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F O O D & W I N E

## Given hands-off treatment, Aiena wines stand on their own

By MARY BROWNFIELD

HE RUNS a successful ad agency, but Carmel resident Lou Sena also knows the secret of making fine wine.

"I learned from my communications business to just leave them alone," Sena said of his winemaker and grape grower.

His winery is called Aiena, and Sena may be the ideal boss for an operation that is based on art as much as science.

Steve McIntyre supervises the growing of the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes used in Aiena's wines, and Byron Kosuge crafts them. And Sena lets them do their thing.

To illustrate the point, Sena said that recently Kosuge asked him if he wanted to taste the 2009 wine, which is still in barrels, "and I said, 'No, just tell me when it's ready.'"

Sena's day job is president of SenaReider, a three-decade-old firm with offices in Monterey and San Francisco that has represented some of the wine industry's biggest players — Constellation, Penfolds, Mondavi and the like. The years he spent working with the people behind those operations led him to dream of having a winery of his own.

Sena realized he didn't have to go big in order to succeed.

"As successful as these wineries are, they can't make really small production wines, because it's not profitable, and it's not in their DNA," he said. "But if I want to introduce a new wine and go up against Constellation, I can do that, even with only 300 cases."

His debut had a somewhat rocky start. In 2005, a produce-growing SenaReider client proposed buying some Monterey County

vineyards and making Sena managing partner. Sena teamed up with McIntyre, who owned and tended several vineyards in the Santa Lucia Highlands and elsewhere in the Salinas Valley, and Kosuge, who made wines for McIntyre, Miura and his own B Kosuge label. But the market was competitive, and a neighboring vineyard owner outbid them after hearing a sale was imminent.

"So we spent the next three years looking," Sena said. When they finally found land, Sena and his produce partner decided to share production costs 50/50, but complications over licensing necessitated Sena's buying out the other guy.

"And that's how my wife and I ended up in the wine business," he said.

Naming the wine also presented an unexpected challenge. The first name, Foghorn, came from Sena's lifelong love of the ocean. He released the 2005 and 2006 wines under the label — but then Old Foghorn beer protested.

Rather than fight about the trademark, Sena decided to rename his wines after his Italian grandmother, Mary Aiena Sena. On each bottle, a line of text below the name reads, "The hands are the tools of the heart," which was one of her grandmother's inspirational lessons, even as she grew blind near the end of her life.

"I feel so blessed to be able to honor her," Sena said.

### Let it be

Aiena recently released its 2007 vintage: 325 cases of McIntyre Vineyard Chardonnay, 340 cases of McIntyre Vineyard Pinot Noir and 520 cases of Monterey County Pinot Noir.

The well balanced Chardonnay exhibits bright fruit, rich notes of toast and butter, and a fair bit of acidity.

Kosuge, who made his first Chardonnays for Napa's Saintsbury in the late 1980s, said his wines "always seem to be livelier, more fruit driven, and, to use a cliché, more elegant than powerful."

The Pinot from McIntyre Vineyard is voluptuous and rich with fruit, but not jammy, with distinctive floral notes, while the Monterey County Pinot, which combines fruit harvested from the Mission and Silacci vineyards at different ends of the valley, is more rustic and ripe, with black cherry elements.

And soon, an estate wine will be added to the lineup, as Sena's eight acres will be ready for their first harvest this year.

Sena is proud to see Aiena on lists at prominent venues, including the private golf clubs at Cypress Point, Tehama and Santa Lucia Preserve; Mundaka, Casanova and Christopher's in Carmel; Bistro Moulin in Monterey; Ventana, Deetjen's and Sierra Mar in Big Sur; La Mar and Waterbar in San Francisco; and the Ritz Carlton in Half Moon Bay.

"We're honored to be in the best restaurants," he said.

Local shops carrying Sena's wines



PHOTO/COURTESY LOU SENA

Lou and Kristin Sena, owners of Aiena wines.

include Nielsen Bros. Market and the Cheese Shop in Carmel, and Star Market in Salinas.

