

Cellar dwellers: Part-time Merritt Island residents own California winery

TIM DWIGHT • THE GRAPEVINE • April 2, 2009

It's a long way from Brevard County to a boutique winery in San Francisco. But it's an adventurous journey Charles and Julie Atkins have enjoyed.

Julie, who graduated from Rockledge High School "sometime in the '80s," and Charles, an Alabama native, began 5 Points Cellars in 2006.

They met in the 5 Points neighborhood of Birmingham, Ala., in 1989 after he had finished school at Auburn and she at Georgia Tech. Eight weeks' later, Charles was proposing over the pilot's PA system on an Eastern Airlines flight to Orlando to meet Julie's parents.



Dreams of a winery were pretty farfetched at that point, and the need for some [adventure](#) led Chuck and Julie to travel to more than 30 countries during the next 18 years.

In 2005, they headed to California to start their winery.

"Please call me Chuck," Charles said, when I met him. He had several bottles of wine in tow. "We don't officially have any of our wines in Florida yet, but I had some at the house, and I hope you don't mind tasting."

Not a problem, I assured him, grabbing my trusty corkscrew so we could begin the research.

Having visited the 5 Points Cellars Web site, I was somewhat familiar with the wines the Atkins produce. There was a chardonnay, a pinot noir, a syrah and a couple cabernets, all sourced from grapes grown in distinctly separate viticultural regions.

"We're going to be adding another pinot, most likely from Oregon, and a cab-based blend from Washington, too," Chuck said.

Very impressive, I thought, but how the heck are they going to cover that much territory? Most producers either grow or purchase grapes from an area close to their winery.

"Well, that's both the tough part and the easy part," Chuck said. "We are purchasing grapes from some pretty good sources, but we've got no actual winery -- yet."

The 5 Points wines are produced with the assistance of the Atkins' winemakers at a custom "crush" facility in San Francisco.

"They're actually located just down the street from where we stay when we're out west," Chuck said. "That's really how this whole thing got started."

Mindful of the old axiom that "the quickest way to make a small fortune in the wine business is to start with a large fortune," the couple explored different business opportunities during their travels. Chuck's entrepreneurial spirit led to a successful start-up in the medical devices field, while Julie began a career with Jabil Electronics, currently as director of business development.

"It's a bit ironic that Julie's company is based in St. Petersburg, and mine in Fort Lauderdale," Chuck said. "We still travel quite a bit, as it is important to keep our day jobs, as we refer to them. But now that we've begun 5 Points, that's home for us, too, as well." As of now, production for wines is limited to several hundred cases, but eventual growth is the game plan. And now that he and Julie are making more wine than they -- or their friends' on both coasts -- can hope to consume, "it's time to get serious," Chuck said.

One of his missions on the recent trip was to begin the search for a distributor in Florida. The 5 Points Anderson Valley 2007 Pinot Noir has just received **90 points in *Wine Enthusiast*** magazine, and **91 points in *Wine Spectator***, which has led to national demand. But as much as I enjoyed that particular wine, ***the two cabernet sauvignon bottlings blew me away in the tasting.***

The 2006 Oakville-designated cab retails for approximately \$75 from the winery. Production was only 50 cases, and the grapes were grown in the famed Beckstoffer-Tokalon vineyard, the source of some of Napa Valley's top cabernets. I've seen -- and sold -- wines from that vineyard for \$150 to \$200 dollars. Top-notch grapes, and a fine effort from winemaker Kian Tavakoli; softer red and black berry [flavors](#) but some substantial barrel tannins from the new French oak.

Chuck and Julie are active in the entire winemaking process, from grape selection to working with the juice in the winery, though the experienced Tavakoli makes their cabs and Chris Nelson the 5 Points pinots.

My favorite wine of the tasting however was the 2006 Howell Mountain bottling (\$60). All mountain [fruit](#); 100 percent cabernet sauvignon from the Ink Grade vineyard, though surprisingly accessible for such a young wine. And alas, just 50 cases of this beauty as well.

In Brevard, we are just going to have to wait for more accessibility -- and a deal with an eventual distributor.

"Julie spends more time here with her folks still living in the area," Chuck said. "She's an active partner, and she'll be doing some of the leg work while I'm gone."

"I grew up in locally and lived in Brevard for many years," she said.

She still has friends in the area. They hope to eventually be able to offer some tastings locally, and given the quality of the wine, I hope I'm first in line.

Dwight, a certified wine educator, is proprietor of The Green Turtle Market, a gourmet food and wine store in Indian Harbour Beach. Send information about local wine dinners, tastings and charity events open to the public to winecolumn@cfl.rr.com