

VELLUM WINE CRAFT'S

2007 VELLUM Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

Review by Lulu Roberts, Wine Writer, www.wineandfoodsf.com

If you are looking for something a little different from the crowded wine tasting rooms on crucial roads around Napa and Sonoma but still want to try some fantastic wine and perhaps have a more personal and refined experience then I have a treat for you.

Hidden off the beaten track is a modern building in which sits a very smart tasting room. Within this tasting room, and by appointment only you will have the opportunity to meet one (or maybe both) of the two men by one of the most exciting Cabernets to come out of Napa this year.

A good winemaker in my eyes needs to be passionate about his wine, and Jeffrey Mathy is to me, the quintessential embodiment of a winemaker at the beginning of a very promising career. Charming in behavior, while always well dressed, he is youthful in appearance, eloquent and articulate in speech yet has the wisdom of someone many years his senior when he discusses his wine. Yet although it's Jeff who is the showman, the real magician is Karl R. Lehmann, a man who understands the fine tuning and composition of wine and wine making and without him the VELLUM partnership would not be what it is today.

I met Jeffrey at the "In Vino Unitas" event at One Market in SF a few weeks ago and was surprised to see how his table drew people from all directions to try his single offering, the 2007 Vellum Cabernet Sauvignon. In a room full of similar wines and 'sameness', I was momentarily shocked by the experience I had when I reached his table. I had expected wines of a similar ilk, but Vellums offering stood out as being something really rather different and dare I say 'special'?

Jeffrey and Karl are close friend who have come together to create a wine, which I feel is outstanding in its field just like its creators.

2007 Vellum Cabernet Sauvignon: \$56
84% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 6% Petit Verdot
Alcohol 14% (Only 800 cases produced)

This is described as being made in a 'French style' (St.Julien style) which really means that it has 'bright acidity and lower alcohol'. A dark ruby red, with a nose abundant with cherries, black pepper, celery spice, tobacco box, coffee beans, horse leather and the gentle hint of cardamom. I was momentarily taken aback but intrigued and taking my first taste I felt the warmth of summer fruit cherry pie, rhubarb, figs and over ripe plums. The finish was ridiculously long and velvety and I felt I was wrapping myself in velvet blankets in front of a log fire.

This wine was incredibly well structured, with a solid acid backbone, which allowed for good integration of alcohol, acid and tannin.

So what makes this wine different other Cabernets out on the market at the second?

Well, in my opinion it has to be the perfect partnership between the scientist and humanist. Jeffrey W. Mathy and Karl R. Lehmann are the two people behind VELLUM. Lehmann has over 8 years under the tutelage of legendary winemakers and now does private consulting and wine making. He believes that to make a wine truly great you must look at the whole picture. The structure of wine, how wine falls on the palate is most important instead of the looking for the little individual characteristics which although pleasant are often fleeting if the wine doesn't have the backbone to support them. By creating a wine with a solid backbone, the sensory experience will be amplified and this strong structure will let everything else fall into place. Flavours and aromas are constantly changing over time, and in ten years it is often hard to know what to expect from a wine. However with Vellum's 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon the structure behind the wine suggests that the wine will age gracefully without losing much of its finish.

Also a graduate of U.C. Davis, Mathy has always dreamed of producing ultra-premium Napa Valley wines. Before starting a career in winemaking Mathy was a sponsored athlete for Lipton Tea - and was one of the youngest mountaineers in history to climb the seven summits, including two expeditions to Mt. Everest.

Jeff became interested in wine through his frequent international travel associated with his interest in climbing. This started as a hobby and soon became a passion which led him to 'want' to be the youngest person to climb the 7 summits and then to 'become' one of the youngest mountaineers in history to climb the seven summits, including two expeditions to Mt. Everest. (A decision he made when he had already climbed four. And now a record soon to be broken by 13 year old Jordan Romero of Big Bear, CA)

In his climbing travels he tasted many different types of table wine and his palette became excited by the mixture of flavors and aromas associated with wine. His travels expanded his culinary tastes and he was mesmerized by the differences in wines produced around the world.

But Jeff's passion was still climbing, an expensive hobby (up to \$75,000 per expedition) and so it was that he went in search of sponsorship which through a series of lucky chances he managed to end up on the line to the Lipton Tea PR firm who happened to be searching for a way to market themselves to a younger demographic.

It was during expeditions to Antarctica and Mt. Everest that he was fortunate enough to end up sharing a tent with a Master of Wine who was the chairman of major Napa and Sonoma wineries.

Jeff would have started his winemaking career a year earlier, but a chance sickness a few days before summiting Mt. Everest sent him retreating from the mountain. He then spent another full year training for a second expedition.

It was during this second expedition on Everest that he made the decision not to reach the summit but stop 1000ft below. It was there, sitting looking out over what can only be described as a breath taking view that he had a moment of clarity, and decided that he would rather keep fingers and toes then proceed on and risk his life.

But what next? His interest spiked by his travels, Jeff packed up his bags and moved to Sonoma. It was here, that Mathy and Lehmann met in the summer of 2003 when Lehmann interviewed Mathy for a cellar position at a major Sonoma Valley winery. Their friendship over the years led to a decision that if they were to produce wine, they wanted to produce wines on a very small scale (by Napa Valley standards) and to make wines that would compete with the best wines in the world.

After one year working side-by-side, Lehmann and Mathy parted ways to take other work but remained great friends.

Lehmann spent a harvest in New Zealand and returned to Napa Valley to assume an apprenticeship with Dr. Jerry Seps, winemaker and proprietor of Storybook Mountain Vineyards. It was there that Lehmann produced their 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages, which recently ranked among the best wines ever produced by the winery. All three of Lehmann's vintages with Storybook Mountain yielded critical acclaim in the form of scores in the 94-96 range.

Meanwhile, Mathy was gaining experience in winery management and promotion through association with multiple institutions including the Wine and Spirits Education Trust in London and the American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts.

Mathy and Lehmann began looking for vineyard properties in the winter of 2006-2007. They discovered and partnered with three perfectly matched properties and decided to harvest four separate blocks of wine for the first VELLUM harvest in 2007.

After finding vineyards and joining forces with Bin to Bottle winery in Napa, Mathy and Lehmann began soliciting investments from friends and family. With the minimum investment offered at \$1,000 the two young entrepreneurs raised enough capital to harvest and produce 800 cases of the inaugural vintage of VELLUM Cabernet Sauvignon.