

John Ash

John Ash & Co., Santa Rosa, California

A pioneer of local cuisine and food-and-wine pairing discusses his latest projects.



Chef John Ash has come to stand for many things. Known as the founder of wine-country cuisine, he began pairing food and wine in the early 1980s at his Santa Rosa restaurant, John Ash & Co. He was one of the first advocates of eating locally and seasonally. Growing up on a ranch in Colorado with his grandparents, he experienced the practice out of necessity. When Ash left an advertising and product-development job with Del Monte in California to attend culinary school in France [what year and what school?], he discovered the same philosophy in the French daily markets. That experience made him aware of the irony of eating canned vegetables in the middle of summer while surrounded by Sonoma's agricultural bounty.

Ash had been employing his bachelor's degree in art [?] as a freelance medical illustrator and his culinary experience as a part-time caterer when he was approached by Don Baumhefner and Merry Edwards to open a series of restaurants in the late 1970s. John Ash & Co., which remains a destination for wine-country diners today, was born in 1980.

Ash has gone on to many other endeavors. His first book, *American Game Cooking* (Aris Books, 1991), was a contemporary look at heritage American foods; *From the Earth to the Table: John Ash's Wine Country Cuisine* was named the Julia Child Cookbook of the Year by the International Association of Culinary Professionals when it was first released in 1995 (a revised and expanded edition was published by Chronicle Books in 2007); and *John Ash Cooking One On One: Private Lessons in Simple, Contemporary Food from a Master Teacher* (Clarkson Potter, 2004) won a 2005 James Beard Foundation Award.

Ash has co-hosted a Sonoma radio program, "The Good Food Hour," with Steve Garner every Saturday since 1987. An occasional contributor to various newspapers and magazines, he has also been featured on the Food Network. He was the culinary director for Fetzer and Bonterra vineyards and is still on the faculty of the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in St. Helena, Calif. He is often on the road as well, speaking to various groups and teaching both home and professional cooks.

His latest venture is Sauvignon Republic, a wine-making operation dedicated to revealing terroir through Sauvignon Blancs from different corners of the globe. Ash has three partners—John Buechsenstein, Paul Dolan, and Tom Meyer—each a food-and-wine force in his own right. Their first release, in 2003, was from Russian River Valley; next was Marlborough, New Zealand, in 2004, followed by Stellenbosch, South Africa, in 2005. Potter Valley from Mendocino, Calif., was added in 2007.

Ash is passionate about Sauvignon Blanc, but it was a Charles Krug Chenin Blanc, consumed with a simple summer lunch at a friend's house, that first inspired him to explore the world of wine. His career has been devoted to sharing that same experience of great food, great wine, and great company—all enhanced by proximity and context. We met [?] to talk about that way of life.

JULIANNE WILL

John Ash & Co.

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John Ash & Co. restaurant at Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa, Calif.

How did you become a locavore before the word was invented?

I've been on the sustainable kick for a really, really long time. I was accused in the early days of being some hippy-dippy, airy-fairy Californian talking about organics and all that, but I'm so pleased that it's come mainstream. I think it's kids who are really brought up to have a sensitivity toward this. I think part of what our generation should do is both walk the walk, but also share that with the generations coming after us, because they're the ones who are going to have to do all the heavy lifting.

From the Earth to the Table certainly offers a great deal of context, with explanations of such things as how curry is made and where lavender grows. Why did you include that kind of information?

I think it empowers people to feel confident in the kitchen. A lot of people don't cook any more, with the growth of the home-meal

replacement—buying stuff at Whole Foods and taking it home and heating it up. It's been interesting: just in my teaching of home cooks, there's a whole generation of people who never cooked, and maybe whose mothers or fathers came from homes that didn't cook, who are adults now. Sometimes they're relatively adventurous, but more often than not, they're a little timid. They watch the Food Network and they love that, but the thought of doing it is not something that they want to try.

With Sauvignon Republic, it sounds as if you're educating once more, now about the idea of terroir. How did that project come about?

Well, first off, I probably should have gone through a 12-step program before I started. It's scary; it's so competitive, and there seems to be a lot of shakeout in the wine business today. But for some odd reason, in interviews, I would get this question: "If you had to drink one wine for the rest of your life, what would it be?" I said

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Dining room (above);
Vintners Inn entrance
(below).

for me it would be Sauvignon Blanc. I come at it not from a winery point of view, but from a cook's point of view. I think everything is improved, whether savory or sweet, by a squeeze of lemon or lime. And that's what Sauvignon Blanc brings to the table when it's made in the way that we think it should be made, and that is without oak, winemaker intervention, malolactic, *sur lie*, and all that stuff. It's just this ripe, citrusy, delicious beverage that adds that wonderful citrusy note to food. So I started talking to my partners and said, "Why don't we go to all the places where great Sauvignon Blanc is made around the world, and we'll make it?" And we actually do make it; we don't just buy juice. It was the angle of terroir again—saying to people it really does make a difference.

How do you select the properties?

Our business model is that we don't own anything except the wine at the end. So in each of these areas that we want to go into, it takes a little while to get it going. We do long-term contracts with grape growers so that we can have consistency. Then we have to find a winery nearby to let us come and make wine. My winemaking partner, John B.—I'm John A., he's John B.—is the



winemaker. He'll be there during crush in each of these places. Our two Southern Hemisphere wines, New Zealand and South Africa, are about a month apart in terms of crush, so he can leapfrog back and forth between those two.

So the winemaking is the same at all of your properties?

Yes. The strategy is the same winemaker using the same winemaking techniques—as I mentioned, all stainless steel, no oak, no other goofing around. So essentially, all things are the same except where the grapes come from. That is the exploration of terroir that we think is so interesting. We are trying to let it really be typical of a place, whatever they are classically doing in that area in terms of grape-growing techniques and signature vines and all that stuff. It drives John B. a little crazy because he's a wonderful, wonderful winemaker who is very creative. It's a little bit like telling a cook, "I just want you to do the asparagus with hollandaise and don't think about doing anything else." But the wines are still so extraordinarily different from each other when you put them in front of people. It's a fun thing to do.

Have you had a chance to do that with people—watch their reaction?

Yes, we do. We have this little tasting map, and restaurants have done them side by side. It is fun; it gives people something else to do. I think a little education can be very entertaining.

Do you package the three wines together for retailers, too?

We sell them separately. Our original idea was exactly that: "You want three wines? We will put four bottles of each in a case." But what people said to us in restaurants and wine shops is, "Well, but I like the South African better," for example. So we have a very simple way today. The wine comes in a three-pack carrier, and our encouragement is, at least from a business standpoint, to get wine shops to display them side by side so that it demonstrates the message. Sometimes that's hard because a lot of wine-shop guys think the Russian River has to go with the California wines, and the New Zealand has to go with the New Zealand wines. And the same thing is true in restaurants, too.

Why did you go to Mendocino for your latest Sauvignon Blanc?

Potter Valley kind of violates our idea of

Photo courtesy of Vintners Inn (top); photo by Julianne Will (bottom)

going to all of the places in the world in which great Sauvignon Blanc is produced. We did it only because by this time we had hoped that we would have something from the Loire—from Sancerre—and something from Friuli in Italy, but the problem has been the euro-dollar deal. We would have been completely under water compared to what we have done here. But with recent changes, we think this summer we will be moving on one of those, probably to Italy.

Are you insisting on organic viticulture in all your locations?

I guess it would be more of what we would call sustainable, which means there isn't that third-party certification that there is for organic. But it is very important for us because our other partner in this is Paul Dolan, who is the godfather of the sustainable and organic wine laws in California. He has a lot of other winery operations that he is involved in, but Mendocino Wine Company, which he and some partners have, is the first carbon-neutral winery in America. He is a very famous spokesperson for doing things in an ethical way.

Are you going to continue using screwcap closures for all your wines?

Yes, we think it is the best for what we are doing, for the price category we're in. We don't ever see ourselves as being a mass winery. But it is consumer-friendly, it is easy to handle, and all of what we know so far says it is superior to the cork-finished wines, at least in terms of not encountering TCA contamination. It's funny, you run into people who are traditional. A friend of mine, who is a sommelier in the city, said, "I'll never have a screwcap wine in this restaurant." So we tried to zing him a little bit to make him change his mind. There is this thing called the Mighty Grip—when you get arthritis, you use it so you can open pickle jars. We put a little one in a package with a label that said, "For those who fear the loss of their tool." And I gave him one of those. I said, "You won't have your cork puller to pull out, but now you can have a little Mighty Grip in the other pocket that you can pull out with great flourish."

How do you express your philosophy of food-and-wine pairing with Sauvignon Republic?

There is a lot of what I will call one-dimensional Sauvignon Blanc on the market. It's just grapefruit. One of John's great challenges has been to make sure there is complexity. Yes, it is



Vintners Inn (above); Sauvignon Republic tasting flight (below).

all about the citrus flavors and all that, but we need something else; we need complexity and length. I think Sauvignon Blanc made in an honest style can really wrap itself around the global cuisines and the flavors of the world, so we recommend food pairings on our website—some Hispanic-driven things, some Mediterranean-driven things, some Asian-driven things. We actually just got a request from a group of Renaissance hotels on the East Coast who are going to run our tasting flights, and they said, "Give us some recipes that are seasonal that you think go well with these wines."

Your book also includes a lot of recommendations for Sauvignon Blanc pairings.

Well, I could have recommended something else, but since I really like it, why not? Treating it like a food, in that regard like a splash of lime or a splash of lemon, helps





you understand why wine and food are paired. Certainly, you can drink what you like, but here's a way to look at it differently. It's a way of demystifying it a little bit, too. It's like the wine classes that I teach. Don't worry so much about who the producer is or even what the varietal is; think about what flavors you like. I'd love to get wineries to give up the suggested pairings on the labels. It makes you want to ask sometimes, "Well, what doesn't it go with?" Instead, to be much more helpful to the consumer and to the service staff in restaurants, let's say, "What is the flavor profile? What does it taste like?" And in terms that the common man can understand, not the Robert Parkerisms of "scorched rock" and that kind of stuff, but "it's lemony and it's got this kind of tarragon note to it"—things that people can recognize. I think it would take a lot of the intimidation out, and it would also help us to match it with food. I'm pleased to see this trend in restaurants that organize wine lists not according to varietal, but according to flavor profile, which I think is very helpful—especially because restaurants love putting wines on their lists that no one has ever heard of.

When you first started John Ash & Co., did you pair wines with dishes on the menu?

We did. I will tell you that originally, I did not want to get into the restaurant business; I wanted to open a wine shop. We got this space in a shopping center, and it was too big to be

just a wine shop, so what we did—we were so far ahead of our time—we had a wine shop in front, and you had to walk through the shop to get into the restaurant. Our policy for a few years was you could buy anything in the wine shop at retail and take it into the restaurant for no corkage. What that meant was that we were selling a lot more relatively expensive wine, because there weren't those usual 2.5-to-3-times markups. And because we had the restaurant, we would do something associated with food and wine every week—tastings, special dinners, explorations of Bordeaux or Burgundy or Dry Creek Valley, or whatever; we would do terroir-driven things. We were kind of the only game in town, and we could have people come in and talk. Winemakers came in like crazy; it was part of their educational experience, too, especially if we were using their wines in context with other wines. It was a fantasy for me, because I could really sharpen my abilities to match food with wine and learn why it worked or didn't work. I think sometimes when it didn't work, that was more of a learning experience than when it did.

The other thing we did—it seems so silly now, but it was absolutely revolutionary because no one was doing it—we offered wines by the half-glass and by the 1.5-ounce pour. We were lucky: it was a really busy wine shop and wine program, so we had stuff people didn't know. And at that time, the wine industry here was barren. You could almost count on the digits of my hands and feet the number of wineries in Sonoma County. The same thing is true of food. In revising *From the Earth to the Table*, of course, we had to update those little sidebars. One of them that I took out said, "Here is an ingredient that is not in very many markets, but if you see some in your market, be sure to give it a try because it has lots of uses." You know what I was talking about? Portobello mushrooms. Fifteen to 20 years ago, Portobello mushrooms were completely exotic to us. Of course, now you can go to any hamburger joint and order Portobello in place of a burger.

What's new at your restaurant?

Not much, which is great. In truth, I've talked to Don and Rhonda Carano, who own that property, and said it's probably time to get my name off it. I still do things there—I occasionally go in and help with the menu, and I'll teach occasional cooking classes and do special events, so there's still that association, but I'm not actively involved. So probably sometime in

Photo by Julianne Will

the next year or so it will be called something else, which is fine. It's time.

Do you intend to ever open another restaurant?

No! It's fun to help out there, but I'm too old. I don't mean that in any geriatric sort of way, but I think there's a time in your life when you need to be there—14-hour days, you're totally devoted to it. It's why I'm not married any more, even though I'm good friends with my ex-wife: because I wasn't there. The restaurant became my mistress. I've been there, done that. That's why I'm so into all the teaching, which I really love to do, which I never had the thought that I could do, actually. I've always been really shy.

So what made you jump into it?

What happened for me was our little, local junior college in Santa Rosa had a culinary program, and they said, "Oh, would you come teach a class or two?" I did, and I enjoyed it and wasn't shy at all, because I was really talking about something I loved. It just changed my life; I became less shy.

How would you describe your teaching method?

What are you working on now?

A new book idea. The working title of it is *Cooking for the Next Half of Your Life*, so I'm taking advantage of the CIA to kind of figure out what the heck that means. When people sign up for a class, what do they think it's about? I'm not sure I know exactly, but the idea is that there's this whole Baby Boomer generation, of which I'm one, and we're kind of moving into the next half. Originally, I called it "the last half of your life," but that's a little morbid, so I started to think it wasn't a good idea. I have two kids who are in their late 20s, and I said, "Hey, what do you think of this? Isn't this a great idea?" And they said, "Oh, so you're just going to use the blender?" So I cut them out of my will.



California's Russian River Valley.

But there is this whole generation of people who are coming into money, or the kids are gone, and they have the ability to travel a little or pursue interests that maybe they couldn't when they were in their family-building years. I don't want it to be a book about geriatrics. It's about not giving up the gusto. I am as interested or more interested in food and travel and discovery as I've ever been, and now that I don't have to do a restaurant every day, I have the chance to do more of that.

Certainly health and nutrition are part of it, too: to weave in there what we know and what we don't know and to include interviews with people I really admire, to give us their two cents' worth about what it means to live a long, happy life. One of the chapters is going to be called "The Taste of Things to Come." What is that? We move so fast. Not that I am any guru, but I want to talk to other people about it. What don't we know about today that we will take for granted five years from now? 🍷