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2008 California Wine Experience: Rising Stars Tasting

West Coast winemakers show off new projects and bottlings, giving audience a chance to taste exciting, small-production wines

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"I've got a lot of grey hair for a 'rising star'," laughed Seven Stones owner Ron Wornick, mocking his 70-plus years, as he looked at his fellow panelists. But the first-time commercial vintner needn't have worried. The 10 West Coast producers gathered by senior editor James Laube and editor at large Harvey Steiman for the Friday seminar were a diverse crew of retirees, marketing and engineering dropouts, and experienced winemakers with new projects. Their spot on the panel had nothing to do with their age, but had everything to do with their commitment to experimentation.

"We wanted to choose wines exciting to us," said Laube of the selection for the panel. "We both taste hundreds of wines every year." For Laube, this meant highlighting wines from Mendocino and Paso Robles, regions that are "underrepresented" in tastings. For Steiman, thrills come from the shock of the new. When he discovers a quality new label or project underneath the brown bag in his blind tastings, he said, "It gets my blood boiling a little more."

The wines were an eclectic grouping of reds from California, Oregon and Washington. Prices ranged from \$48 to \$175, while production levels maxed out at 550 cases. All 10, however, were newly realized projects, some only in their first or second vintages.

Two Oregon Pinot Noir veterans with new personal projects kicked off the tasting. Lynn Penner-Ash, former winemaker at Rex Hill, poured her [Penner-Ash Pinot Noir Willamette Valley Shea Vineyard 2006](#) (93 points, \$55, 350 cases made), while Rollin Soles, of [Argyle](#), served [Roco Pinot Noir Chehalem Mountains Private Stash 2006](#) (94, \$75, 150 cases made) from his new label, which he started bottling in 2003. Both were delicate reds with a touch of pepper and strong acidity. Soles noted that it was a relief to be talking about elegance in New World Pinot Noirs. "Twenty years ago, folks didn't want to know about a wine with elegance."

Larry Londer answered with a fuller-bodied, intense 2005 California Pinot Noir, the second vintage of his [Londer Pinot Noir Anderson Valley Londer Estate Grown](#) (92, \$54, 506 cases made). Londer, who bought 50 acres of land in Anderson Valley as a retirement project, regaled the crowd with stories of his city-slicker adventures in rural Anderson Valley.

Ziad Keirouz, engineering dropout-turned-winemaker, served his [ZanZibar Sandra Horse Heaven Hills 2005](#) (93, \$50, 425 cases made), a Cabernet-based blend from very low-yield vineyards in Washington. He explained how he bucked the



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Michael Hirby of Relic.

The audience got a different view of Washington from Hugh Shiels, longtime grapegrower of the renowned DuBrul vineyard in Yakima Valley, who recently started setting aside 20 percent of his grapes for his own projects. He shared his vision for what his vineyard can produce with the Côte Bonneville DuBrul Vineyard Yakima Valley 2005 (not yet rated, \$120), a blend of Cabernet and Merlot that has a vibrant character with juicy acidity.

Winemaker Michael Hirby began production of the Relic label in 2002 with the intent to experiment with grapes from risky sites. His offering, the Relic Syrah Mendocino County Alder Springs Vineyard 2006 (90, \$54, 165 cases made), from a high-altitude vineyard, is a blend of two different vinifications, one involving traditional foot-stomping and the other modern techniques. The result is a Syrah full of pepper and spice.

Rounding out the tasting were three up-and-coming vintners, whom Laube described as part of the "youth movement," defined by their "leadership and vision." Justin Smith, formerly of Linne Calodo, now winemaker-owner of Saxum, poured his dense, concentrated Saxum Booker Vineyard Paso Robles 2005 (95, \$55, 350 cases made), the first vintage for this particular Syrah-Grenache blend, one of many in his stable of Rhône-style blends.

idea of blending trials, just throwing whatever he got into the mix, which "is probably heresy in some circles." The result, however, was a balanced wine with notes of dark fruit.

The elder statesman on the panel presented his Napa Cabernet between the two Washington Cabs. Wornick described his transition into winemaking as "serendipitous." He bought a Napa vineyard from Bill Harlan as part of a retirement program to "stay out of mischief." His original intent was not to make a commercial wine, but "the grapes kept waving [at him]." After a soil analysis revealed his land to be ideal for Napa Cabernet, he started working on his own cuvée with the help of winemaker Aaron Pott. His 2005 Seven Stones Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (94, \$175, 236 cases made), the first for the label, is graceful, with a supple texture that Laube said is rare in Napa Cabernets this young.



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Top row (from left): Senior editor James Laube; Larry Londer; editor at large Harvey Steiman; Rollin Soles, Roco. Middle row: Michael Hirby, Relic; Ziad Keriouz, ZanZibar; Chris Gorman; Lynn Penner-Ash. Bottom row: Justin Smith, Saxum; Matt Trevisan, Linne Calodo; Ron Wornick, Seven Stones; Hugh Shiels, Côte Bonneville.

Washington winemaker Chris Gorman served up what Steiman called a "rock-star wine." The Gorman Syrah-Cabernet Red Mountain The Evil Twin 2005 (95, \$55, 250 cases made), a blend of 75 percent Syrah and 25 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, is sourced from Red Mountain in Yakima, which Gorman said he chose because its grapes



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Justin Smith of Saxum, Chris Gorman of Gorman and Matt Trevisan of Linne Calodo.

show "massive structure."

Linne Calodo winemaker-owner Matt Trevisan, in describing the creation of his Zinfandel-based Linne Calodo Problem Child Paso Robles 2006, had the crowd laughing: "Everyone knows a problem child. Some people have them. Some people are them." This wine, Trevisan explained, began as one, as he underwent trials of picking grapes at the wrong time and blending experiments seemingly gone awry. But the result, a bold unique wine with notes of blueberry and pepper, affirmed his commitment to the mad scientist approach to winemaking. "I am a blender," he explained.

Laube, swirling his glass, proclaimed: "I think this is the future of Zinfandel—and of California." Steiman, looking down the line of panelists, expanded on those sentiments to wrap up the segment: "These are all great wines."

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