



WALKING the line

The agitators behind the “In Pursuit of Balance” movement explain its brief but influential history – from a simple assemblage of favourite wineries to becoming a defining trendsetter in the Californian wine scene. By *Anne Krebiehl MW*



pinot noir & chardonnay

“extreme” Sonoma Coast where her father David pioneered growing Pinot Noir in what is now part of the Fort Ross AVA. Parr is group wine director for Michael Mina Restaurants and co-owner of Sandhi Wines and Domaine de la Côte in the Santa Rita Hills, specialising in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

All three wineries produce subtle, food-friendly wines, characterised by coastal California’s brilliant sunshine and brisk Pacific coolness. Such wines have found ready admirers in trendy American wine bars and restaurants, despite flying under the radar of the most influential wine critics who were still awarding the highest scores to the ripest, plushest wines. In some minds this was interpreted as Californian “terroir” when it was nothing more than a stylistic choice, even in warmer, less Pacifically-influenced regions. Those who made different styles produced and sold their wine in relative obscurity. In 2010 when the minds of Hirsch and Parr met, this was already changing. What was new, however, was that Hirsch and Parr went public and gave a name to something that was already happening, that could already be felt and tasted.

THE FIRST TASTING

Parr recalls: “In the beginning there was no movement, there was no manifesto. There was just me and Jasmine and we kept talking.” One evening, says Parr, they made a list of “Californian wines we look up to.” “The list was fairly short, of a

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Feature findings

- > Based on a manifesto laid down by Jasmine Hirsch and Rajat Parr in 2010, In Pursuit of Balance has gathered like-minded Chardonnay and Pinot Noir producers to become an influential movement on the Californian wine scene.
- > Their original aim was to host a tasting based on producers making “crunchy, high-acid, vibrant wines, more reminiscent of the Old World than what was happening in California.”
- > Membership of IPOB has since creased to 32 wineries, and includes both new and established names.
- > While media attention has been largely American, the rest of the world has started to take note.
- > There is currently reluctance to expand IPOB’s remit beyond Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

few friends who tried to make crunchy, high-acid, vibrant wines, more reminiscent of the Old World than what was happening in California,” he remembers, “so we said let’s do a tasting of our friends’ wines and let’s see what the discussion is all about. We never planned a movement, we just planned a simple tasting.” To cover the cost of space and glassware, they sold tickets to consumers to come after the trade event. “It was a simple tasting and the demand was crazy,” says Parr. This was the first San Francisco IPOB-tasting in 2011, showcasing the wines of 22 like-minded Californian wineries making Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Since then, the idea has evolved into a movement and ruffled quite a few feathers. Blog posts devoted the group draw endless controversial comments and press articles spark intense debate: a clear sign that IPOB has touched a nerve. Hirsch says: “IPOB symbolises some of the major changes that are going on in the industry. We are not >

WHO CREATES a “manifesto” in the early 21st century? Isn’t that rather an idealistic 19th century notion? Evidently not: Rajat Parr, San Francisco-based über-sommelier-cum-vigneron, and Jasmine Hirsch of the eponymous winery on the Sonoma Coast dreamed up the idea in 2010, wrote a manifesto and held their first tasting in 2011. Since then, this unintentional movement “In Pursuit of Balance”, or IPOB, has grown, gained momentum and drawn admiration and criticism in equal measure.

Both Hirsch and Parr are involved in the making and selling of wine: Hirsch sells and markets her family’s wines from the



What the sommeliers think

OLIVER MCSWINEY, KENSINGTON WINE ROOMS:

"What attracts me to the wines is their vitality; a quality new to me in Californian wines. Aromatics are clearer than before. On the palate they have brightness and verve, helped by good acid, clean fruit and digestible alcohol levels leaving the palate energised and ready for the next sip. For this reason, they work with a good range of foods too. Customer reaction has been very positive. They are in fact the perfect sellers."

LAYO PASKIN, THE PALOMAR:

"I visited several of the wineries and was taken with their approach and quality and wanted to have some on our list at The Palomar. So much comes down to the staff also understanding the qualities and conveying this. It becomes much easier when there is a strong narrative, which these wines all have. I think people are surprised but only because they have an expectation that is challenged by these wines. We are behind a movement that strives for quality."

MICHAEL SAGER-WILDE, MISSION:

"They are on par with wines I love drinking from any region in Europe. In comparison to music they are neither too high-pitched nor too bass-heavy, they simply strike the perfect balance between alcohol, fruit, length, acidity and body. I also like that in most cases I can drink more of it because they are lighter. Customers love the wines once they try them."

causing those changes, we are just one of the actors in this much bigger story. When you see James Laube attacking our organisation in *Wine Spectator* – that's fascinating. It wasn't intentional. I don't think Raj or I had really any idea that this was going to make such a big impact. I think a big part of it was timing and the calibre of the producers in the

group." Parr agrees: "We didn't do this to cause a stir or to hurt anyone. This is just for us to get better in what we do. We are not defying anybody else, fighting anybody else, it's not us against them. It's not about popular wines, it's about wines in a certain style made with a certain mind-set."

MEETING OF MINDS

Being a member today means being recognisable for producing a certain style of wine. By now membership has increased to 32 wineries who became accepted after their wines were blind-tasted by a panel in which neither Hirsch nor Parr have voting rights. Interestingly, these members are not just new, social-media savvy,

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négociant-style start-ups like Red Car or Lioco, they include Californian Pinot-royalty like Hanzell, Au Bon Climat and Littorai.

Jason Jardine, president of Hanzell, explains: "I believe at its core, IPOB members share a great deal of beliefs and ideals. This does not mean we all translate 'balance' in the same way, nor should we. I believe we are all striving for the same thing, to create wines of distinction that reflect some sort of place."

On top of this, Hirsch emphasises: "Jim Clendenen [Au Bon Climat], Ted Lemon [Littorai] and Josh Jensen [Calera] – when those guys get together people pay attention. The fact that these producers felt this was an important group to be part of and an important event to show up for really made the industry and the consumers pay attention." Jardine sees IPOB as an "opportunity to collaborate with our like-minded peers and learn from each other."

For Jamie Kutch of Kutch Wines, a much newer kid on the block and original IPOB member, being in the presence of such greats is "pretty incredible, sometimes you pinch yourself." He joined because "IPOB is a philosophy I believe in, much like people choose religion, I believe in the thoughts, ideas and the style of IPOB." This style for him includes "perhaps a little trace of a green flavour, or a bit more of a gritty tannin or a bit of a higher acidity." He talks about much more "nuances" in Californian wine which previously consisted mostly of bold, primary colours.

Clendenen's UK importer, Damian Carrington of Fields Morris & Verdin, says of IPOB: "The likes of Jim and others have always espoused a similar cause, it's a vindication to a certain extent; it underlines things we have long believed. Balance is obviously a key part of that."

While their own wines are showcased and therefore benefit from that publicity, Hirsch and Parr work on IPOB in their own time, without drawing salaries. Their critics accuse them of just being a marketing machine, but Hirsch is quick to defend: "I take pride in the fact that our organisation can have a positive economic benefit for our members. One of our

producers makes fewer than one thousand cases a year. When she decides to be a member and spend her very limited marketing dollars to attend our event, we need to make sure this has an impact for her. Unless people are buying and drinking it, our small wineries are not going to survive."

WORLD ON THEIR SIDE?

While most of the media attention has been American, the world has taken note. Hirsch is thrilled to relate that the Norwegian wine monopoly just published a tender stipulating IPOB membership as a prerequisite. "In Norway!" she exclaims. IPOB will visit Japan in 2015 and London in 2016. Some members were at a New Wave California tasting in London earlier this year, organised by specialist merchant Roberson. Senior buyer Mark Andrew reports that Californian sales have risen 300% year-on-year: "The market response has been fantastic," he says. "I think that's testament to the quality of the wines, they hit the zeitgeist perfectly."

While the wines "sell through steadily online and in store," says Andrew, sales are predominantly in the on-trade: "But that is to be expected to some extent, because sommeliers are typically the early adopters." Neither are the wines cheap, selling for between £15-£50 to the trade.

CALLS TO EXPAND

IPOB thus fits a niche of curious, mature, metropolitan markets. They are fine wines that re-define the way we see California. They challenge, question, evolve but ultimately just expand California's offering. Are there plans afoot to expand membership to producers of other varieties, too? "I guess we could do other things but that's not our field of expertise. We just don't know everything about everything so Pinot and Chardonnay is what we focus on," Parr answers cautiously.

Hirsch agrees: "It's very tempting and our members have asked us to expand.

IPOB members

Au Bon Climat
 Big Basin Vineyards
 Calera Wine Company
 Ceritas
 Chanin Wine Company
 Cobb Wines
 Copain Wine Cellars
 Domaine de la Côte
 Drew Family Cellars
 Failla
 Flowers Vineyard and Winery
 Hanzell Vineyards
 Hirsch Vineyards
 Knez Winery
 Kutch Wines
 LaRue Wines
 Lioco
 Liquid Farm
 Littorai Wines
 Lutum
 Matthiasson Family Vineyards
 Mindego Ridge
 Mount Eden Vineyards
 Native9 Wines
 The Ojai Vineyard
 Peay Vineyards
 Red Car
 Sandhi Wines
 Twomey Cellars
 Tyler Winery
 Varner
 Wenzlau Vineyard
 Wind Gap Wines

We've also been asked by a number of producers of Cabernet. We don't feel it's our place to speak of varieties that we are not engaged in the production of. But we do feel that the conversation, the questions and debate raised by IPOB are relevant for probably all varieties. One of the things that makes IPOB powerful is that we are focussed. It's only Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and California." In 2014 it's good to know that a manifesto can still make a difference. db