith subsequently got a job in an Oakland liquor store that carried every wine then produced in California, as well as many from France. “We sold the ’52 Montrose for two

Rick Jones, another of Smith’s contemporaries at Davis, recalls his first exposure to Smith in an undergraduate biochemistry course. “There were about 250 students in this big lecture hall,” Jones says. “The teacher was talking over a microphone about the shapes of molecules and stereochemistry of glucose, and this one poor schmuck stuck his hand up and said he didn’t understand. The teacher went over it again, but the guy still said, ‘I’m confused.’ At that point the teacher got kind of snitty and said: ‘Maybe somebody else in the class would like to explain it.’

“Clark practically came out of his seat, waving his hand like a kid saying, ‘Me, me, me!’ He bounded down the stairs and grabbed the microphone. I kind of knew he was a winemaking student, and I remember feeling a mixture of envy and embarrassment—he was so guileless, but he had such balls. I think a lot of people in the wine business have that mixture of emotions about Clark.”

Upon graduating from Davis, Smith was hired as founding winemaker at nearby R.H. Phillips, owned by a family of wheat farmers

varieties and made money on wine that cost \$3.99 a bottle,” he says.

Between 1983 and 1990, Smith presided over a production increase from 3,000 to 300,000 cases per year, constituting a crash course in nuts-and-bolts skills like brand development, winery construction and equipment selection. “I became a very good white-wine maker,” he says, “but it became clear that I didn’t know jack about reds. When I tasted a great one, I couldn’t figure out how it happened.” In fact, owing to the squeaky-clean practices promoted at Davis, Smith felt that great contemporary red wines were few and far between. “Whenever I went to Napa Valley and saw the Robert Louis Stevenson sign saying, ‘The wines are bottled poetry,’ I said, ‘Horseshit.’ Certainly there were exceptions, but whenever I tasted a wine that had texture and soul, neither my university training nor my cellar experience offered any clues as to how it was done.”

In spite of this, Smith started a consulting business called WineSmith, and in 1990 was enlisted by the Benziger family to work on its

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“People were picking riper and riper, with higher and higher sugars,” says Rick Jones.

“We were like heart surgeons who just happened to open up shop when people found out they really liked steak.”

dollars a half bottle,” he remembers. “I used to drink it at lunch with a pastrami sandwich and a Cadbury bar.” In the course of this—and of tasting about 5,000 wines per year—Smith decided that wine was the rare pursuit (music being the other) capable of merging life’s two central questions: “What is the nature of physical reality?” and “What does it mean to be a human being?” He went back to school in the UC Davis department of enology and viticulture, where his classmate Bill Dyer (of Dyer Vineyards) remembers him as an “exuberant” student, “really good at understanding concepts delivered in class and taking them to a practical level. He’d hear things that were theoretically possible mentioned in lectures, then he’d go there.”

who had decided to get into grapegrowing. “They thought about chardonnay and cabernet, but because it was Region Four, the geniuses at Davis recommended French colombar and chenin blanc,” Smith says. “Davis didn’t believe soil composition was important—they thought Winkler (the noted heat-based classification framework) is a grading system, which is an example of linear thinking doing a face-plant. In the Dunigan Hills we had heavy clay, which has a lot of water in it—so when the sun goes down, the vine recovers really well.” Under Smith’s guidance, R.H. Phillips pioneered the practice of harvesting grapes at night. “We set up a North Coast-style winery, grew really good sauvignon blanc and Rhône

International Claret Project along with Pascal Ribereau-Gayon, successor to the legendary Emile Peynaud of the University of Bordeaux. “He trained me in the language of tannin and the French aesthetic, which focused much more on texture than aromatics,” Smith says. “It drove me crazy when he called our best zinfandels ‘picnic wines.’”

Reacting to the rising neo-prohibitionist movement of the time, the Benzigers assigned Smith the task of researching dealcoholized wine. “They chained me to an R.O. filter to create formulas for nonalcoholic merlot, chardonnay and white zinfandel,” he says. “The problem was that, when you took all the alcohol out, the wine didn’t taste very good.” In the course of this research, Smith hit on the idea of running a

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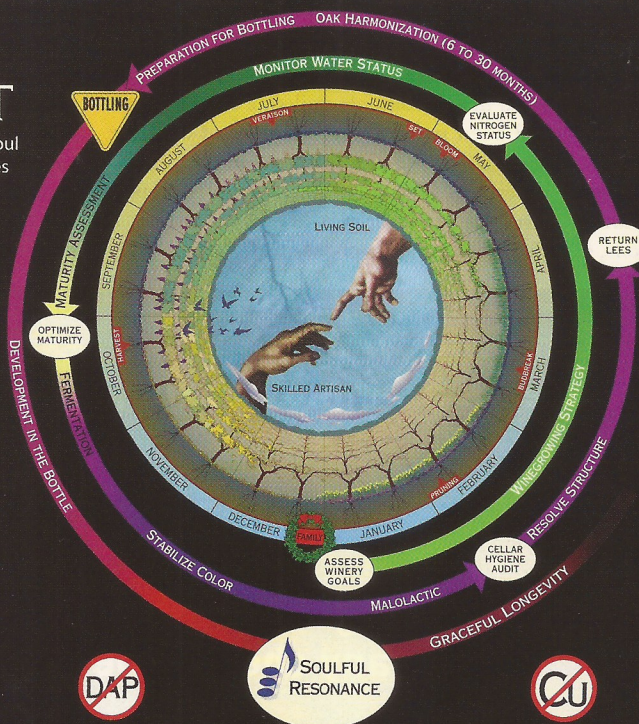


GOALS

DISTINCTIVE TERROIR EXPRESSION
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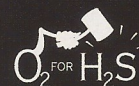
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PROMOTE MICROBIAL EQUILIBRIUM
STRUCTURE TO INTEGRATE FLAVORS



batch of acetic permeate—obtained though reverse osmosis from a high-V.A. merlot with a stuck fermentation—through a water softener, which operates on the principle of ion exchange. When the experiment was carried out, the acetic acid, similar to the contaminating minerals in hard water, was absorbed by the resin in the device. When the V.A. was thus removed from the wine, it began fermenting again.

Not long afterward, Rick Jones ran into Smith at a retirement dinner for Davis professors. “Clark told me he’d figured out a way to remove V.A. from bulk wine,” he remembers. “He was looking for somebody to do it with. Clark makes lots of grandiose statements, not all of which are based on fact; people tend to roll their eyes, and I had that same reaction. But he said he’d run some tests, and he showed me a few samples.”

Smith and Jones soon filed a patent on the “Apparatus and Method for Removing Compounds from a Solution.” They didn’t expect V.A. removal to amount to much of a business, though. “We didn’t think there were that many [acetic] wines out there,” Jones recalls. “Between us, Clark and I had made about twenty million gallons of wine, and each of us had had maybe one lot that could have used the process. We just thought it would be something neat to do, and that it might make a modest amount of money.”

As it turned out, Vinovation was backlogged from the moment it hung out a shingle. “We discovered, to our astonishment, that there was a lot of this wine around,” says Jones. “And a lot of expensive, high-quality

wine too. We were very quickly working in Napa Valley.”

Today Jones says that, ever since Vinovation uncovered this underground market, he’s wondered “whether this wine existed all along, but nobody talked about it. I think a large part is that we came along when winemaking styles were changing dramatically. People were picking riper and riper, with higher and higher sugars—and as every student of enology is taught, high sugar is an inhibitor to fermentation. It makes it harder for yeast to get started, and there are more lactobacillus and V.A. problems coming out of the fermenter. We were like heart surgeons who just happened to open up shop when people found out they really liked steak.”

Smith has his own explanation for the sudden appearance of so many such wines. “People didn’t talk about it because it was considered a mark of negligence,” he posits. “It wasn’t until our eight-hundredth customer that we realized it was a mark of quality. The grapes that are best at attracting birds are the ones that make the most expensive Napa cabernets—those with superior color and flavor. Birds peck the berries, leaving damaged fruit, which starts to ferment on natural yeasts; that attracts fruit flies, which carry lactobacillus on their feet. With extended hang time, when the grapes finally get to the fermenter, they’re carrying a whopping big bacterial inoculum. We used to think oxygen was required to turn sugar into vinegar, but now we know that these bacteria can do it anaerobically.”

Not long after they began plying the de-V.A. trade, Smith and Jones unveiled a

method for adjusting alcohol through reverse osmosis. The challenge lay in how to treat the water-and-alcohol permeate after it was separated from the flavor-and-color retentate: If the endproduct is nonalcoholic wine, regulations allow you to reintroduce water that didn’t come from the original wine. But if you’re only lowering the alcohol, the water has to originate in the wine being treated. Smith and Jones developed the idea of distilling the permeate to remove the alcohol from the water, which can then be legally recombined with the retentate; after that, alcohol is blended back in at whatever percentage the producer desires.

“Reverse osmosis and ion exchange had been approved for use in the wine business for fifteen or twenty years,” says Smith. “Anybody with any technological background could have figured it out, but the lightbulb didn’t go off until we did it.”

4 Cooking with Goodge

Needless to say, Smith is a proponent of the contemporary catechism that “Brix [an approximation of sugar level in grapes] has nothing to do with flavor”—that in a place like cold, drizzly France, phenolics (chemical flavor compounds) commonly outpace sugar development, while in the comparatively warm and dry New World, they tend to lag behind it. “Attention to Brix is an unnecessary distraction and often out of our control,”

he says. "It's what nature gives us, so we tell our clients to ignore it and concentrate on the good stuff." A corollary conclusion is that any wine's natural alcohol level is independent of its most agreeable flavor—that it is, in fact, usually too high to be harmonious in a properly picked New World wine. But the good news—surprise!—is that, thanks to innovations like reverse osmosis and spinning cone, a

chestnut-brown hair, he reminded me of a smaller version of the actor John Goodman.

Inside a conference room in the office (situated in a doublewide trailer), a row of glasses had been poured with samples of a single sauvignon blanc, dealcoholized in 0.1 percent increments from an original level of 14.6 percent. Its producer was identified only as a "high-end, middle-of-the-road" Napa Valley

expression is—proof that it's liquid music. Science can't explain it, but everybody gets it. It's a subjective experience, but it's strongly shared—just as we all have different hearing acuities but can still listen to a piece of music and perceive its emotional, visceral character. People will have differences in what they like, but once you tune the piano, you can do all kinds of things with it."

"Oxygen is the wire whisk with which we create a tannin soufflé," says Clark Smith.

"What we're really talking about here is a winemaking cuisine."

Its goal is the same as that of any chef—to be delicious."

winemaker can now fine-tune alcohol content to an ideal "sweet spot," guided only by taste and market goals.

"Just about everything you can say about alcohol, the opposite is also true," Smith told me. "It's really cooling, but it's also hot; it adds body, but it's also thinning; it's very sweet, but it's also drying. By itself it has no taste, but wines with too much of it are hot and bitter and have suppressed aromatics, while wines with too little taste thin and salty."

Last January I revisited Smith to sit in on a sweet-spot tasting, a common ritual among Vinovation (and Conetech) clients. His headquarters is located on Industrial Avenue in the town of Sebastopol, west of Santa Rosa, its physical layout reflecting its inauspicious address. Behind a chain-link fence was a low, pea-green compound of cargo bays, loading docks and dimly lit passageways connecting caverns of tanks and barrels and humming machines. Smith described the complex as a former apple warehouse—a sign of the times, as the area's old-fashioned orchard industry is being inexorably uprooted by grapes.

It was a chilly winter day, but Smith was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. When I asked if he wasn't cold, he answered: "I'm a pretty fat guy." A more charitable description is "roly poly"—although Smith is admittedly overweight, he's also short. Boasting a full head of

label that was trying to target a style that has been successfully exploited by Mason Cellars. "It has some density and a little oak," Smith said of his client's wine. "I like it at 12.3, but that wouldn't work in this market. It's more European—it would be better for New York."

The lineup of samples didn't perform according to any discernible logic. Some tasted sweet, some watery, some soft, and some fummy, but not according to any pattern pertaining to alcohol content. "I think 13.3 is the best wine on the table," Smith announced after whipping through the flight standing up. "13.9 has some nice qualities too, but between 13.2 and 13.3, you have a point of harmony that's finer and sweeter. The biggest transition is between 13.3 and 13.4—as often happens, the one just above the sweet spot is hot and bitter, with low fruit expression in the nose. We're going to say the best places to look are 12.3, 13.25, and 13.9. But we're not going to dictate his style."

When Smith started to perform sweet-spot tastings, he was surprised to find that they didn't describe a bell curve—that is, one clear favorite with diminishing preferences on either side. "It's more like radio stations with a lot of static in between," he said. "We find that about one in six is worth drinking. In this case, 13.9 is like a major chord and 13.3 a minor one. Both have harmony, but put them together"—i.e., 13.6—"and you have dissonance. It's an example of how nonlinear wine

People dubious of the sweet-spot approach tend to suggest that, if a vintner finds it necessary to "adjust" a wine's alcohol, there's probably something wrong with his or her grapegrowing. "If the right varieties are grown in the right place with a balanced yield, you should be able to mature your flavors without excess sugar," one such critic told me. "But in the New World, people want to grow cabernet and chardonnay and pinot noir wherever you can grow grapes."

Randall Grahm elaborated on this attitude. "In a culture that encourages the expression of terroir," he told me, "it's logical to plant grapes in cool areas and have them struggle to ripen. That highlights those favored sites that can ripen their grapes and encourages behaviors that enhance quality. The basic value, above all, is balance and distinctiveness. But in areas that are too warm—where grapes are overripe almost every year—you have to adjust, and you end up with wines that are pleasant and likable but not distinctive. It all depends what's valuable to you as a culture. Right now, ripeness and texture and softness are valued, and distinctiveness is not."

Smith insists that there's no such thing as an ideal location ("any more than there's a perfect-ten body type") and that no vineyard is always balanced. He even goes so far as to say that reverse osmosis isn't a winemaking tool, but rather "a grapegrowing tool, which works

to accentuate the distinctive terroir of a site through improved fruit quality."

Soon we were met by Tom Meadowcroft of Magito Wines—a three-year-old, 3,000-case winery housed, like a handful of other such operations, at Vinovation—and Galina Seabrook, Vinovation's Bulgarian-born enologist and expert on micro-oxygenation. Since the late '90s, Smith's main focus has been this increasingly popular technology: the use of a timer-controlled gas cylinder to calibrate the aeration of wines in storage so as to emulate—or augment—the oxidative effects of oak barrels. Effective at refining tannin, stabilizing color, aiding clarification and softening texture, the technique was invented in 1990 by Patrick Ducournau of Madiran ("the most important figure in winemaking in the last 100 years," according to Smith), who in 1998 chose Vinovation to represent his company, Oenodev, in the United States. Ducournau has since bought back the American arm of the business, but Smith—having been, to judge by his own narrative, born again—continues his work as a micro-ox missionary. He characterizes his conversion by saying, "I changed from being a service provider to a cooking school."

"Patrick figured out how to do what the Aztecs did," Smith said. "Turn something nasty (cocoa powder) into something you'd kill your mother for (chocolate)."

Describing the B.D. (before Ducournau) mentality, he went on: "Davis taught us that wine is a chemical solution and oxygen is its enemy. It's only recently that we've learned wine's texture is caused by a macromolecular structure—the good stuff is in the 'colloidal suspension': little particles of phenolics, pieces of goodness like clarified butter, or lobster bisque as opposed to consommé. What the Aztecs taught the Belgians is that, by working with oxygen and fats and oils, you can transform raw phenolics into a velvety structure. So, instead of fining to get rid of tannin, we use it to create a rich, fine structure, incorporating oxygen with oak and lees to refine mouthfeel and integrate aromas into a single, soulful voice. It's like a finely crafted sauce—when Bearnaise is made right, you get one harmonious single flavor instead of all the separate tastes of tarragon, onion and mint. So what we're really talking about here is a winemaking cuisine. Its goal is the same as that of any chef: to be delicious."

Meadowcroft had brought along a sample of '05 cabernet sauvignon from his Mount Veeder vineyard, which is planted to Bordeaux clone 337. "It's a fruit bomb on the valley floor," Meadowcroft said of this genetic

material, "but on Mount Veeder it has thicker skins, so there's tannic structure to balance the fruit." Maybe a little too much, in fact: Meadowcroft's '04 was so tannic that he'd ended up blending it into an '05 Sonoma County cabernet to give it more depth and backbone. The '05 Mount Veeder wine got the micro-ox treatment, which helped soften the tannins and reveal the fruit.

"It's very concentrated," Seabrook observed upon tasting the wine. "But it's bony. It doesn't have curves—it's very dry. But you can still add richness and round out the curves."

"We took the wine from cocoa powder to dark chocolate with oxygen," Smith said. "Now, to move it from dark chocolate to milk chocolate, it will need sweet oak and lees stirring to coat the tannins."

Next Seabrook passed around a set of wines in various stages of micro-ox—some (unidentified) from Mendocino and Sonoma counties, one a Geyserville cabernet franc bearing the WineSmith imprimatur. What followed was a seminar in tannin nomenclature, as Smith described how oxygen redirects "raw, green" tannin from "dry, parching, numbing" tannin toward "melted" tannin by way of "firm and rounded" tannin.

"Oxygen is the wire whisk with which we create a tannin soufflé," he said, returning to the culinary arena. "Once we recognize it as useful, we start looking around for more." Suddenly the kitchen turned into a construction site. "It's like cementing bricks," Smith said. "If somebody drops a load of them in your yard, you can get upset and try to truck them away; but if you're a skilled mason, you use them to build an addition on your house."

Postmodern Medicine

Smith says that, Before Ducournau, he thought winemaking was simply about "growing good grapes, fermenting with care, and waiting for the smoke to clear." Not unexpectedly, he now feels what's most important "is to be very active in guiding the post-fermentation evolution of the wine. Most winemakers today cling to the notion of doing the minimum, as if benign neglect were some sort of high moral ground," he says. "Leaving well enough alone is fine, but there's a world of difference between passive neglect and actively choosing to do nothing. You can't phone it in—if you look at winemaking as cooking, you have to show up in the kitchen. We would all prefer not to do anything, but I have to use micro-ox to make

the kinds of wines I want to make."

This raises the question of what kinds of wines Smith himself wants to make. Contrary to expectation, he describes his own preferences as "Eurocentric."

"Almost everybody in California is trying to make power wines," he says. "I want to show that we can have other voices, too." The epitome of this ambition seems to be his WineSmith Reserve bottlings, which he describes as "heady concepts." Faux Chablis, for example, is a non-malolactic Napa chardonnay de-alcoholized to 12.9 percent, while Roman Syrah is a high-altitude Sierra Foothills wine made without sulfur dioxide. The latter example, Smith believes, "succeeds through a culmination of practically every GrapeCraft principle: living soil, vine balance, proper maturity, co-extraction, oxygenative structuring, aromatic integration, alcohol fine-tuning, and microbial equilibrium."

"Even though we take advantage of a lot of modern aids," he admits, "I feel like we're getting back in touch with what the Romans knew, and what [enabled] them to make wine without sulfites all over Europe for a thousand years: Wine can preserve itself if the minerality of living soil is present to protect it."

Not everyone who has tasted Smith's Roman Syrah would necessarily concur. "It's a problem if you expect the same experience every time," he acknowledges. "Wine resonates strongly with the environment in which it's served—music, lighting, background aromas, and the mood in the room. Organic wine reacts doubly so.... it's so dynamic, it will react to the color of the wallpaper. A lot of apparent bottle variation isn't really there—a wine might taste really veggie in one place, but go across the street and it's gone. On the whole, I recommend relaxing your expectations a bit around these new styles."

In any case, Smith suggests, "GrapeCraft techniques are really useful for people trying to get away from sulfur dioxide," seeing as how—surprise!—"micro-ox and R.O. are basic tools for pulling out V.A." (volatile acidity being more likely in unsulfited wine).

"The trouble with Clark," comments Ravenswood's Joel Peterson, "is that you feel like you've walked into a medicine show. Even though much of his basic information is correct, there's a certain amount of hucksterism that goes on—he's not an impartial scientist. After all, his livelihood is at stake."

"Clark is a unique combination of twenty-first-century technology and nineteenth-century romantic philosophy," Rick Jones concludes. "It's like he's saying, 'I've discovered a better way to paint the Mona Lisa—we can do it with a machine. And while we're at it, we can take away that obnoxious smile.'" ■