

{ scents and accountability }



by Deborah Parker Wong

# In Pursuit of Sensory Literacy

A TASTING AT **LA CREMA WINERY** TAKES AN UNCONVENTIONAL—AND EDUCATIONAL—APPROACH

**WHEN SONOMA'S** La Crema Winery turned 40 last year, it celebrated the milestone with a unique exercise: Led by Dr. Henry "Hoby" Wedler, it was easily one of my top sensory experiences of 2019. Wedler, who has been blind since birth, studied chemistry at the University of California, Davis, and now serves as Sensory Innovation Director at Senspoint, a consulting practice he co-founded with several partners.

A native of Petaluma, Wedler has long explored the geology of Sonoma County and has worked extensively with local clients in viticulture and winemaking—including Jackson Family Wines, which acquired La Crema from founder Rob Berglund in 1993.

After conducting a brief overview of the winery's history and the terroir-related factors that influence the quality and style of wines grown on the Sonoma Coast, Wedler led a small group of professional tasters through six Russian River Valley AVA wines made by La Crema winemaker Craig McAllister. While Wedler designed the experience to improve sensory literacy, he also described it as a "thought-provoking way of telling the story of a great growing region like the Sonoma Coast."

To begin, the 2017 Kelli Ann's Vineyard Chardonnay and the 2016 Bellflower Vineyard Pinot Noir were analyzed using all five senses. To help us connect aromas readily apparent in the wines with the aromas of microbial terroir from each

expression's respective vineyard, Wedler asked the group to moisten two vials containing soil samples with a small amount of water.

While the samples looked like they lacked organic matter, the water hydrolyzed microbes that in turn released distinct volatile-aroma compounds. The first vial held Cortina gravelly loam from Kelli Ann's Vineyard, which, in effect, is dried silt with clay-like aromas.

The second contained Goldridge fine sandy loam, a signature Russian River soil with ashy, volcanic, and petrichor aromas. (*Editor's note:* See Parker Wong's column on petrichor in the December 2019/January 2020 issue.) While it was richly scented, the Goldridge sample didn't smell of clay because the vineyard is further from the Russian River than Kelli Ann's. Not surprisingly, we found similar aromas in both wines and their respective soil types.

We were then asked to don eye masks and taste the remaining four expressions with Wedler's guidance. "[Humans] use eyesight to obtain 85–90% of the information we take in," he said. "By using blindfolds and aromatic samples and by smelling soil samples, we allow ourselves to see

wine in a very unique and positive way."

With that in mind, we began exploring a 2017 Chardonnay from Durell Vineyard—which predominantly comprises Los Robles gravelly clay loam—on the southern end of the valley. Using botanical ingredients, Wedler had created aroma samples modeled after the volatile-aroma compounds found in the soils and the wines; after being exposed to them, we were more readily able to identify aromas that were mirrored in the wine and the sample.

After we repeated the exercise with the 2016 Annapolis Shell Ridge Pinot Noir, 2018 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay, and 2017 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, Wedler summarized the key factors driving the differences between Pinot Noir grown in Burgundy with that of the Sonoma Coast: soil composition; Burgundy's cool continental climate and summer heat, which creates more floral aromas; the influence of fog on the Sonoma Coast, which results in slower ripening; and, lastly, the mineral content of the water in both regions. The final result of this informative tasting? A fulfillment of Wedler's aforementioned mission: improving our sensory literacy. *sj*



**Dr. Henry "Hoby" Wedler is the Sensory Innovation Director at consulting practice Senspoint.**

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