

San Francisco Chronicle

The Ahlgren Vineyard was one of the Santa Cruz Mountains' great unheralded wine estates. What happened to it?

BY SYDNEY LOVE | MAY 31, 2019



My friend Jacob, a traveling musician I met during my college years in Atlanta, recently celebrated his 27th birthday on May 19. We had met up three months earlier at a wine bar during one of his trips to Los Angeles. At the time, he told me he enjoyed Cabernet Sauvignon, so I decided to buy him a bottle from his birth year. I was determined to find his epiphany wine — the wine that, when he put it to his lips, would flicker a light bulb and release fireworks.

I worked at a wine shop and asked the manager if we carried any affordable Cabernet Sauvignon from 1992. I was prepared to pay \$150 or more, since that is what many aged Napa Cabernets can cost.

“How about a bottle of 1992 Ahlgren Bates Ranch?” he asked. It was a winery from the Santa Cruz Mountains I’d never heard of, but we sold it for just \$68. I bought a bottle on the spot, deciding it was affordable enough to taste-test. If I liked it, I would buy a bottle for Jacob.

The contents in the glass wooed me immediately. The 1992 Ahlgren Bates Ranch Cabernet had the dark fruit I expected from California Cabernet but also a finesse, with earthy flavors giving way to a soft texture and a steady tinge of menthol. At 27 years old, the wine still tasted fresh, tingling my tongue almost like Pop Rocks. It didn’t weigh down my palate or leave me with that sickly rich taste I had grown used to from some Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons. Instead, it carried a quiet yet persistent brightness — a quality I had never associated with the varietal before.

Several days later, I was still thinking about the wine and how it had exceeded my expectations. Why hadn’t I heard of this winery that produced such memorable wine? At first glance, there was very little information about Ahlgren Vineyard. The winery’s website was defunct, and my Southern California wine shop, Kogod Wine Merchant, was the only wine shop I could find that listed the wine online.

I wanted to know what had happened to Ahlgren Vineyard. And eventually, by chasing every thread I could find, I learned that Ahlgren Vineyard had indeed closed. But the story and the characters driving it turned out to be just as compelling as the wine itself.

What I found was the story of a family who took a chance late in their lives to pursue a pipe dream that would lead to quiet success — not in the sense of dollar signs but in the number of devotees acquired along the way. I found a story about how a bottle of wine can cause a ripple effect and become something greater than itself.

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The 1992 Ahlgren Bates Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, the author's epiphany wine.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

I'm not the only one to have been wooed by a bottle of Ahlgren Cabernet. The Ahlgren wines became an insider's secret among winemakers of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Ian Brand of I. Brand & Family (The Chronicle's 2018 Winemaker of the Year) recalls a night in 2009 when he and his wife, Heather, had gathered with John Locke and Alex Krause of Birichino Winery. Brand had been given a bottle of Ahlgren from his mentor, Jeff Emery, owner of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, which he, in turn, was given from his predecessor, Ken Burnap.

"We opened a 1979 (Ahlgren) Bates Ranch ... from Ken Burnap's cellar, and it was absolutely phenomenal," Brand says. "The four of us just stopped talking for 10 minutes and got deep into that wine." Inspired by the wine, Brand now produces his own Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon from Bates Ranch.

Searching online, I found bits and pieces of Ahlgren Vineyard's existence but never the full story. It wasn't until I spoke with winemakers Kenny Likitprakong, Brand, Emery and Valerie Ahlgren herself that I could finally stop digging and put the shovel down.

I learned that the Ahlgren Vineyard story began in the 1960s when Dexter Ahlgren, a civil engineer, and his wife, Valerie, an English professor, decided to try winemaking. They were in their 40s. Valerie will tell you that Dexter was the genius behind the operation, but it was her interest in fermentation that planted the seed. She experimented in the kitchen with mead, then beer and eventually wine.

By 1972, the Ahlgrens owned seven French oak barrels, a crusher and a fermenter, and purchased 2 tons of Zinfandel from winemaker John Roffinella in Hecker Pass. Dexter became so engrossed in the project that he converted their home garage into a winery and cellar. They bottled their first official vintage in 1976, a time when there were only 13 bonded wineries in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Today there are more than 60. Dexter later became the president of the Santa Cruz Mountain Vintners Association and played a leading role in establishing the region as an AVA in 1981.

The Ahlgrens' limited access to pure water on their property in Boulder Creek, a mountain town 14 miles north of Santa Cruz, prolonged the development of their own vineyard. In the meantime, they resorted to purchasing fruit from a variety of growers, including Bates Ranch, a vineyard 50 miles southeast in Gilroy. They continued working with Bates for the next 40 years, except for a single vintage in the 1980s when Valerie says Dexter and Jack Bates got into a tiff.

The reality of producing wine in the Santa Cruz Mountains is not for the faint of heart. Though the AVA spans three counties (Santa Cruz, San Mateo and Santa Clara) and 480,000 acres, only 1,500 of those acres are planted to vineyards. The Napa Valley AVA, in contrast, spans about 225,000 acres with 45,000 acres planted. Despite the long-running presence of wineries like Ridge, Mount Eden and Kathryn Kennedy, Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet as a whole tends to fall under the radar.

Not only does the region's proximity to Silicon Valley make it expensive to purchase land, but the rugged terrain also makes for difficult farming. Fruit yields are inconsistent across vintages, and yet it is this very tension that can result in balanced, structured wines reminiscent of Europe.

I could not help but think of Jacob during my research, weaving together the months between him and his birth wine. Before he was 6 months old, the Ahlgrens were approaching their 16th harvest. On Sept. 30, 1992, they crushed 10 tons of Cabernet Sauvignon from Bates Ranch. That's 630 cases or 7,560 bottles — 7,560 bottles of wine that have gone out into the world, most of which are gone by now.

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Near the time that Brand was enjoying that 1979 Ahlgren wine, the Ahlgrens put their home and vineyard for sale for \$2.9 million. They asked Kenny Likitprakong of Hobo Wine Co., who had worked with their daughter Beth Ahlgren at Hallcrest Vineyards, if he would be interested in purchasing the property. That was more than Likitprakong could commit to, but he wanted to make sure the vineyards were still taken care of. He agreed to farm the Ahlgren Vineyard himself. He also took over the Ahlgrens' long-held portion of Bates Ranch and, from 2013 to 2015, produced Cabernet from those vines under his Ghostwriter label.

Valerie and Dexter eventually took their property off the market. They bottled their last vintage in 2010 but kept the business active until 2016 to sell their remaining wine. Dexter Ahlgren passed away in April 2018 at the age of 89.

Since Dexter's passing, Valerie, who will be 87 this year, has moved to Felton, about 7 miles from Boulder Creek. "It's been a big change, but Dexter and I always considered being able to live on the mountain and to do the winery an enormous adventure," Valerie says. "It was great, from 1976 to 2016. We had a fair run."

Likitprakong and his team still make the 120-mile trek from their facility in Santa Rosa down to Boulder Creek on a regular basis to farm and produce wines from the Ahlgrens' 1 acre of Pinot Noir. "I'm committed to it as long as the family keeps the property," Likitprakong says. He's even working on some long-term investments in the property's preservation, like replanting some of the vineyard blocks.

Though the Ahlgren estate vineyard lives on through Ghostwriter, Likitprakong has since moved on from Bates Ranch because it, too, is for sale. The Bates Ranch estate and its 22 acres of vineyard are on the market for \$15 million. There's no telling what a future owner might do with the vineyards, which makes the question of the region's founding wineries' survival all the more poignant. As generations hand over the baton and the Silicon Valley real estate market continues to grow, will these pioneering Santa Cruz Mountains vineyards become endangered species?

Despite the fact that many acclaimed wines come from the Santa Cruz Mountains — from older heroes like



Kenny Likitprakong at the Ahlgren Vineyard in Boulder Creek. The Hobo and Ghostwriter winemaker has farmed the vineyard since the Ahlgren family retired.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Bonny Doon and Mount Eden to newer projects like Rhys and Birichino — the region still manages to feel quiet and sleepy. "I can tell you in the almost 20 years I've been around, more has stayed the same than what has changed," Likitprakong says of the region. Still, an increasing number of well-known winemakers based in Napa and Sonoma, in addition to Likitprakong, are purchasing fruit from the area, including Ceritas, Arnot-Roberts, Kutch and Leo Steen, which may help raise its profile.

Valerie kept most of the winemaking equipment after they retired with the intention of going back to home winemaking, but she has not touched it. "You get finished. I'm not sure I could make wine on my own anywhere nearly as good as what Dexter and I made," she says. "I have this lifetime stash of Ahlgren wines so that I don't need to do without."

She had more than a lifetime stash, it turns out. After the Ahlgrens' retirement, Likitprakong connected them with Farm Wine Imports, which also distributes Ghostwriter. Farm bought the majority of the Ahlgrens' remaining back vintages spanning 1985 to 2009. What is left from that purchase is now dispersed among restaurant wine lists and wine shops across California, waiting patiently for the right admirers.

I never imagined my grandiose effort to educate my friend would lead to my own epiphany wine.

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