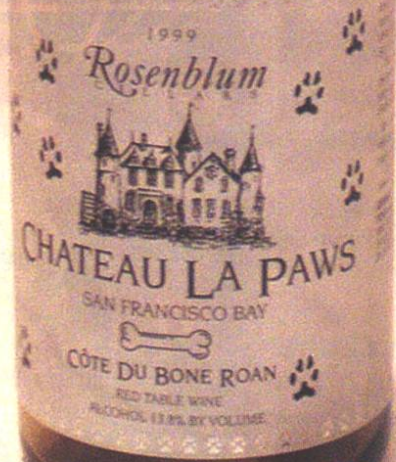


The
*Rhone
Ranger*

*And His Faithful
Companion — Elliot*

The first in a series of
"The Story behind the Dogs
on Wine Labels"



BY BARBARA DENZER

I was on the Sunday evening shuttle flight between Oakland and Burbank, California. It's usually a flight packed with bubbly people returning from a weekend in the wine country of Napa Valley, with their prized travel boxes of premium wines. No wonder then that my subconscious mind was on wine as I scrunched myself into the small seat and started leafing through my monthly stack of magazine reading. In the very first glossy, my eyes stopped on a headline that nabbed my attention: "The Rhone Rangers." A catchy phrase I thought, worth a read.

I delved into the article to learn that The Rhone Rangers are a group of mostly West Coast vintners who brought the "workhorse" grape vines of the Rhone River Valley in France to their various United States turfs about 10 years ago in an attempt to replicate French table wines. Considered mavericks by many, 18 producers met to share information and encouragement and established a formal organization in 1997.

"Mais, non!" cried the French. "It will not work! You cannot replicate the Rhone River Valley in America!"

"Mais, oui, monsieur!" comes the reply from today's connoisseurs and critics. These new American wines, they say, are now as good as any grown in the French valley. At the end, the article listed some of the best new wines, which are thought to be destined to replace the merlots in popularity.

"Very interesting," I thought. "Good old U.S. ingenuity and hard work prevail again." I decided I needed to know more. When I got home I went crawling through the Web. Rosenblum Cellars was the first stop. Owned by award-winning methodologist, Kent Rosenblum, one of the members of The Rhone Rangers, Rosenblum

Cellars has an extensive list of wines including one of the Rhone varietals with the interesting name of Chateau La Paws. That stopped me in my tracks. "It must be named after a dog," I thought. "Well, OK maybe a cat. There's definitely a story behind this label." Reading further, Chateau La Paws was listed as a Cote du Bone Roan.

The Cote du Rhone is the southern part of France's Rhone Valley. So, a Cote du Bone Rhone should be a wine from the southern part of that region of France. I know this is produced in Oakland so is this, well, a joke? Is it a play on words and sounds? I looked the up the bottle on the Web site. The label was covered with paw prints. There was a dog bone on the top of the seal. Vintners are usually so serious. This was so playful.

The description of Chateau La Paws was fascinating: "This is a very fresh, vibrant and exotic wine produced from Rhone style varietals. It exhibits dark cherries, violets and chocolate in the bouquet. With full-fledged flavors of blackberry and currants, with hints of earth tones and wild roses, in a word, this wine is juicy." Even if you aren't a wine aficionado, the description makes your mouth water. Chateau La Paws won the Double Gold Award at the 1999 Alameda County Fair. What kind of vintner, I wondered, is so whimsical on one hand and obviously so dedicated to his craft on the other? The mystery of the story of Chateau La Paws was too enticing, I had to know the story behind the label and find out about the paws.

My next trip to Oakland included an afternoon at Rosenblum Cellars. Located on the northern edge of the island of Alameda, between the old naval commissary and the ferryboat dock, about an hour and a half

south of Napa, it's not exactly the location you'd expect for an award-winning winery. It is, however, strategically located near the Peninsula Pet Hospital. That's very important to Kent Rosenblum, the owner and vintner of Rosenblum Cellars — and possibly the most expert zinfandel winemaker in California.

Rosenblum is blessed with an extraordinary palette. He can taste grapes or wines and enumerate and describe all their luscious fruity flavors. He knows what a wine is missing and what grapes to add to get the flavor he desires. Wine is his passion and he's built an extraordinary winery, but his first love is animals. Rosenblum is also, first and foremost, a practicing veterinarian. Except during the harvest, you'll find him caring for all manner of dogs, cats, reptiles and small animals almost every day at his veterinary practice. When that day is over, it's a short five-minute drive to the winery and his other passion.

The day I visited the tasting room Rosenblum was in Minneapolis at a special charity dinner to raise money for a pediatric center for his alma mater, the University of Minnesota. He took along some special wines that were auctioned off for the extraordinary sum of \$34,000. That was more than \$113 per bottle.

The tasting room manager, Nourredine Azouaou, greeted me. Another surprise was in store. Azouaou is also a veterinarian. He was born in Algiers, grew up in the Rhone Valley and met Rosenblum in veterinary school at University of California Davis where their passions for animals and wines brought them together. Azouaou also has two occupations, heading up the tasting room on weekends and working as a research veterinarian in San Francisco during the week.

Lining the tasting room walls are enough ribbons and awards to make you think you're at a dog show, plus photos of Rosenblum, Azouaou and everyone else who works there — and their dogs. One, in particular, shows Rosenblum and a beautiful golden retriever, Elliot. Once a constant companion of Rosenblum and practically an employee of the winery, Elliot attended all open houses with a special sign around his neck asking people not to feed him. Elliot has since passed on and other employee pets have taken over his duties at the winery. Marketing maven Carol Oredsen-Garbez often brings her dogs to work with her, as do many of the other 10 employees.

Last year Rosenblum Cellars produced almost 1200 cases of Chateau La Paws. Looking back, Rosenblum and Azouaou agree that naming a special wine Chateau La Paws in honor of all their faithful companions, was just a natural thing to do. And the Cote du Bone Rhone? Well, OK, they agree, maybe that was a little cheeky.

The mystery of the paws on this wine label turned out to be the story of a group of dedicated, passionate people who share their love for animals and their passion for wine.

Dog lovers — they're special people. *DB*

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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