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Young but Mature

Babcock Wines Bear Out the Promise They Showed in '87

BY ROBERT LAWRENCE BALZER

FROM SMALL Babcock Vineyards comes big taste.

I encountered Babcock Vineyards at the American Wine Expo in Dallas in 1987. The wines were excellent, as they are still.

I keenly awaited the Babcock Gewurztraminer at the Dallas tasting. I held out my glass to the young man behind the counter, then swirled the wine and inhaled the exotic bouquet.

Sensitive vinification had captured the luscious varietal's almost Oriental perfume of lychee fruit, which also

suggests ripe pink grapefruit.

"This is wonderful," I told the smiling young man, who turned out to be Bryan Babcock, maker of the wine. From under the counter, he proffered a sample of a late-harvest Johannisberg Riesling from his last vintage—a berry-selected (37% Brix, 7% alcohol) 1986 nectar. Brilliant amber, it was a liquid poem of wine.

I made notes to pursue the unreleased and unlabeled wine, the Gewurztraminer, and Babcock Vineyards. Among the hundreds of new wineries in California, this one has enormous promise. With a mere 7,000-case annual production and but 50 planted acres on its 100-acre estate, Babcock has been discovered by Gewurztraminer aficionados. There is much to jus-

tify the true wine lover's attention, a significant achievement in the winery's short history.

In 1978, dentist Walter Babcock of Long Beach bought the 100-acre parcel near Lompoc. He and his wife considered making wine.

For 18-year-old Bryan Babcock, a freshman at Occidental College majoring in liberal arts, the farm acquisition was not exciting, but the prospect of wine making interested him.

Babcock was persuaded to pursue graduate studies in viticulture and enology at University of California at Davis. The day after he left college, in 1984, he was pouring concrete for the winery. The vines were in five-year maturity. And Bryan Babcock, wine maker, became a working reality.



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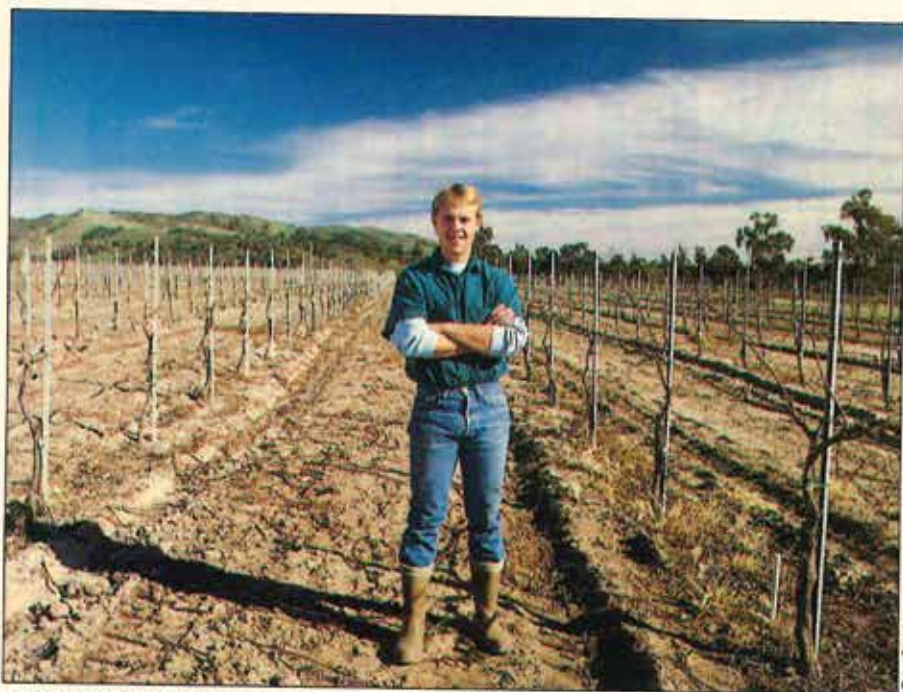
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Don Sabain

Bryan Babcock at his winery near Lompoc: He's been discovered by Gewurztraminer aficionados.

Recently, I sat down with him at the winery to a tasting of current release wines, beginning with his 1987 Santa Ynez Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$8).

"It's barrel-fermented," he told me, "in French oak, 15% new. It has what I call an 'expanded style' . . . with about 30% malolactic fermentation

and about six months on the lees."

That "expanded style" totally tamed the "sauvage" quality of the grape, which is so often "wild" in its aggressive, grassy character. Here, the wine is wholly beguiling. It's one of the most delightful wines from Sauvignon Blanc grapes (100%) I've tasted. A second 1987 Sauvignon Blanc, dubbed "11 Oaks Ranch" (\$18), with grapes from three nearby properties, also in "expanded style," is smooth and subtle.

Where you'll find these wines, you'll probably also discover the Babcock Vineyards 1987 Santa Ynez Valley Chardonnay (\$12), barrel-fermented, nine months on the lees, delicate in Meursault-style, and the 1987 Santa Ynez Valley Chardonnay-Selected Barrel Reserve (\$18). It has a striking complexity and is totally balanced.

And the wine under the counter in Texas? It's the 1986 Santa Ynez Valley Johannisberg Riesling, Berry-Selected, Late Harvest (10ths \$37). The ultimate elixir of the grape, it would exhaust a vocabulary of superlatives to make adequate praise.

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