

The Island Way With Wine

*Vet-turned-vintner
Kent Rosenblum puts
Alameda on the
wine-lover's map*

By Mary Eisenhart

Photography by Sophia Szeto

One day in 1972, Alameda veterinarian Kent Rosenblum and his wife, Kathy, were dining at San Francisco's Tadich Grill, about to enjoy the establishment's renowned petrale sole. Some wine-buff neighbors also at the restaurant sent over a bottle. "Concannon Johannisberg Riesling 1971," Rosenblum says now, recalling the moment of epiphany with a faraway look. "It went so well with that fish, it just got us hooked on wine and food."

In the wake of that experience, most people would have bought a case or two of the Concannon. Or they might have taken a cooking course or embarked on restaurant junkets. Rosenblum, who concedes that his taste in wine up to that moment had run to the jug variety, especially the pink Chablis that was all the rage at the time, started making wine.

Happy chance has played a large role in the evolution of his winery, Rosenblum Cellars. On the other hand, so has knowing what to do with it.

Rosenblum is now the president, chief executive officer and director of wine making at Rosenblum Cellars, which he and Kathy Rosenblum own with about 150 shareholders. This was not remotely on the radar screen in January 1970, when the native Minnesotans arrived from the wilds of Montana.

Kent Rosenblum established the 2900 Main St. address for Rosenblum Cellars in 1987. The winery, which briefly operated in Oakland and Emeryville, produces more than 90,000 cases of wine a year and has hit \$9 million in sales.

Kent Rosenblum had wanted to be a veterinarian since he'd read the Dr. Dolittle books as a child. An avid skier, hiker and fisherman, he was drawn to Montana by the attractions of the outdoor lifestyle, and he landed a job there after graduating from veterinary school at the University of Minnesota. He soon found himself plunged into an arduous 18-hour-a-day schedule, heavy on bovine and porcine C-sections in remote, kerosene-lit barns.

About the time this routine began to lose its charm, and Kathy Rosenblum was bemoaning the absence of conversational topics other than Herefords and heifers, they heard from Dr. Cliff Munns of Alameda's Providence Veterinary Medical Group. Munns had hired one of Rosenblum's vet-school classmates as an associate, but the associate was now pining for Minnesota. The idea had come up that maybe Rosenblum would be interested in taking over the job. After some discussion (and a narrow escape from moving to Southern California instead), the Rosenblums became Alameda residents. Rosenblum was immersed in the daily routine of a busy veterinary general practice, dealing with everything from broken bones and stomach torsions to flea dips and teeth cleaning. And so it was that the Rosenblums came to be enjoying their seafood at the Tadich Grill that fateful day in 1972.

Joining forces with some friends, including Gene Nagel, his former lab partner from school who now has a veterinary practice in Dublin, and Nagel's wife, Del, Rosenblum learned everything he could about wine making. The fledgling vintners toured wineries and picked the brains of experts, in California's wine country and eventually in Europe. The first year, in 1972, they made five gallons of White Riesling. "It didn't kill anybody, so we did more," he recalls. By 1974 (the year Rosenblum became a partner at the veterinary practice), they had discovered the joys of cold fermentation by putting the wine in the refrigerator at 50 degrees. The next year they started experimenting with cabernet and zinfandel. They also learned that some of the wine they were making preferred warm fermentation, so they took to wrapping the fermenters (which Rosenblum describes as "Rubbermaid 40-gallon food-grade containers, which looked like fancy garbage cans") in electric blankets.

The Rosenblum tradition of handcrafted



"Vinterinarian" Kent Rosenblum spends some sunny afternoons making tracks on the island in his in-line skates with his dog, Max, tagging along for a romp.

wine was off to a fine start, and friends snapped up each year's offerings as soon as they became available. By 1977, the partners decided to make it official and become a real winery. Rosenblum discovered that both his scientific background and the keen sense of smell for which he'd never before found any practical use were great advantages in making each lot of grapes—and the wine they eventually produced—all they could be. But if he brought to the task a fanatical attention to detail and passion for excellence, he also imbued the company with a sense of humor and a lack of pretension.

Today Rosenblum Cellars produces a

range of wines—about 85 percent red and 15 percent white—many of which win multiple awards yearly. The prizewinners

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range from the fairly rare Carla's Vineyard Zinfandel to the budget-friendly blend Chateau La Paws Cote du Bone Roan, a tribute to the boss's day job. Quantities are small, ranging from 100 cases for such releases as St. Peter's Church Zinfandel (named after the town of St. Peter, Minn.,



The vet-turned-vintner sniffs, swirls and tastes a glass of wine in the Rosenblum Cellars tasting room, which offers a panoramic view of the San Francisco skyline.

from which the wine is made come from a particular vineyard. Most wine, he explains—98 percent of California's, for example—is made from a blend of grapes from various vineyards to produce a result superior to what would result from any of its individual sources. But if you're lucky enough to find a vineyard that produces superior fruit year after year, he says, you want to give it a chance to shine.

Being able to do that involves both the endless quest for great grapes and the ability to build and foster long-term partnerships. "Wherever great grapes grow, we go look, and then if we can work a deal, we do," Rosenblum says. "Over the 25 years we've been in the business, 30 years of making wine, we've gotten to know the guys that have the best and oldest mountain and hill-top vineyards. Those are the ones we use. We've been fortunate in having great relationships with them, and long-term contracts." Today Rosenblum Cellars owns some vineyards in Sonoma and has partnerships with many growers around the state, and the winery's central location in Alameda has proven ideal for quick handling of fruit from around California.

As on that breakthrough day at the Tadich Grill, both chance and the good sense to run with it continue to figure prominently in the winery's operation. There was the day in 1982 when an old guy with a delivery van pulled up to the Rosenblum warehouse door, wondering if anyone wanted to buy his grapes. "Muscat of Alexandria," recalls Rosenblum, getting almost misty at the recollection of the brimming lug boxes. "And they tasted really great." The deal was soon done; the winery produced an unscheduled and quickly sold-out run of late-harvest Muscat of Alexandria. The next year, Rosenblum sought out the mystery grower, only to learn that the entire Muscat of Alexandria crop had fallen prey to the mold. The grower then suggested Rosenblum might be interested in some other grapes. This led to the discovery of an entire world of venerable vineyards, some over a century old, on the east side of Mount Diablo, many originally planted by Italian or Portuguese immigrants. They'd flourished in obscurity for generations; since the days of Prohibition, their owners had sent their entire crops to Canada. Now these vineyards, about to



home to Rosenblum's undergraduate alma mater, Gustavus Adolphus College) to 30,000 cases for Vintner's Cuvee Zinfandel. There's a wide range of distinctive characteristics even within the same variety, and, in keeping with the company's inspiration, each wine comes accompanied with suggestions, often quite detailed and specific, for complementary foods.

In general, though, if you mention Rosenblum Cellars to a random connoisseur, you're likely to hear fervent odes to their handcrafted zinfandels. "Zin has really been our passion," concedes Rosenblum, while putting in a good word for up-and-coming Rhône varieties. "We make about 20 different zinfandels, many vineyard-designated"—meaning that all the grapes



▲ Rosenblum remains a partner at Providence Veterinary Medical Group. Meet the staff, from left to right: Heidi Hurtubise; Randall Miller, D.V.M.; Antonella Aste; and Scott O'Hara.

► The vet, who joined Providence in 1970, examines a cooperative one-eyed feline patient.



find new identity as the San Francisco Bay appellation, would give Rosenblum Cellars an unexpected new avenue to great wine.

"We're a little bit like kids in the candy shop," Rosenblum admits. "If something new comes along, it's 'We've got to try that.' And if we like it, we tend to find a place for it."

Surprises are fewer today. From the time the grapes are growing on the vine until the bottled wine leaves Alameda, Rosenblum employees are closely supervising every aspect of the process and constantly optimizing the extraction, fermentation and other processes with everything from state-of-the-art technology to small open-top fermentation tanks and custom-made wooden barrels. Jeff Cohn, Rosenblum Cellars' winemaker, who also operates his own winery, JC Cellars, is renowned for his ability to find the ideal combination of fruit, yeast and barrel to bring out the best

the grapes can produce. "We have a lot of people that have passion about this," Rosenblum says. "We treat all these wines like our kids. Every wine is special. I work with every one before it goes out of here—if I don't like it, it doesn't go. A lot of the things we do are used to kind of enhance

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the structure of the fruit, and just the friendliness of the wine—easy drinking, rich fruit, not excessive tannin, acid or other harsh flavors."

Passion and friendliness extend throughout the Rosenblum Cellars company culture and into the collegial atmosphere Rosenblum fosters with the small, inde-

pendent wineries (Dashe Cellars, JC Cellars, Zoom Vineyards, and Sunset Cellars, as well as St. George Spirits) that lease space in the 2900 Main St. building and use the winery's facilities for their own production and bottling. Each finds its own niche, and a spirit of collaboration and shared quest pervades their efforts: "It's education more than it is competition," Cohn told the San Francisco Chronicle last year. "I make a conscious effort to make wines that are different than Rosenblum; I know what Kent wants and I have my own style."

These days the winery takes up most of Rosenblum's time—aside from supervising the day-to-day wine-making operations, he's often on the road, building relationships, cultivating resources, checking out the latest and greatest technology and the wisdom of the masters.

He's still a partner in the Providence vet-



Kent Rosenblum, a native Minnesotan, relaxes at home with (clockwise) his wife, Kathy, and daughters, Shauna and Kristen.

erinary practice (which describes him as a “vintnerian”), but only gets in to the office about once a month, usually to consult with the office’s new generation of vets. “It’s been a very rewarding career,” he says, noting that in his 30-some years of practice, he’s seen a lot of change in the profession. Among the most notable, he says, is the proliferation of specialists, mirroring the same trend in the human world. Whereas in the old days a general-practice vet would handle practically any crisis that arose, he says, “Today it’s more about educating the clients, talking to them about the animals, getting all their medication squared away.” The occasional surgery might come up, perhaps, but also many referrals to specialists. Rosenblum admits that he does not at all

miss the late-night phone calls that were a regular feature of life before the advent of 24-hour emergency vet clinics.

He and Kathy Rosenblum and daughters Shauna and Kristen are involved in a number of groups, including Guide Dogs for the Blind and the Humane Society of Alameda. Rosenblum has served as president of the Alameda Chamber of Commerce for the past year, is a past president of the West Alameda Business Association and serves on its board. He’s also a past president of ZAP, or Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, and a former board member for the Humane Society of Alameda and the Alameda County Veterinarian Association. He notes that community involvement is a common characteristic of Alameda residents: “We’ve

got a lot of folks here that are very civic-minded, and that’s part of what living here is all about.”

Of course, it was all that civic-mindedness that kept Rosenblum Cellars from being in Alameda in the first place, but it all ended happily.

By 1977, Rosenblum and his buddies decided to take their hobby to the next level and start their own winery, though not with especially grandiose intentions. “The idea [was] that we would be able to write off the trips to Europe, sell the wine to our friends,” he recalls. With that in mind, they started outfitting the basement of the Rosenblum house on Liberty Street with tanks and other wine-making equipment. All was sailing along happily when one of the neighbors decided a winery was an unsuitable business for the neighborhood and launched a petition drive that ultimately swayed the city council against the project.

A setback at the time, this reversal actually proved something of a blessing, as the winery would soon have outgrown the house. Forced to locate its new world headquarters at the defunct Dead End Bar in a dubious neighborhood in Oakland, Rosenblum Cellars officially opened its doors in 1978. In 1979, it launched what’s now a quarterly event—the winery’s open house. Combining the best features of fun and marketing, the occasion offered aficionados a chance to sample the new releases, taste wines from previous years, and enjoy food and music at the winery.

Needing larger quarters, Rosenblum Cellars moved again, first in 1982 to Emeryville and then in 1987 to the current location at 2900 Main St. in Alameda, adjacent to the former navy base. The spacious, high-ceilinged building had originally been used as a facility for repairing steam locomotives, as evidenced by a few remaining tracks still in the floor; during World War II, Todd Shipyards built Liberty ships there.

Today a tasting room at the front of the building (open daily) draws a steady crowd of diverse, wine-savvy Bay Area residents year-round. (Another Rosenblum tasting room recently opened in Healdsburg in Sonoma County.) The comfortable, homey room, plastered with ribbons for the awards Rosenblum wines have garnered, commands a panoramic view of the San Francisco skyline and Bay Bridge; visitors can sit in the window seat, sample

the latest wines and watch the ongoing ballet of tugboats, cranes and container ships in the estuary. Other parts of the building are devoted to various aspects of wine making and bottling; cases of wine await shipment, while one cavernous section is stacked to the ceiling with pallets of wine, slowly aging in wooden barrels, cooled by the ambient breeze as well as a sprinkler system that occasionally fills the air with mist.

Rosenblum Cellars currently employs 40 people year-round, says Peter Hirschfeld, the winery's director of marketing. The number goes up to about 70 during "crush"—the harvest period between mid-August and the end of November. Aside from two varieties imported from Australia and bottled at the winery, all other Rosenblum wines are made entirely on the premises. And production has grown considerably since the five gallons of Riesling in 1972—this year, Rosenblum Cellars will bottle more than 90,000 cases of wine and hit \$9 million in sales (and, Rosenblum adds, it "pays LOTS of taxes!"). Urban wineries per se—especially boutique wineries producing less than 1,000 cases—aren't unheard of, but a winery of Rosenblum's size is somewhat unusual.

The winery hosts a number of its own events throughout the year, including the quarterly open house events and wine discovery seminars. In addition, it's a popular space for private parties and serves as the perfect setting for a number of charity events and fund-raising galas year-round—the First Saturdays in Alameda concert series is a notable example.

After three decades of active involvement in his adopted hometown, Rosenblum says that while the city faces some formidable challenges in the years to come, particularly in balancing economic and quality-of-life issues, he's pretty confident of a good outcome: "Alameda's got to move forward and develop, but a lot of effort's going into it. I think it's going to happen." And, as one who still in-line skates around Bay Farm Island with his dog, Max, each weekend, he remains delighted with the Island's amenities.

"Where else can you see the city and be in the middle of everything? We have access to water and mountains; we have a mile-and-a-half beach, old Victorian houses. ... I think Alameda's an absolute gem of a community."

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