



The Sonoma County
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FREE

RENAISSANCE DUDE
Random Ridge's
surfer/poet/vintner p13

AGAINST THE GRAIN
Carol Setterlund's
wood sculptures p17

AIN'T IT GRAND?
Greg Sarris' saga
comes to HBO p20

COMPLETE
**ARTS &
ENTERTAINMENT
COVERAGE**
MOVIES • MUSIC • THEATER • BOOKS

**Al Liner has a plan
to revolutionize state
politics. Why isn't
anyone listening? p10**

Third Party Blues



Veeder mountain high: *Random Ridge Vineyards owner Bill Hawley surveys his domain.*

Surf and Turf

Poet/surfer/vintner Bill Hawley carves out a niche By David Templeton

WITH LONG, QUICK strides, Bill Hawley leads a visitor up to the vast, rambling farmhouse that he built—in full appreciation of the romance of it all—with his very own hands. To the left of the house, which was constructed from reclaimed (read: used) lumber, is a wide path that leads around to the back, and then down into the vineyard.

“Watch out for rattlesnakes,” he warns, adding, “I kind of like them. They don’t eat grapes and they keep away the animals that do.”

This is Random Ridge Vineyards, the whimsically titled wonderland located 3,200 feet above the Sonoma Valley, atop the craggy volcanic eminence of Mt. Veeder. It is here that Hawley, a native of Southern California, sometime poet (in the Gary Snyder vein of nature-inspired verse), and a rabid enthusiast of surfing, established himself, along with his lawyer wife Susan, in the late 1970s. Settling in, the pair cleared several

acres to make room for Hawley’s slowly fermenting vision: the creation of an independent wine-making business producing unique, world-class wines that would capture the muscular essence of all that is Mt. Veeder.

Today, by all accounts, Hawley has done just that. Producing no more than 1,000 cases of wine per year, Random Ridge has charmed its way to the forefront of an expanding number of small “boutique” wineries. Priced in the middle to high range (\$12 to \$30 per bottle), Hawley’s product is in great demand, as much for its character and flavor as for its understandable scarcity.

“They are all handcrafted, all wonderful wines across the board,” gushes wine consultant Les Ferguson of Traverso’s Gourmet Food & Wines in Santa Rosa. “All of the Random Ridge offerings are just exceptional. The red table wine is as good they get. It’s ready to drink now, and it ages wonderfully.”

Handcrafted wines

It is a charming, homey little phrase that is dangerously close to becoming an industry cliché, yet in Hawley’s case, the description “handcrafted wines” is completely apropos. He tends his own crop, with only one hired hand and the occasional conscription of his two sons. He also farms other small-scale vineyards, thanks to a variety of handshake deals that give him use of his neighbors’ grapes. The grapes are sent down the mountain to Peter and John Wellington, who operate a small winery in Glen Ellen, and with whom Hawley has been collaborating since 1981, when they began bottling wines under the Random Ridge label.

And speaking of that label, the handcrafted category has no handier or craftier a label than the wildly enchanting, look-Ma-I-can-draw-type

Continued on next page

Vintner

Continued from preceding page

badges that are affixed to each bottle of Random Ridge wine. The "Old Wave" zinfandel features a chimerical cork riding a surfboard, a reference to Hawley's lifelong, wave-riding hobby. The Random Ridge Red Table Wine is a hallucinogenic montage of tiny images: dangling horseshoes, hat-waving buckaroos, and, of course, surfboards. The sangiovese label is even less fancy: two bravely drawn wine glasses, exchanging a wave of multicolored drips, and nothing else."

We are inside the house now. A light-filled, multiwindowed beauty, Hawley's home is eccentrically designed, its wraparound lofts and creative use of space the result of working with whatever materials were available at the time.

"My first career was in construction," he says, explaining his house-building know-how. "After I bought this property, I was working at different wineries in the valley. I'd started collecting reclaimed lumber and windows and stuff. Whenever I thought I had enough to work with, a contractor buddy and I would take a look at my pile and figure out what to do with it. We'd build on the house until I ran out of material, and then I'd start collecting again."

Since his home is too far away from town for the county to provide electricity, Hawley powers it with solar-powered roof panels and a number of generators. Leading the way through the house, he points out his collection of surfboards—several rooms worth—ingeniously stored on the ceiling, where they fit nicely between rafters. The walls are adorned with paintings, photographs, and framed poems from writers the Hawleys respect.

Bill Hawley's own writings, most of which he has self-published in low-volume quantities throughout the years, stand in a place of honor beside other poets' works.

A brief peek into the bathroom reveals Hawley's enthusiasm for old-fashioned sinks and fixtures. "I have kind of a sink fetish," he admits with a grin. "I have antique sinks all over the place."

He's a hard one to describe, this Bill Hawley. Vintner-poet-surfer-builder-farmer-father-husband-sink fetishist. One description he does not appreciate is the word *eccentric*.

"I don't think of myself as eccentric at all," he shrugs. "I prefer 'rugged individualist.'"

But a term that he *will* allow to be applied to himself is the word *lucky*. "I am lucky," he states gratefully. "I wouldn't say that I'm fully content. I don't know if I ever will be. But it's certainly a good life I've got. I don't know how I could live any other way."

He gazes out the window, a sweeping view of his vineyards and all the tree-filled vastness of the mountain beyond. "If I ever had to go get a real job again, I'm sure I could do it," he says. "But I'd be pretty bummed." ■