

## Proof in the bottle: Local winemaker's premiere releases win praise

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Megan McGrath may owe her foray into the world of winemaking to her nose. "Walking past a chardonnay fermentation was my single, pivotal moment," she told me during a recent chat inside the Lucas & Lewellen tasting room in downtown Solvang. "The smell was divine."

McGrath is a soil scientist by profession and, just five years ago, was making a name for herself analyzing soils for future vineyards in northern California; the information she helped gather would be used by viticulturalists to decide what wine grapes to plant, which root stocks to use and in which direction the vines should be placed in the ground. The ultimate goal: to promote better quality grapes and, subsequently, better quality wine. McGrath's ability to scrutinize and evaluate landscape still comes in handy, even after that auspicious stroll by a batch of fermenting Sonoma Coast chardonnay fruit that led her to shift careers. It gives this young winemaker a greater appreciation of terroir. "It's not only the soil, but the time that it took for the soil to become that way, the climate, your plant material, the people involved," McGrath tells me. "All those things together are your terroir."

As we chat, I'm sipping on the 2007 Lucas & Lewellen chardonnay, one of the very first wines McGrath made after she took over the winemaking program at the long-standing winery two years ago. It is still young, yet made from older vines, leading to a delicious wine whose soft richness and subtly resinous quality is balanced by clean minerality and bright flavors. "After secondary fermentation, I put it in barrel and let it go," she tells me of her hands-off approach to making chardonnay, a wine whose persnickety nature often tempts a winemaker to be cautiously hands-on during the fermentation process. "I'm not heavy-handed, which takes a bit of faith and guts. I trust the fruit. It's more of a labor of love."

McGrath's own roots are especially local. A descendant of the storied Olivas family of Ventura County, she attended Midland School on Figueroa Mountain Road. It was a very positive boarding school experience, where the exposure, at age 14, to advanced courses in geology, physics and math no doubt were the foundation for her career to come. During her college years at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, she apprenticed as a soil analyst for vineyards-to-be in the Edna Valley, Peachy Canyon and Atascadero.

The subsequent move to Northern California would be a sacrifice ("I have lots of family in Ventura, Ojai and Oxnard, and my identical twin sister lives in Pasadena," she says), although one diminished by "the allure of the European lifestyle," as she puts it. "The wine, the Redwoods, the trains."

Once up north, she honed her soil-mapping skills through private consulting. She would go on to work for three years at famed Flowers Winery. And she would then be hired by Cahill Winery near Sebastopol, a custom crush facility catering to myriad private label projects and an often-lucrative clientele. "I did everything from fermenting an 85-ton lot of cabernet to a 4-ton lot of organic pinot noir," McGrath recalls.



**Winemaker Megan McGrath Gates, Owner Royce Lewellen, and author Gabe Saglie at the Lucas & Lewellen Winery**

When, four years after her move, she felt the need to "come home," she found Lucas & Lewellen Winery's call for winemaker r sum s online. "I fell in love with their program," she says. "I loved the fact they were all estate and the fact they were in Solvang, of course. It was the only place I applied." What followed was a rigorous three-tiered interview process that involved a multitude of candidates. "Ultimately, for me, it was just meant to be," McGrath says. "Some things are just like that."

McGrath's own aptitude for all things "soil" is echoed by her new boss, Louie Lucas. His family's been growing table grapes in California for generations, and his personal venture into wine grapes in the Central Coast in the late '60s makes him a bona fide local pioneer. With business partner (and highly respected retired judge) Royce Lewellen, he's built a wine business that thrives on self-nourishment. They grow well over two dozen grape varieties throughout Santa Barbara County and use their own grapes to make their own wines. Estate wine, personified. Most everything is done in-house. And that, McGrath says, is the key to everything from prioritizing quality ("we treat each lot as its own artisan product," she asserts) to keeping prices affordable. The 2007 Santa Barbara County pinot noir we're sipping now -- the only red wine from the '07 vintage currently released and a bouncy blend with wonderful layers of fruit and earth -- retails for \$20.

"We crush 250 tons of pinot noir," McGrath tells me. "If you were to purchase that from a grape grower, they'd most likely deliver it in big lots. Thirty or 50 tons. And they would not want to separate out specific lots of 2 tons here or 8 tons there. On the other hand, we keep every little lot separate. Louie will pick just the sunny side of the vine, and that'll be one lot. And then he'll go back and pick the shady side, and only in a few days when he believes it's ripe. So talk about customizing."

As winemaker, McGrath oversees production for three labels: Lucas & Lewellen, with a focus on French grapes; Mandolina, an Italian-inspired label with its own tasting room along Copenhagen Drive; and Queen of Hearts, a venture where value (and prices close to \$10 a bottle) reigns supreme. Her job also has wonderful international requisites. McGrath has made trips to Italy, for example, to visit boutique cooperages (where they take French oak but toast it in a special, proprietary way just for Italian winemakers," she touts) and to buy numerous barrels for Lucas & Lewellen. She's also excited about the winery's newest foray into Scandinavia; we later make our way to their Buellton winery and warehouse, where several cases of the 2007 Lucas & Lewellen chenin blanc (a crisp, spicy wine with a ripe mouthfeel and flavors that remind me of pears and tangerines) are being packaged for exportation to Sweden, where the wine will make its first-ever appearance on shelves this May.

The bulk of the red wines from McGrath's premiere vintage (2007) are still a way off from making their debut. Most will be put in bottle in the next two months and aged there for about six more months before being released late this year and early in 2010. Before then, though, the 2008 whites (which need far less maturity to be enjoyed to their fullest) will hit shelves, some as early as next month, including a dry, exotic gewurztraminer.

And in vintages to come, the newly married McGrath (she met her husband at a hip-hop class) is especially excited about nebbiolo, a food-friendly wine that's a tasty mix of fruit, spice and tannin. "There are only 115 acres of it being grown in the whole state, and we have 14," she says to me with a big smile. "It's one of the most illustrious grapes in all of Italy, so to be able to have it here is a triumph."

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