

[Print Page](#)

David Stoneberg photo Seven Stones winemaker Aaron Pott, left, and owner Ron Wornick talk over the dayâ€™s events beneath the 100,000-pound granite sculpture by Richard Deutsch that gives the St. Helena winery its name.

Museum-quality wine
Huge cabernet from tiny vineyards above St. Helena
By David Stoneberg
STAFF WRITER
Thursday, September 25, 2008 12:27 AM PDT

Winemaker Aaron Pott distinctly remembers the moment that he knew he wanted to be involved with wine. He was 10 years old and traveling through France with his parents. They had stopped at a Parisian café and the waiter asked him what he wanted to drink. After the youngster said milk, the waiter told him, "Milk is for babies" and brought him a glass of watered-down wine.

That was 30 years ago. During an Aug. 28 tour of the six small vineyards that he tends for Seven Stones, Pott told of his youthful experiments with yeast, grape juice and fermentation in the garage of his parents' home that were not necessarily successful and often messy.

The tour of the vineyards, about 800 well-tended, mostly cabernet sauvignon vines, grown in 1.78 acres, was during one of August's hot spells when it was 105 degrees.

In one of the vineyards, there was shade cloth protecting the grapes, because the vines were planted so the afternoon sun hits the grape clusters — not a good idea in the heat, hence the shade cloth. Drip irrigation

tubes were threaded through the vines and Pott said he had given water to the vines two days before the beginning of the heat spell, otherwise if he had waited, it would have been too late, because the plants would have shut down. When that happens, the grapes begin to dehydrate.

It is this kind of individual care that Pott brings to Seven Stones. These are small vineyards with relatively few vines and Pott can spend his time carefully tending each vine, rather than managing thousands of vines planted on many acres as he did when he was winemaker and general manager at Quintessa Estate. Pott, who consults for others including Quintessa, Bello Family Vineyards, Fisher Vineyards and Blackbird Vineyards, also makes his own wines with his wife Clare under the label Huis Clos Wines.

Purchased in 1995

The Seven Stones vineyards are part of a 45-acre parcel of land that was first owned by Bill Harlan, one of the developers of Meadowood Resort. It is above Meadowood and looks out over St. Helena. Ron and Anita Wornick bought it in 1995, after Ron retired from a distinguished business career.

Wornick said when he was a businessman, he wore a suit and was "never without a briefcase." He adds, "I ran around the world at a fantastic pace trying to do something." That something included owning a freeze-dried food company where he developed individual combat field rations — Meals, Ready to Eat, or MREs — for the U.S. Department of Defense. "We would ship a few rail cars every day," he said, "It was very hard work, very intense."

Today, he's shed the worldwide travel. More likely than not, he'll close the gates to his estate and not bother coming out.

For this interview, he was dressed in slacks and a short-sleeved dress shirt with deck shoes, but no socks. "I don't even have a suit and I never wear socks anymore," he said.

Wornick didn't need to start a winery: There are so many other things he'd rather do than become a businessman again. At age 76, he's involved in many things — collecting contemporary art, supporting hundreds of "quality of life" causes, and creating his own art through woodworking. He also likes just being on the property, where there are no demands and no responsibilities. "It's very easy to be passive, to be spiritual here. This house has a special sense of time, especially very early in the day and later in the day, when the shadows get longer."

A dozen years ago, after buying the property, Wornick said there were "some patches that needed landscaping." He hired Jim Barbour to plant vines, since "this is the Napa Valley, after all." After a few years, they made wine, just for fun and as a family exercise, from the grapes that were harvested.

The family started to drink the wine and it "sort of surprised us, even though it was not especially well-made wine," Wornick said. There was something significant about the wine, it grabbed your attention. At a dinner party about the same time, "people who we all know and completely respect" had the same thoughts about the wine. Wornick said he thought there may be something about the site, the terroir, that would allow him to create a good wine.

Wornick hired David Abreu, who was horrified at the winemaking, but "exceedingly positive on the potential of the site." He spent a couple of years redoing the vineyard, severely pruning the vines and by the 2005 crush, it became clear to Wornick "that we began to get wine that was unique to the site."

Abreu stayed through the 2006 crush, then Wornick hired John and Davie Pina, to manage the vineyard.

Best possible wine

"People will tell you I'm probably an obsessive kind of guy. I'm trying to get this (the making of wine on the property) as correct as possible. If we make wine here at all, we need to elevate it to the highest possible level," he said.

Wornick hired Pott in 2007 and he said the American- and French- trained winemaker "will make the wine very famous."

That prediction may come true. The 2005 Seven Stones Cabernet Sauvignon was released in early August

but not before the Wine Spectator's Jim Laube had tasted it blind and awarded it a 94 score. Wornick said the score and resulting blogs catapulted the wine into the stratosphere. When the wine was released, primarily through the winery's Web site and its mailing list, "there was a firestorm" and the wine available was sold in less than five hours.

"A major part of where we are is because of Aaron," Wornick said. Pott said he has tasted the 2007 wines in the barrel and declared them the "finest wine" he has ever tasted.

Pott said, "The vineyard has a variety of complex soil types, leading to wines with intense depth, breadth and complexity. Our viticulture is vine-by-vine; and in winemaking, no detail is too small to be overlooked. I think this estate has the capability of producing one of Napa's most expressive wines."

Wornick said in the business of making wine, the wine is fundamentally made in the vineyard.

Besides wine, Wornick adds his property is also about many things, including his contemporary art collection and being able to live with the collection on display and not in storage. "I believe there is a strong connection between the art and wine," he said.

"The object is to make museum-quality wine. You know when you've got it."

2005 Seven Stones Cabernet Sauvignon

236 cases produced

Harvested Sept. 30 to Oct. 19

90 percent cabernet sauvignon, 10 percent merlot

Cabernet from Thorevilos and Seven Stones vineyards

15.5 percent alcohol

Retail: Sold out at \$175

Info: www.sevenstoneswinery.com