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WINE & SPIRITS

When life dealt them grapes, they made wine

Imagine marrying a famous Central Coast winemaker, and when you meet your extended family, it includes not only your spouse's parents and siblings, but his winery partner.

By Patrick Comiskey
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IMAGINE marrying a famous Central Coast winemaker, and when you meet your extended family, it includes not only your spouse's parents and siblings, but his winery partner, who is himself a famous winemaker, and members of his staff, who are also successful winemakers, and a group of cellar rats who have winemaking aspirations of their own.

Imagine that in that cellar, not one but 11 wineries are housed, some the most celebrated in the region. And imagine you have the bad fortune to want to make wine yourself.

No pressure, of course. None at all.

This scenario has played out not once but twice at the intertwined wineries Au Bon Climat and Qupé in Santa Maria. In 1996, Au Bon Climat winemaker Jim Clendenen's wife, Morgan, founded Cold Heaven Cellars, an entity devoted mostly to Viognier. Three years later, Qupé winemaker Bob Lindquist's wife, Louisa Sawyer Lindquist, founded Verdad, an entity devoted entirely to Spanish-style wines.

Not only are these two women making wines distinct from their spouses', but their efforts are so good that they've managed to steal a little limelight for themselves.

Morgan Clendenen grew up in the six-pack world of Asheville, N.C., the sort of place where any abiding interest in wine got you noticed. "The guys at the liquor store would see me come in and shout, 'Hey, Lambrusco!'" she says with a laugh. It didn't take her long to exhaust her wine options, so after a brief stint selling wine locally, she headed to the Napa Valley to be closer to the action, and spent the next 18 months at Robert Sinskey Vineyards in Napa. With long blond hair, bright blue eyes and a healthy penchant for stirring the pot, Clendenen is used to getting noticed. But when she met Jim Clendenen, proprietor of Au Bon Climat, "sparks flew fast," she says. They

were married in 1998.

Morgan's husband is not exactly a retiring personality. Six foot two, with piercing blue eyes and long blond hair (for many years he sported what was arguably the wine world's most famous mullet), Jim is voluble, opinionated, loud-shirted, and as a winemaker, extremely talented. His oenological curiosity and appetites are so incessant and voluminous that he has founded six labels in which to contain them.

Setting aside the broad shoulders and mullet, Morgan Clendenen measures up, with curiosity and drive equal to her husband's, as well as a touch of unabashed wildness that he can't quite match. When she started to think about making wine, she felt the need to sidestep her husband's many interests. But where did that leave her a place to stake a claim?

She settled on Viognier, the exotic white Rhône grape variety introduced here in the 1980s. In the early '90s, Viognier had proliferated as a kind of "it" grape in California. It was, for all practical purposes, the un-Chardonnay. But early California efforts didn't impress Morgan.

"I couldn't understand what all the mystique was about," she says. "In Condrieu [France] it made this elegant, noble wine, but here it was sweet and cloying, with too much alcohol." Indeed, in California's warm climate, Viognier could be tricky to grow. If you missed the mark at harvest, the acids that provide structure would disappear and this usually resulted in a thick, candied, bombastic wine.

"Most people couldn't even define what it was supposed to taste like," she says. So in 1996, she set out to.

Cold Heaven makes four Viogniers — one, in fact, blends California fruit with Northern Rhône fruit, the latter provided by her friend and Condrieu producer Yves Cuilleron. It's called Deux C, and it's a wine so rare and audacious that it just might be the first Viognier to shoulder its way into cult status, alongside Napa Cabs.

And Cold Heaven's Central Coast bottlings possess an elegance that's often missing in California iterations of the grape. They tend to be lean, perfumed, attenuated wines, always with a marked acid component that provides definition and vibrancy. Clendenen achieves this, she says, with meticulous fruit selection, and by harvesting well before anyone else does. At the vineyards where she buys fruit, she says, winemakers don't monitor their grapes, they monitor her. "They tell the vineyard manager, 'When Clendenen picks, call me,' " she says.

In the last 10 years many who planted Viognier have moved on to other things, including Syrah, but Clendenen remains committed to defining Viognier here. "I saw something I could really hang my hat on, define and pioneer in California as it hadn't been before," she says.

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Passion for Spain

NEW Yorker Louisa Sawyer Lindquist took notice of wine in the early '80s during a summer job stint at Yosemite National Park. Her fellow workers, Californians, had an appreciation for wine that she eagerly adopted. When she returned to New York she got involved in the industry there, working harvests in the sand-spit vineyards of Long Island, and off-season in a progressive East Hampton wine shop that had a large selection of wines from Spain.

"The owner really liked unusual stuff," she says, "so that was the first time I had an Albariño," referring to the bracing white wine grape grown in Galicia, on Spain's Atlantic Coast. For Sawyer Lindquist, Albariño became the gateway to a full-blown love for all kinds of Spanish wines, years before they had the kind of popularity they now enjoy. This made her passionate about wines few others knew much about, a trait that seems in keeping with her temperament, which is that of a quietly brilliant student in the back of the room who doesn't let on what she's thinking.

Quietly, deliberately, she explored Tempranillo in the wines of Rioja and Ribera del Duero, Garnachas and blends from Priorat. She traveled to Spain's wine regions, adopting as her go-to wine the sinewy rosés of Spain.

These wines stuck with her, as did a taste for esoterica. It partly explains why she struck up a conversation with Bob Lindquist and Jim Clendenen at a wine event featuring singer James Brown in 1992, the year she moved to San Francisco. She and Lindquist started dating, and he persuaded her to move to Santa Maria, where they married and Sawyer Lindquist took up selling Qupé wines.

Like his wife, Bob Lindquist is relatively soft-spoken. He has cast his lot with Rhône varieties, and has such skill with them that a French company hired him to make wines in southern France for several vintages in the '90s, with Sawyer Lindquist alongside him. Working two harvests a year was enough to start Sawyer Lindquist thinking about making wine on her own, but Spain was her forte, and its varieties were largely unplanted and untested in California.

When she learned that a colleague was having some success growing Albariño, she persuaded one of Lindquist's growers to plant some Albariño and see just how they took in California; the next year they planted a clone of Tempranillo, which is how her winery Verdad was born.

Although Verdad wines are Californian, what is striking is how Sawyer Lindquist has made them feel Spanish. The Albariño is clean and minerally; the rosé has robust flavor but is lean in structure, with a pleasingly low alcohol level. And the Tempranillo tastes true to its roots in the Rioja and Ribera del Duero.

Both Sawyer Lindquist and Clendenen make their wines — tiny productions — at the charmless, corrugated Au Bon Climat/Qupé winery structure situated in a canyon in the Santa Maria Valley, surrounded by the hillside plantings at Bien Nacido, one of the Central Coast's most famous vineyards.

Although there are many wine projects from a dozen winemakers taking place under this roof,

Clendenen's and Sawyer Lindquist's projects are completely unique.

Cold Heaven is probably the only remaining winery in California whose primary focus is Viognier, and that is how Morgan Clendenen would like to be known. "I'd really like it," she says, "if when people say Viognier or Cold Heaven that one conjures the image of the other."

Verdad, on the other hand, is the only winery in California devoted solely to Spanish varietals — Albariño, Tempranillo and Garnacha, primarily, as well as a stellar rosé — and Sawyer Lindquist adheres not only to the grapes, but also to a Spanish style: lean, elegant, earthy wines designed for the European palate and usually going against the grain when it comes to forward California fruit expression.

"Bob's always telling me I should make it more California in style," she says, referring to the rosé, "but I can't do that." Morgan's husband offers similar advice about making her wines more Californian, and meets the same resistance. Not that these differences are liable to lead to domestic strife. "Not only am I proud of what she did," says Bob Lindquist of Louisa and Verdad, "I'm proud of the path she took."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Distinctive boutique wines

Cold Heaven and Verdad wines are extremely limited production — just 1,600 cases of Verdad and about 2,500 cases of Cold Heaven — and not all wines are available at all times, but look for Cold Heaven wines at Mission Wines in South Pasadena, (626) 403-9463; the Wine House in Los Angeles, (310) 479-3731; and Woodland Hills Wine Company in Woodland Hills, (818) 222-1111. Look for Verdad wines at Larchmont Village Wines & Spirits in Los Angeles, (323) 856-8699; Silverlake Wine in Los Angeles, (323) 662-9024; and Wally's Wine & Spirits in Los Angeles, (310) 475-0606. Additionally, some of the wines can be found on restaurant wine lists. Deux C, for example, is at Lucques in Los Angeles; Verdad's rosé is at Campanile in Los Angeles.

2004 Cold Heaven Le Bon Climat Viognier, Santa Barbara County. From an estate vineyard, a lean wine with floral aromas of apricot and honeysuckle; you can detect the prickle of acid just by smelling it. Flavors fall into the pear spectrum, with the grip of fruit skin and a touch of wood to round out the firm texture. About \$25.

2004 Cold Heaven Viognier, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills . From an iconic Central Coast vineyard site, this wine is extremely cool climate with ethereal scents of dried apricot and peach. Its golden-peach flavors are richer than the Le Bon Climat Viognier, with a creamy texture. About \$35.

2003 Deux C. A blend of 50% Condrieu, 50% Santa Barbara County Viognier. Clendenen partners with Yves Cuilleron to produce this fascinating Janus-faced wine, which tastes like the

sum of its parts. More fruit-driven than a French wine, it has a rich, almost buttery peach aroma and flavor, but its broad and powerful texture bears an opulence and grandeur that's reminiscent of Condrieu. About \$50.

2003 Cold Heaven "Second Sin" Syrah, Santa Barbara County. Compared with many jam-pot Syrahs, this one is lighter, leaner, and more elegant, with aromas of smoke and leather to accenting black currant fruit. Elegant and soft on the palate, with flavors of black currant and spice cake and a firm, tightly focused finish. About \$35.

2005 Verdad Albariño, Ibarra Young Vineyard, Santa Ynez Valley. This brisk young wine has a racy, lemony scent with a saline tang. Brisk and light on the palate, with taut citrus flavors and a touch of arbequina olive. Crisp, and fresh, an ideal aperitif wine. About \$18.

2005 Verdad Rosé, Arroyo Grande Valley. A blend of Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Tempranillo with a beautiful deep coppery pink color. Aromas of cherry blossom and wild strawberries, with a hint of olive. Dry and firm on the palate with a dried strawberry fruit flavor and plenty of grip — ideal for spring barbecue. About \$15.

2004 Verdad Tempranillo, Santa Ynez Valley. This wine is 87% Tempranillo; a small amount of Grenache and Syrah round out the blend. It's the most emphatically Spanish of all of the Verdad wines, with earthy scents of wild herb, wild cherry, plum, beef bones. Powerful and gripping on the palate, with flavors of black cherry jam laced with herbs, and plenty of youthful tannin on the back end. Decant, then serve with lamb. About \$17.

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