



The Steven Kent Winery tasting room (left) is situated near the La Rochelle tasting room (center) in Livermore. Steven Kent Mirassou sources fruit

Winery Within a Winery Within...

How two historic families cooperate in California's Livermore Valley

By Tim Patterson

Highlights

- The Steven Kent and La Rochelle alternating proprietorships at Wente Vineyards in Livermore, Calif., show the advantages and limitations of this winery model.
- The two brands use Wente's small-lot winery to make mostly Bordeaux-variety wines for Steven Kent and mostly Pinot Noir for La Rochelle.
- Combining plastic-lined plywood fermentors with top-notch barrels and advanced lab equipment produces wines that mostly sell directly to consumers at prices averaging from \$50 to \$65 per bottle.

A lot of wine in California and across the United States is made through alternating proprietor (AP) arrangements—"tenant" wineries renting space and equipment from larger operations. Especially with the proliferation of custom-crush facilities in recent years, APs have multiplied like rabbits; they now make up roughly half of California wine labels, though they account for a much smaller share of wine volume. Often, the holder of an AP license is a former home winemaker with dreams of making the big time, pursuing his or her dreams out of an 8-by-10-foot wire-framed cage inside a generic warehouse shared by 50 other brands.

This one is a little different. Between them, Steven Kent Winery and La Rochelle Winery put out about 9,000 cases of wine—most of it selling for

between \$35 and \$75 per bottle—and distribute it in several states. Their AP is not just a winery within a winery, but more like one of those Russian nesting dolls: a winery (really, two wineries) within a specialized small-lot facility that is, in turn, part of a much bigger winery operation. What's most unusual, though, is that this venture unites two historic, pioneering families in California wine: the sixth generation of the Mirassous (through winemaker Steven Kent Mirassou) and the Wentes (currently on their fourth and fifth generations.)

Even with such stellar family credentials, the Kent/La Rochelle AP is a good example of the advantages and limitations of this winery model, one that's becoming more common every day. In a nutshell, La Rochelle winemaker Tom Stutz puts it this way: "The advantage of alternating proprietorship is that



from Ghilmetti Vineyard (right) and is partners with the Ghilmettis.



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STEVEN KENT WINERY, LA ROCHELLE WINERY

5443 Tesla Road, Livermore, CA 94550 • (925) 243-6440 • stevenkent.com; Irwine.com

Year Bonded (in current form): 2005 • Winery AVA: Livermore Valley • Winemakers: Claude Bobba, Tom Stutz

Owners: Steven Kent Mirassou and the Ghielmetti family, alternating proprietors at the Wente Small-Lot Winery

Varietals	Primarily Cabernet Sauvignon for Steven Kent, Pinot Noir for La Rochelle, and many others
Vineyard Sources	Estate vineyards in Livermore; purchase fruit from Monterey, Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Santa Cruz counties
DtC Sales	75%-80%
Tasting Room	Each label has a public tasting room at 5443 Tesla Road
Special Events	Release parties, wine club events



Steven Kent Mirassou

Steven Kent Winery vs. Other Wineries		
	\$ \$ \$ Average Bottle Price	☐ ☐ ☐ Average Case Production
Steven Kent LLC	\$20-\$125	9,000
Alameda County	\$28	12,000
California	\$37	79,000
United States	\$27	43,000

Bottle prices averaged across categories, based on one price per winery. WinesVinesDATA

	What	Details & Supplier
Winery Equipment	Destemmer-Crusher	Puleo Vega 10, Carlsen & Associates, carlsenassociates.com
	Fermentation Bins	1.5- to 1.7-ton plastic-lined plywood cubes, Kings Canyon Wood Products, kingscanyonwood.com
	Press	Bucher RPL52, Bucher Vaslin North America, bvnorthamerica.com
	Barrels	For Pinot Noir: Billon, Cadus, Damy from Bouchard Cooperages, bouchardcooperages.com ; François Frères from Mel Knox Barrel Broker, knoxbarrels.com ; Nadalié, nadalié.com ; Radoux, tonnellerieradoux.com ; Tonnellerie Remond, (707) 935-2176
	Barrel storage	For Cabernet Sauvignon and other reds: Taransaud, Mel Knox Barrel Broker, knoxbarrels.com ; François Frères from Mel Knox Barrel Broker, knoxbarrels.com ; Le Grand, mlegrand.com/en ; Canton Cooperage, cantoncooperage.com ; Trust/Demptos (Hungarian oak), Demptos Napa Cooperage, demptosusa.com ; Trust International Corp., barrelmakers.com
	Filtration	Almost never used
	Bottling Line	Wente in-house designed equipment, with the addition of a Bertolaso VB40 for Stelvin capping, Collopack Solutions, collopack.com
Winemaking Products	Yeast	Lallemmand, lallemand.com ; Laffort, laffort.com ; Chr. Hansen, chr-hansen.com
	Oak Products	Innerstave, innerstave.com (for fermentation)
	Malolactic Bacteria	Chr. Hansen, chr-hansen.com
	Nutrients	Rarely used, DAP in a pinch
	Enzymes	Not used
	Fining Agents	Not used



Fermentation bin

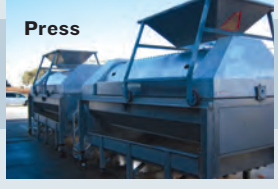
Inside of bin



Portable tank

	What	Details & Supplier
Facilities	Winery Facility	Wente Small-Lot Winery, converted by Wente staff from existing space in 2002
	Steven Kent Tasting Room	Built in 1888, remodeled 1996-98, local contractor Winnie Construction
	La Rochelle Tasting Room	Modular construction in 1996 for Ivan Tamas, taken over by La Rochelle 2003, repeated upgrades

	What	Details & Supplier
Packaging	Bottles	Encore Glass, encoreglass.com ; Saverglass, saverglass.com
	Label Design	The Agency Orange, theagencyorange.com
	Label Printing	Landmark Label, landmarklabel.com
	Closures	Natural cork from Ganau America, ganauamerica.com ; Stelvin screwcaps, Amcor Flexibles American Canyon, amcor.com
	Capsules	Ramondin, ramondin.com
Winery Services	Vineyard Management	Wente vineyard management (for Livermore estate vineyards)
	Crushing, Pressing, Bottling, Cellar Routines	Wente Small-Lot Winery staff
	Laboratory Services	Wente Vineyards lab
	Web Design	The Agency Orange, theagencyorange.com
	Compliance	Colleen O'Neal
	Banking	Wells Fargo, wellsfargo.com
	Public Relations	Done in-house
	Wine Club	Handled by staff
	Shipping	California Wine Transport, San Jose, californiawinetransport.com
	Case Goods Storage	Some at Wente warehouse; some at Pacific Wine Distributors, pacificwinedistributors.com
Distribution	Direct distribution in California by staff; Ohio, Superior Beverage Group, superiorbeveragegroup.com ; Illinois, Vine-O Distributors; Florida, Republic National Distributing Co., rncd-usa.com	
Inventory Management	AMS software, ams-software.com	



Press

you're not buying all the equipment; the disadvantage is that it isn't always the equipment you'd want."

Complex arrangements

Unlike the classic, almost mythic winery model—family buys vineyards, builds a winery, then makes and sells wine—this one has a lot more moving parts. The families, of course, knew each other forever. In 1984, Mirassou's father, also named Steven, left the Mirassou company to pursue a negociant label with winemaker Ivan Tamas Fuezy, and by 1995 the Wentes persuaded them to move the Ivan Tamas operation to the Livermore Valley. The Wentes eventually became partners in the brand, then full owners, and the name changed to Tamas Estates.

Along the way, the Steven Kent brand was launched with a Cabernet Sauvignon focus, and in 2005, Steven Kent Mirassou and his new grower-partners, the Ghielmetti family, took full ownership of Steven Kent. The same year, Mirassou purchased the Pinot Noir-focused La Rochelle brand from some of his Mirassou cousins and moved it from Monterey to Livermore, bringing along winemaker Tom Stutz. After many forms of financial linkage, the Mirassou-Wente connection is now quite simple: Steven Kent Mirassou and his brands have their own winery bond and pay to make wine in a Wente facility.

Mirassou has kept and will continue to keep the Steven Kent and La Rochelle brands separate, since they focus on different grape varieties, have different vineyard sources, draw on different growing regions, have different winemakers and require different sensibilities. In fact, Mirassou recently added a single-wine label, Lineage, for a proprietary red Bordeaux blend. All three labels are housed under the Steven Kent LLC, representing the partnership between Mirassou and the Ghielmettis.

The Steven Kent wines are sourced from the Livermore Valley, primarily from two estate vineyards—the Home Ranch, near Wente Vineyards and the Steven Kent tasting room, and the Ghielmetti Vineyard, a few miles away. Some additional grapes are bought from growers in the valley. Vineyard management at the estate vineyards is done by Wente's vineyard management arm, but Mirassou calls the picking dates and stays in constant communication with vineyard manager Bryan Anthony to discuss viticultural questions.

Since Livermore is not known as Pinot country, the fruit for La Rochelle

is all purchased from a collection of vineyards in the Anderson Valley, Russian River, Carneros, Green Valley, the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Santa Lucia Highlands. La Rochelle has used as many as 15 vineyards in a single vintage; for 2011, the number was eight. Vineyard purchases are relatively small lots for the single-vineyard program, which typically releases 125- to 150-case bottlings.

Cellar strategies

Wente created the Small-Lot Winery in 2002, largely by conversion of existing win-

ery space and relying primarily on in-house Wente resources for design, engineering and construction. The principal reason for the project was to have a dedicated facility for a new, higher tier of small-production Wente wines including the Nth degree bottlings, but the facility was also designed to accommodate small-scale, ultra-premium winemaking for other Wente Family Estates and AP labels. The facility covers 33,000 square feet and produces 20,000-25,000 cases per year under the Wente, Murrieta's Well, Tamas Estates and Steven Kent/La Rochelle labels. Mirassou and his partners pay



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Wente for crush, laboratory, barrel storage and bottling services in what Mirassou says boils down to a per-case cost.

The Steven Kent wines are made by Claude Bobba, the Wente winemaker for the small-lot program, using protocols suggested by Mirassou. The La Rochelle wines are made by Tom Stutz, whose experience and winemaking style have an impact on both labels.

For the several Pinot Noir lots, processing begins with half-ton bins being dumped into a hopper, which drops them onto a sorting line conveyor built

by Wente staff. The fruit then goes into a Puleo Vega 10 destemmer-crusher. From there, the crushed fruit is pumped into waiting fermentation bins. This initial processing step is one that, in a perfect world, Stutz might do a little differently—with a destemmer-crusher that would leave more whole berries, and with the machinery elevated so that fruit would simply be dropped into bins below, not pumped, which beats up the fruit more than Stutz would like.

The bins themselves are something Stutz brought to the operation. Each



Steven Kent and La Rochelle use wood boxes with plastic liners for primary fermentation. The boxes hold 1.5 to 1.7 tons and can be moved and stacked with forklifts.

has a plastic liner inside a plywood cube frame, holding 1.5 to 1.7 tons, purchased from Kings Canyon Wood Products. The bins were originally designed for nut harvests but have been adopted by several wineries. The plastic liners are perfectly inert, and the wooden frames radiate out some of the fermentation heat, helping keep temperatures down in range. After they were put to work for La Rochelle, the bins were adopted for the Steven Kent label, which had been doing stainless tank fermentations, and soon Wente made the same move for its small-lot wines.

The bins are forklifted inside the winery and into the facility's cold room, which is both very cold (close to freezing temperature) and very, very large, with plenty of room to move everyone's wine around. Overnight, the grape temperature drops down into the 45°F range. On the second day, the basic wine chemistry gets checked, and the bins get moved out into the general fermentation area. No initial sulfur is added, unless the fruit is highly problematic. La Rochelle uses no extractive enzymes, although, Stutz does use ColorPro from Scott Labs on some Chardonnay—not for color, but because, as a side effect, it

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keeps foaming down. All the Pinot bins get an addition of oak chips—Custom Cooperage wood from Innerstave, which Stutz says helps with green tannins and pyrazine character, covering it up if not actually removing it.

Wild and commercial yeasts compete

Rehydrated commercial yeast is layered on top of the bins but not mixed in, allowing any yeasts brought in from the vineyard to do their work down lower in the bin. Stutz thinks the wild yeasts are more suited to cooler temperatures, so they have a few days to perform before the *Saccharomyces* on top goes into high gear.

Yeast strains include RC-212, Montrachet, Fermirouge, L2056 and Zymaflore RB2. Strains are matched with characteristics of the fruit from the various vineyards, and when quantities permit, multiple bins are inoculated with multiple yeasts in hopes of layering more complexity. Yeast nutrients are only added when fermentations smell of sluggishness or with certain strains that have proven to have high nutritional requirements. In general, Stutz avoids adding nutrients so that by the time the fermentation is complete, the wine is a “nutrient desert”

with no fuel left for spoilage organisms.

Punch downs begin four or five days after the top-only yeast additions, and fermentation temperatures rise to about 85°F. If a certain bin needs to be cooled down, a glycol cooling plate can be lowered into the must to bring it down. The alcoholic fermentations are generally completed within a week after punch downs start. Stutz and Mirassou let the wine sit, without a gas blanket, and taste each bin every day as it continues to develop texture, length, and depth. Pressing may only occur when the cap falls, or even some days later. When Stutz and Mirassou started producing La Rochelle in this facility, standard practice was to press everything at zero Brix; La Rochelle’s bin-by-bin approach has changed that framework.

With no sulfur at the crusher and no gas during the somewhat extended maceration, the grapes and wine are somewhat exposed, but spoilage has never been a problem. “We do keep the animal life out of the bins,” Stutz jokes, “but sometimes I consider the La Rochelle style of winemaking a major act of faith.”

Since the grapes have been through both a cold soak and some post-fermentation

maceration, a light pressing is all that’s required. Free run and press fractions are combined, and the wines go to barrel and are inoculated with *Viniflora* malolactic culture. Again, no special nutrients are added. Malolactic fermentations take their time, sometimes into February. Once the malo is complete, barrels get their first taste of sulfur, a 50-ppm addition. At this point the barrels from a particular lot are racked into a tank, blended together and racked back into barrels.

Barrels come from a number of suppliers: Billon, Cadus and Damy barrels from the Bouchard Cooperages, François Frères, Nadalié, Radoux and Remond. Like yeast strains, barrel sources are matched with vineyards, and a mix of barrels—like the multiple yeast strains, aims for complexity. A small amount of American oak in hybrid barrels—Appalachian oak staves, French oak heads—from Radoux and Nadalié is used for Pinot Meunier and one Pinot Noir vineyard. La Rochelle’s Pinot Noirs get between 30% and 50% new oak and are aged 16 to 20 months. The wines aren’t fined or filtered before bottling, though if a particular barrel has problems, Stutz may choose to filter.

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Tom Stutz, left, winemaker at La Rochelle and Steven Kent Mirassou, of La Rochelle and Steven Kent wineries, pull a sample from a barrel at Wente Vineyards, where they make their wine.

Kent Cabernet


The Steven Kent wines are made in a similar fashion. Wente small-lot winemaker Claude Bobba oversees the wines, working closely with Mirassou on the protocols. And while

the winemaking for the two brands is purposely kept separate, Stutz's Pinot paradigm has had an influence on the Kent Cabernets. Up until 2009, the Cabernets were all tank fermented, but since then, the fermenta-

tions have been conducted much like the Pinot program: the same bins (literally, since the Pinots get picked and processed a few weeks earlier than the Cabernets), similar cold soaks, the same top-only yeast additions, pressing on a bin-by-bin basis and no fining or filtration.

The Kent Cabs mostly come from estate vineyards close to the winery, with a small amount of purchased Livermore fruit. The Home Ranch is planted half to Cabernet, half to Barbera and Sangiovese (which also go into small Seven Kent bottlings); the Ghielmetti Vineyard has all five Bordeaux red varieties (most of which get separate bottlings as wine club wines), including multiple clones of Cabernet Sauvignon—IC Davis 30 as well as 6, 7 and 8 and the French 337.

The Cabernet and other Bordeaux varieties get a small dash of sulfur at the crusher. Cold soaks for the Cabernet don't use the cold room, since the whole facility is fairly cool. (Last year, Mirassou took advantage of the chilly weather and moved some bins outside for a cooling-off period.) The bins of grapes get additions of French and American oak chips; rehydrated yeast is layered on top, and punch downs start after a few



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days. Frequent yeast choices for the Cabs and Bordeaux grapes are D254, BM45 and RB2. Nutrients are used only when the grapes demand it. The wines ferment some period beyond dryness, until they taste right.

Discussing the relatively low-input approach to winemaking for both labels—skipping nutrients and enzymes and keeping sulfur additions down—Mirassou notes that the wine industry did just fine without these things until not that many years ago. He says the technical advances that greatly improved white wine quality in the past 40 years have been moved on to reds as well, increasing reliability but perhaps at the expense of nuance.

The highest tier Kent reds go into Taransaud, François Frères and Le Grand barrels; some other reds spend time in Canton Grand Cru American oak and in Hungarian oak from Trust and Demptos. Some Cabernet lots mature in 100% new oak, most around 70%-75%; Syrah gets 50%-60% new American oak; Cab Franc goes mostly into second-fill barrels. Cabernet Sauvignon usually spends 24 to 26 months in barrel, the Bordeaux blenders 20 months, the Rhone and



Steven Kent Mirassou (left) and winemaker Tom Stutz of La Rochelle taste in the laboratory at Wente Vineyards. La Rochelle makes high-end Pinot Noir sourced from various regions in California, and Steven Kent Winery focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon.

Italian grapes 18 months. As with the Pinots, fining and filtration aren't part of the program.

The Steven Kent label also offers a Livermore Chardonnay, Merrillie, named after Mirassou's grandmother and based on an old Wente Chardonnay clone. Plans are under way to develop a larger line of

small-batch Chardonnays, similar to the La Rochelle Pinots, and in some cases from the same cool-climate vineyard sources.

All in all, the entire operation produces around 50 different bottlings per year, adding up to about 9,000 cases. Under the Steven Kent label there are several Cabernets, single-variety Bordeaux grape

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bottlings, small bottlings of Syrah, Petite Sirah, Barbera and several other red varieties, a Livermore Chardonnay, a tank-fermented Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon blend and a Cabernet Sauvignon Port. Under the La Rochelle label are several vineyard-designated Pinots, a second tier of appellation-wide Pinots, a Pinot Blanc and a Pinot Gris, a rosé and a small amount of sparkling wine; La Rochelle will also be home to the newly expanded line of vineyard-designated Chardonnays. This long list of wines is made possible by a focus on direct-to-consumer sales as well as working in a winery environment where it's possible to try a small batch of almost anything.

Supporting services

The relatively small Steven Kent and La Rochelle labels are able to take advantage of the extensive laboratory and analytical capacities of the much larger Wente operation. The main Wente lab, located within the small-lot facility, has a four-person staff, plenty of expertise in wet chemistry and an array of advanced, automated testing equipment—including a Metrohm 798 Titrino Titrator, a Chemwell autoanalyzer, an Anton Paar Alcozyler for alcohol measurement and an Anton Paar DMA density meter. The lab gives Mirassou and Stutz quick turnaround and, more important for Stutz, “information that is real. Bad information is worse than none.”

Rather than buying their own bottling line, Steven Kent and La Rochelle use Wente's in-house designed equipment. In order to put a few of their white and pink bottlings under Stelvin screwcap, Mirassou and Wente jointly purchased a module, the Bertolaso model VB40, that fits into the existing Wente line. The great majority of wines are bottled with natural corks from Ganau; bottles come from Encore Glass and Saverglass. Label design is done by The Agency Orange, which currently is redoing the Steven Kent labels; capsules come from Ramondin. Case goods are stored in several places: some at a Wente warehouse and some in San Jose; from there California Wine Transport trucks a portion down to Southern California for storage at Pacific Wine.

The two labels have direct distribution in California, including significant restaurant sales, especially for the basic Livermore Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40 retail) as a by-the-glass offering. They also have distribution in Ohio, Illinois and Florida. They also produce a house brand—Steven Kent Ritz-Carlton Cuvee—which makes its way into the chain's hotels.

But the main channel for both brands is direct-to-consumer, accounting for 75% to 80% of the sales of the higher end wines. Wine clubs are a major focus; the two Steven Kent clubs, one for Bordeaux grapes and one for Rhone and Italian wines, have 2,000 members, and the La Rochelle single-vineyard Pinot program has 400-500 members. Considering that many of the wines are produced in 125-case lots, the wine clubs automatically absorb a good deal of wine. Wines are also sold on the web and through the separate Steven Kent and La Rochelle tasting rooms, a few yards apart from each other on the Wente property, which are both a notch fancier than the Livermore norm.

The three websites—Steven Kent, La Rochelle, Lineage—are being re-designed by Agency Orange. Wine club and web sales are processed and shipped in-house by Steven Kent/La Rochelle staff. Shipping compliance is handled by Colleen O'Neal, a former Wente compliance specialist, rather than automated software. Inventory control utilizes AMS software.

The 50 wines from the three brands cover a wide price range, from white blends and rosé at or under \$20 to the Livermore



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The Wente Vineyards bottling line handles the bottling needs of Steven Kent and La Rochelle. Most of the wines produced by the two labels are bottled under natural cork from Ganau.

Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (the largest production at 1,000 cases) at twice that to Cabernets and Bordeaux blends ranging from \$50 to \$125 per bottle for the Lineage proprietary blend. The La Rochelle Pinots start at about \$30 and crest well over \$50. Mirassou estimates that the average price (not weighted) for the Steven Kent wines is about \$65, for La Rochelle it's about \$50. So far, they're not having trouble selling the wines.

And since the cash is flowing, Steven Kent LLC doesn't rely on bank financing

but on income from wine sales. Routine banking is done with Wells Fargo.

Life after AP

The AP arrangement within the Wente Small-Lot Winery has clearly worked well for Steven Kent and La Rochelle. The wines are well regarded, production has been increasing, the brands have weathered the recession fairly well, and the average bottle price for the two brands is the highest in the Livermore Valley. Over the years, many of the kinks in the working relationships have been

ironed out; there have been no repeats of the time the first batch of La Rochelle Pinot Noir got pressed without Stutz's permission.

In a perfect world, Mirassou and Stutz would do some things differently. More modern and gentle crushing and pressing equipment is out there, though that would require major money. Though their relationship with Claude Bobba is excellent, some of the routine cellar work could be more to their liking. Stutz says he has a biology-centric approach to winemaking—for example, controlling spoilage organisms by eliminating the nutrients they need—whereas the routine Wente protocols are more chemistry-based—controlling critters with SO₂.

Not far down the road, perhaps within five years, Mirassou hopes to move his labels out on their own, to be able to control all the quality factors he sees as crucial. Chances are that won't be a chateau-style winery pictured in *Architectural Digest*, but more likely a "transitional winery" in warehouse or office park space that can be customized for wine production. In the meantime, Mirassou readily acknowledges, "There are a lot of worse places to make wine than here." **W&V**

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