Reviving a Family Legacy

Riding to 2,699 feet, the Eagle Peak appellation stretches across more than 26,000 acres of remote terrain in northern Mendocino County. It’s home to a single winery, Masut, which is Pomo Indian for “dark, rich earth.” Jake and Ben Fetzer founded the winery as a tribute to their father, who first planted the region to Pinot Noir.

The two brothers are third-generation vintners who grew up in the vineyards of Mendocino, where their family founded Fetzer Vineyards in the 1960s. One of 11 children, their father, Bobby Fetzer, was the green thumb of a family that came to embody Mendocino wines. "I always wanted to be in the family business," says Jake, 34. "It was kind of alluring, something you felt proud of."

After the Fetzers sold the winery to distiller Brown-Forman in 1992 (it was later sold to Concha y Toro), Bobby established a cattle ranch. But he yearned to start a vineyard with his wife, Shella, and their children.

Turning his gaze to the mountains, Bobby bought land adjacent to the family’s ranch in Redwood Valley, where his father, lumberman Barney Fetzer, had planted grapes in the 1950s. Bobby later increased his property to 1,500 acres.

In 1997, with his sons in high school, Bobby planted 40 acres to vines. Rejecting local advice, he chose Pinot Noir because of the region’s unusual climate. “He was the kind of guy that liked to go against the mold,” says Jake.

Eagle Peak acts as a gateway between the foggy coastal regions and the warmer inland Redwood and Potter valleys. It draws in cooling ocean breezes and fog through a gap in the coastal range. Summer afternoons can be sweltering but once the wind kicks in it doesn’t let up. The slopes are a mix of thin, gravelly soil that is well-draining, with pockets of deeper alluvial clay soil.

For years the family sold its grapes and made a little wine. But in 2006 tragedy struck when Bobby, 50, drowned in a river-rafting accident. The dream came to a screeching halt.

The sons took a temporary hiatus. In 2008, they rekindled their father’s vision, seeking advice from Pinot maestro Greg La Follette. The first vintage was a loss after devastating wildfires covered the region in smoke for weeks. But the following year, they produced their inaugural Pinot, with Jake guiding the grapes to bottle.

There is a natural division of labor, with Ben, 36, as the farmer. As a child, he often accompanied Bobby on tours of Fetzer’s vineyards. "I’m more involved in the winery side of things day to day, but we wear a lot of the same hats," says Jake. “You can get a lot more done as a team.”

The brothers converted an old barn into a winery. They also spearheaded a petition to create an Eagle Peak AVA, which was approved in 2014, and they replanted some of the vineyard to new clones.

Masut is mostly Pinot Noir, with a smattering of Chardonnay. It’s divided into two sections, planted to a mix of heritage and DiIon clones. The upper portion is dry-farmed and sees 1,800 feet in elevation. The lower section is larger and sits 800 feet down the hillside on an east-facing slope.

For the first few vintages, Ben and Jake experimented with different parts of the vineyard. Now they are focused on a single estate vineyard, blending the sections for additional complexity. They ferment and barrel the different blocks separately before determining the final blend.

"The style that we are making is a little more robust," Jake explains. "I like a little bit of tannin and rustiness." The 2014 bottling (90, $45) packs in a tight core of spicy berry and earth, fanning out to pick up herbal details. The Fetzers plan to bottle individual sections in vintages where the quality stands out.

"I feel like there is a sense of responsibility for me to continue the family business of winemaking," says Jake. With Masut, the siblings are forging their own path while honoring their legacy.

90 MASUT Pinot Noir Eagle Peak Estate Vineyard 2014

$45 1,800 cases

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