

EDMUNDS ST. JOHN

SIERRA FOOTHILLS



If you know about Edmunds St. John, you know. Most people don't. Beyond industry insiders and a core of devoted fans, few drinkers are aware that a Berkeley winemaker named Steve Edmunds has been producing some of California's most soul-stirring wines for the last 33 years under his Edmunds St. John label. He is, for California at least, the ultimate winemaker's winemaker.

Unmoored from the structures that tend to prop up California wine businesses - vineyards, wineries, regional organizations- Edmunds is something of an island. With no winery of his own, the brand has drifted between various production facilities over the years. Edmunds has no employees: no assistant winemaker, no marketing manager, no salesperson. He has no land, either, and has had to fight to get some of his most beloved varieties — unpopular, commercially cryptic grapes like Mourvedre, Gamay and Vermentino — put in the ground. Edmunds began making wine in 1985, an offshoot of what we might call the Chez Panisse diaspora: those denizens of post-counterculture Berkeley so fond of the rustic flavors of southern France.

With Tempier Mourvedres in mind, in 1985 Edmunds found some old-vine, mountain-grown Mourvedre in a Mount Veeder vineyard owned by the Brandlin family. "I knew that this was something very special, and I knew it while the grapes were still in the fermentor," he says.

Throughout California in the 1980s a movement was taking shape that would call itself the Rhone Rangers, dedicated to the premise that Rhone varieties — grapes like Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Viognier — could thrive on these shores. Vintners like Gary Eberle, Bill Easton, Bob Lindquist and Randall Grahm had all preceded Edmunds' efforts. But Edmunds played a special role.

What defined Edmunds' winemaking in those days — that "framework for authenticity" — is still true today: The wines are quiet, reticent to announce their substance. That fresher, lighter, brighter (read: lower-alcohol) approach to wine-making may be in vogue now, but Edmunds stuck with it before it was trending.

Could a winemaker like this ever feel satisfied? "There have been a few years where I felt like I was finally making a wine that was approaching what I'd set out to do in 1985," Edmunds says in characteristically slow tempo, pausing as he says "approaching."

He's still chasing a single, original goal: "How do I take what I think I'm receiving from this vineyard," he says, "and figure out what I need to do in order to bring that out in its most transparent form?"

-SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, MARCH 2018



"The more you know about wine, the more you'll want to know about us."

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THE VINEYARDS

Since Edmunds St. John began, in 1985, we've purchased all the grapes from which we've made wine. We've worked with fruit from dozens of vineyards over the years, but in recent years we've narrowed the number of sites down to four. The grapes we use that are grown in three of those four vineyards were planted there at our request. They're all managed by Ron Mansfield, with whom we've worked closely, now, for more than 25 years, a collaboration that has been, for us, a source of inspiration, and energy, and great satisfaction. The fourth vineyard source is Shake Ridge Ranch, also in the Sierra foothills, in Amador County, a few miles east of Sutter Creek. The vines at Shake Ridge are farmed with exceptional care, and Shake Ridge has a deservedly lofty reputation for producing marvelous grapes that have, in turn, become the source for very distinctive wines.

THE FENAUGHTY VINEYARD Formerly pretty much orchard land, in the Apple Hill district above the Gold Rush town of Placerville. Before there were grapes, there were lots of apples, lots of peaches and nectarines, some pears. Its situated on the North edge of Carson Ridge, at roughly 2800 feet in elevation, from where the land slopes gradually down to the North. Soil is volcanic clay-loam. A portion of the vineyards were planted in the mid-to-late 1990's, including the Syrah grapes we've most recently used from Fenaughty. Vermentino and Grenache Blanc were planted at Fenaughty in 2009.

Our first vintage working with Fenaughty grapes was in 1988, when we purchased Syrah from a mere two rows, that made such lovely wine that we were able to persuade the property manager, Ron Mansfield, to plant quite a bit more Syrah on the property over the next several years.

WITTERS VINEYARD Before 2000, Bob Witters' property was planted to Bartlett pears, for quite some time. But by 1999, the pressure of global economics drove the market price for Bob's pears so low that it didn't make sense for him to keep farming them. The market for wine grapes, on the other hand, was expanding, and Bob had a conversation with Ron Mansfield about putting in a vineyard to replace his pears.

Since Edmunds St. John had been working with Ron at that point for a dozen years, we spoke about Bob's site, and it seemed like it might be a really good site for Gamay, a grape that had been on our radar for some time. Ron conferred with Bob, and in 2000, four acres were planted to Gamay, the first planting of real Gamay in California in a generation!

Witters is situated at 3,400 feet elevation, making it one of the highest vineyards in California. The soil is volcanic clay-loam, and the land slopes gently down to the North. At that elevation, temperatures are generally pretty mild, and nights can be quite cool. The risk for frost in Spring is fairly high, and there have been a couple of years where crop losses were substantial.

BARSOTTI VINEYARD The Barsotti Ranch is situated East and a bit North of Placerville, at just under 3,000 feet in elevation. Gamay was planted for us on the Eastern edge of the property in 2005. The soil is partially comprised of weathered and decomposed granite, similar to soils found in the Northern part of Beaujolais, and also in the Northern Rhone.

We'd had Gamay planted in the volcanic clay-loam soil at Witteres five years earlier, which produced wine with typical aromatic and flavor characteristics for Gamay, but oddly lacking in tannins, and phenolic texture, even after the vines had produced for a few years. When we harvested our first Gamay from Barsotti, in 2007, the phenolic structure was much more compelling, and the wine had a very distinctive soil signature. Presently the only red Gamay we produce is from Barsotti.

(The Barsotti property was expanded around 2011, at which time an adjacent property was acquired that included an old block of Syrah. We began producing wine from that block in 2013. In 2012 a small amount of Vermentino was planted in a block adjacent to the Syrah, and there was a small amount of wine produced from those grapes in 2014).

SHAKE RIDGE RANCH Ann Kraemer planted vines at her property on Shake Ridge starting in 2003. The Ranch is on very steep undulating hills a few miles east from Sutter Creek, in Amador County, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Shake Ridge features some 42 acres of wine grapes in numerous blocks, each of which has its own unique combination of slope, exposure, aspect and soil mix. Soils at the property consist of well-drained loams on a base that ranges from quartz and soapstone to shale and, here and there, a bit of granite.

Ann farms the blocks at Shake Ridge with the devotion of a monk, and the hand of an artist; her work is meticulous, and the grapes her vines yield are among the finest with which we've ever had the opportunity to work.

We make one wine from Shake Ridge at this time; it's a blend of Grenache, Tempranillo, Mourvedre, and Graciano. The proportions will vary, from year to year, as we attempt to zero in on the most compelling combination. We call that wine El Jaléo.