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Cheers!

Montgomery native now crafting fine wines

By Teri Greene

On a recent evening, Chuck Atkins shouldered case after case of wine into the bar at La Jolla in East-Chase. Later in the evening, he'd open up some bottles and pour glasses for a group of close Montgomery friends.

Intimate gatherings over drinks are always a good time, but this one would be different. The wine would be the unique creations of Atkins and his wife, Julie. In Montgomery, most people know him as Chuck. But in San Francisco and the nearby wine mecca Napa Valley, Chuck Atkins is known as Charles, the winemaker.

In wine country, Montgomery native Atkins and his wife own 5 Points Cellars (www.5pointscellars.com), a boutique winery that is steadily making a name for itself. One of 5 Points' blends, the 2007 Anderson Valley Pinot Noir, recently earned 91 points from *Wine Spectator*, no small feat for an up-and-coming label.

The life of a winemaker is a far cry from the plans Atkins originally laid out for himself. In 1990, after graduating dental school at the University of Alabama, he met Julie on a date set up by mutual friends in the Birmingham entertainment district known as Five Points.

"That was the beginning of us as a couple," Atkins said of the location that would become their winery's namesake. "It's something that means a lot to us."

Eight weeks after meeting her, Atkins proposed to Julie via the pilot's intercom on an Eastern Airlines flight to Florida. The couple settled in Tampa, Fla., and as Chuck waited to take the Florida Dental Board exam, they opened a gourmet food and wine shop.

That's when the "wine bug" bit them, he said. Having their own winery became a dream -- a long-term dream. After living in Tampa six years, the couple moved to Atlanta, where they remained for eight more years.

Finally, in 2005, they set off for San Francisco for their great wine adventure.

Bottling success

For Chuck and Julie, building their own wine brand was a birth of sorts. Learning from scratch the intricate process of winemaking -- and then packaging and marketing -- took about nine months.

They had to buy grapes and barrels and find a facility that could help. They based their grape selection on their shared love of big cabernets, picking the best of grapes from Oregon, Washington and California.

The couple thoroughly researched every step and not by scouring Internet sites.

"We would go to the individual vineyards," Atkins said. "I would taste the grapes, and they would have

me taste wines of other wineries, people who were buying their grapes."

They chose grapes, carefully selecting the right blends, from the most famous and expensive vineyards in California. Among the vineyards were To Kalon in Oakville, Calif., a subset of Napa, the source of more 100-point wines than any other vineyard in the country, Atkins said.

Those To Kalon grapes are the source of 5 Points' 2006 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville and the soon-to-be released 2007 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville.

The 100-point system, created in the 1970s by wine critic Robert Parker, has become the modern standard in assessing the quality of wine, used by major wine publications such as *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Enthusiast*.

There are very, very few 100-point wines, and some of the wines from the same vineyards sell in the \$500 range. Wines from 5 Points Cellars sell in the \$75 range (they're available for purchase on the Web site and will be sold in Alabama later this year).

But then, 5 Points is relatively new to the game.

"2005 was our first vintage. We started with three wines that year. This year, we'll do seven different wines," Atkins said.

Getting noticed

For Chuck and Julie Atkins, the call from *Wine Spectator* came in February. They learned the magazine had named 5 Points Cellars' 2007 Anderson Valley Pinot Noir one of its favorite new California Pinots, assigning it a 91 rating. There was also a glowing review of the wine, which is a blend of two vineyard sites in Mendocino's Anderson Valley, Hein and Wentzel.

Here's what the magazine had to say:

"Firm, concentrated and full-bodied, with an underlying richness and minerality that's compelling, joining firm wild berry, blackberry, and fresh earth notes, ending with structured tannins. Drink now through 2014."

That review was the biggest sign yet that 5 Points was on the map in the world of California wines. But for Chuck, it came after some eye-opening lessons about just what makes a wine special.

Because he had a strong educational background in chemistry and biology, he knew the basic science behind making wine -- adding yeast to grapes converts the sugars into alcohol. But those were just the basics.

"I soon found out there's a lot more art that goes into this than science," he said. "That's what separates great wines ... the nuance of art, how you manipulate something. The science is the science. For everything else, there are probably 300 decisions that have to be made, from what (grapes) you pick to what the final blend is going to be for that wine."

And he learned some lessons about palate sensitivity.

"They say a woman's palate is much, much more attuned, that women make the best winemakers," he said. "Their palates are so much more focused and attuned than a man's."

Julie Atkins, who is as hands-on in the venture as her husband, showed that theory in action when the couple was making the final decision regarding the 2007 Pinot -- the blending. The pinot grapes

were all from the same vineyard, but within each vineyard there are different clones of grapes. One may be French, another American, for instance, each with their own flavor distinctions.

The week of the blending, Chuck Atkins had a cold and couldn't discern the tastes. So Julie went solo, creating the final blend that would result in the couple's most recognized wine yet.

Passion for the vine

One thing is for sure, Atkins said: If you're in the wine business, passion should be the driving force. Otherwise, you might as well throw away money.

It takes a lot of money to create your own successful line of wines, but it doesn't yield a lot of money, he said.

Chuck and Julie Atkins have been in the business four years, and it will take another two or three years before they start to break even.

Luckily, they both have successful careers away from the vineyards. Chuck works with Mako Surgical, which specializes in medical devices including robotic arms that perform surgery. Julie is a director of development for a large electronics company, which has her traveling the world for long stints.

When they're away from Napa or their chic urban loft, a converted warehouse that overlooks the San Francisco Bay, they have a trusty crew of winemakers overseeing the day-to-day workings of the company.

Though the couple lives about 45 minutes away from Napa, they've already settled into its way of life, which is surprisingly laid-back and unpretentious, he said.

"In Napa, the big, big-name winemakers that actually make millions of dollars are just regular Joe's. You see them out at dinner wearing their jeans and their work boots and they look like farmers," he said. It's only when they travel outside the comfy confines of Napa that they become important, famous people.

High scores and brand recognition aren't everything. There's something deeper to the venture. It's the same thing that set it on its course, Chuck Atkins said -- love.

The placid blue label on each 5 Points' bottle, inspired by the Atkins' waterfront homes in Florida and San Francisco, contains a small star that reads "CJ," the couple's initials, always there to remind them of why they started this venture in the first place.

"There's nothing cooler than to start with just a grape and bring your passion and talent to the end product, then sitting down and sharing it with friends," Atkins said. "It's just the happiness that comes from that."
