

# Wine Spectator

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## Four to Watch

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### LAW: FROM ENGINEER TO WINEMAKER

Don Law and his wife, Susie, are taking their love of Rhône varieties to new heights at their winery in the hills west of Paso Robles. In 2008, the couple planted one of Paso's highest vineyards, peaking at 1,950 feet, and have now released their first wines from the 2010 vintage.

Law, 60, an engineer, became interested in wine after moving to Ventura, Calif., in 1976. While working for an oil company, a co-worker introduced him to wine. "We would drive up to Santa Barbara and scour the wineries in those days," Law says. He started collecting wines from around the world, but he concedes that Rhône styles are his favorites.

In 2005, the Laws decided to start their own vineyard. They explored the coast from Monterey to Santa Barbara at a time when Paso was distinguishing itself as prime Rhône territory. "It didn't take long to laser-focus on Paso Robles," Law admits, adding that they were already familiar with "that Paso style of Rhônes that really struck me as being great wines."

The couple bought a 230-acre site in the western hills of Paso Robles, where several prominent wineries grow their grapes. Torrin's Scott Hawley, who makes the wines, calls the vineyard "a pretty challenging site for vines," but believes that the *terroir* is well-suited for Grenache. He says the high pH of the shallow limestone soils produces big wines with high acidity reminiscent of Spain's Priorat region.

The Laws have expanded their property and now have 55 contiguous acres planted mainly to Grenache and Syrah, with smaller blocks of other Rhône grapes, along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo and Petite Sirah. This past December, they opened a 10,000-case winery.

Hawley's winemaking blends traditional techniques with modern innovations, such as using concrete fermentors with custom-designed tubing to control temperatures. He aged the 2010 wines in 500-liter French puncheon barrels to minimize the oak influence. Starting with the 2011s, a small portion of the wine will see time in concrete eggs. "My philosophy—and I know Scott's philosophy too—is, let's take the fruit that the land gives us and make our wine an expression of that," Law says.

Law made four wines in 2010, each named after a personality trait, such as a Grenache blend called Sagacious. The Laws plan to increase production and may eventually bottle as many as eight different wines.

**92 LAW** Sagacious Paso Robles 2010 \$62 351 cases

**91 LAW** Beguiling Paso Robles 2010 \$62 390 cases



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[2011 Bordeaux Standing On its Own](#)

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**90 LAW** Audacious Paso Robles 2010 \$62 369 cases

**89 LAW** Intrepid Paso Robles 2010 \$62 359 cases

## **SKINNER: A FAMILY LEGACY REBORN**

Mike Skinner, 67, didn't plan on starting a winery, but a revelation about his ancestry sparked his interest. Before Skinner's father died, in 1992, he revealed the scant details he knew about the family's history: a town in the Sierra Foothills called Coloma and a vague reference to the year 1849, since he knew an ancestor was involved in the Gold Rush. Skinner's son, Kevin, drove to the town and found the remnants of a family cemetery. Skinner then contacted local historians and learned that his family had been pioneers in the California wine industry.

Skinner's ancestor, James Skinner, was a Scottish miner who traveled to California during the Gold Rush and built one of the first commercial wineries in the region, in 1861. The winery closed in the early 20th century, but some of the stone buildings still stand today.

"It was a shock," recalls Skinner, who founded an insurance company in Los Angeles before establishing Skinner Vineyards and Winery in 2006. "For whatever reason, our family didn't know about the winery."

Skinner decided to revive the family legacy and set out to start a vineyard. In 2006, he and his wife, Carey, found a parcel in Rescue, Calif., close to the original property, where they planted 12 acres of vines. They also bought an 11-acre vineyard in the Fair Play AVA, planted at 2,700 feet. The couple built their 12,000-square-foot winery here in 2010.

While studying probate records, Skinner learned that the original winery had grown Grenache, Carignane and Trousseau, as well as a rare variety called Petit Bouschet. The couple planted their vineyards to the same grapes, as well as a host of other Rhône varieties, including Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache Blanc. "What worked back in the 1860s, in terms of the types of grapes, works today," Skinner says.

Winemaker Chris Pittenger blends grapes from the two estate vineyards, along with purchased fruit from El Dorado County. He selects grapes from multiple areas in the Sierra Foothills, citing the characteristics that different *terroirs* provide. "We are just trying to highlight [the soils] and let the wines be representative of their place," says Pittenger.

Skinner's family helps to run the winery, and he hopes to pass the reins to future generations. "We're not going to sell to a big producer, which is what some people do," says Skinner. "We don't want a 150-year interruption again."

**94 SKINNER** Mourvèdre El Dorado Estate 2010 \$32 73 cases

**93 SKINNER** Eighteen Sixty-One El Dorado 2010 \$30 320 cases

**88 SKINNER** Dry Diggings El Dorado 2010 \$32 250 cases

**88 SKINNER** Grenache El Dorado 2011 \$26 402 cases

## **NICORA: SPIRIT OF THE ENTREPRENEUR**

A decade ago, Nicolas Elliott knew nothing about wine. "Growing up, wine was always in a box in the fridge," jokes Elliott, 31, who was born into a family of contractors in the small town of Coalinga, Calif.

Elliott's great-grandfather started his own construction business in the 1920s, and Elliott was destined to become a fourth-generation general contractor. At 21, however, he decided to follow his own path. He packed his bags and moved 70 miles south, to Paso Robles. He took a construction job to pay the bills and spent his free time exploring the area's wineries, trying to discover what "real wine" was about.

In 2006, Elliott heard that Torrin's Scott Hawley needed a cellar hand. Hawley gave Elliott his first opportunity, and Elliott worked the next few years at Torrin, spending additional time at Booker and Alta Colina.

"I learned by standing in the fire," says Elliott, who worked 90 days in a row his first year. "Like construction, it pays off when you get to see a product that is a reflection of yourself and your efforts."

After several years of honing his winemaking skills, Elliott decided to start his own brand, Nicora, in 2009. The label combines Elliott's name with that of his entrepreneurial great-grandfather, Ora. "I had a pair of boots and two hands," Elliott says of starting the business with hardly any money. For Nicora's first vintage, he traded labor for fruit and cellar space from Alta Colina, Denner, Torrin and others.

Nicora currently makes four Rhône-style reds that are distinctly Paso Robles: big, ripe and bold. Elliott plans to add a few more wines, starting with two Rhône-style white blends from 2012.

**90 NICORA** GSM Paso Robles 2011 \$48 125 cases

**90 NICORA** Law Vineyard Paso Robles 2011 \$53 120 cases

**88 NICORA** Buxom Paso Robles 2011 \$53 120 cases

**88 NICORA** Euphoric La Vista Vineyard Paso Robles 2011 \$53 125 cases

## **KALE: SWINGING FOR THE FENCES**

Kale Anderson is just 34, but he has already been making wine for a decade. The Sonoma native attended UC, Davis, with the intention of following his father into medicine, but an introductory course in viticulture and enology changed that. "I quickly found that one of the coolest intersections of nature and culture was in the vineyard," says Anderson.

After school, Anderson interned at Colgin Cellars, followed by stints at Terra Valentine and Cliff Lede before joining Pahlmeyer in 2012. Along the way, Anderson worked at the side of Mark Aubert, Philippe Melka and David Abreu, who each helped shape his meticulous approach in the vineyard and cellar. "They taught me more about what not to do than what to do," jokes Anderson. "But the one takeaway was to spare no expense in the vineyard." In 2008, Anderson started his own label, Kale, focusing on Rhône wines.

Another source of inspiration came from Dick Keenan, whose Kick Ranch Vineyard, in Sonoma's Rincon Valley, is planted on a former horse ranch next door to the field where Anderson played Little League as a child. The winemaker recalls retrieving home-run balls from the Clydesdales' pasture. Anderson met Keenan around the time Kale was established, and subsequently decided to call his first wine Home Run Cuvée.

Anderson tailors each wine to the vintage and the vineyard. "It all comes down to the raw materials," he says. The Syrah-based Home Run Cuvée is rich and bold, but Anderson also makes Syrah from the cooler Alder Springs Vineyard in Mendocino, with floral and spice scents. Starting in 2013, Kale will continue to expand, adding Syrah from Napa Valley's Stagecoach Vineyard, as well as Grenache and Mourvèdre from a newly planted vineyard in Rutherford.

**92 KALE** Home Run Cuvée Kick Ranch Vineyard Sonoma County 2010 \$45 81 cases

**87 KALE** Syrah Mendocino County Alder Springs Vineyard-Spirit Rock 2010 \$45 111 cases