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# CODE

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# California dreamin'

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*As Sideways opens on the stage in London, Zeren Wilson reminisces of his time spent in the vineyards of California.*

Over a decade ago, wow. As the stage adaptation of *Sideways* begins its run in London at the St James Theatre, St James's Park, I'm reminded of my own Californian epiphany, which happened to coincide with the release of the film.

Having jacked in a job in magazine advertising sales, and taken a precipitous - and terrifying - leap to join Oddbins the previous year, 2004 found me working at independent merchant The Winery, in Maida Vale. Among other wines imported exclusively by owner David Motion (most notably dry Rieslings from

press-ganged a willing accomplice on each visit, I wasn't going to get to any vineyards: the Greyhound coaches aren't going to help much, that's for sure.

A Pinot Noir tasted in the town of Santa Rosa wowed me - Kosta Browne, from Sonoma County. Within minutes I was emailing winemaker Michael Browne asking if I could hang around and help in the winery at next year's 'crush'. 2006 came along and there I was, two weeks of punching down grape skins in small vats, sorting grapes on the table, and working alongside a guy called Jamie Kutch who was learning how to make

American winemaker to be hired as winemaker and vineyard manager of a Burgundy estate, at Guy Roulot in Meursault. Stories like Ted's have bound me ever closer to the wines of the region. I was hooked. His wines remain my all-time favourite Californian wines, wonderful Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays.

The brilliance of *Sideways* was that it captured the sense of beauty and excitement of Wine Country without audiences needing to understand or even care about wine, yet there were plenty of 'in' jokes so that wine nuts could nod along approvingly, stroking chins and having an inner chuckle.

***'No, if anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any fucking Merlot!'*** – Miles Raymond, *Sideways* (2004)

Germany, and small growers from Burgundy and Piemonte), stood a scintillating selection of boutique Californians: teeth staining Zinfandel and Petite Sirah; sumptuous, cherry laden Pinot Noirs; elegant Chardonnays; Cabernet Sauvignons with more than a whiff of 'Old World' restraint and poise - the first rumblings of a love for Californian wine.

A couple of months later I was on a plane heading to San Francisco and wine country. *Sideways* was the first film playing: a euphoric, appropriate, knee-janglingly anticipatory build-up for the trip ahead.

Shooting across the Golden Gate bridge and just an hour away, Sonoma begins to unfurl its sweeping vista of vineyards. Over the course of a week, and I'm in love with the town of Healdsburg, its cute square, the vineyards and tasting rooms within striking distance, and Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen in Hotel Healdsburg: a revelatory post-tasting lunch of foie gras and wagyu sliders at the bar (before the 'slider' had come anywhere near a UK restaurant menu) remains etched in the memory.

California made me learn to drive. The second visit later that year was the clincher, realising that unless I

wine: Kutch Wines are now some of the most admired and sought after in The Golden State, and you can now find them in the UK, imported by Roberson Wine.

Back in 2006 it was a struggle to find much decent Californian wine in the UK, aside from the usual big dog suspects, most of which were also punishingly expensive. Roberson became the trailblazers in the UK for 'The New California Wine' as it was styled by Jon Bonné in his 2013 book (Sager + Wilde the evangelist wine bar leading that charge for the on-trade, banging the Californian drum), a clutch of winemakers spearheading a movement that was a reaction to the blowsy, sledgehammer wines of the 80s and 90s. The 'Old California' was always about elegance, grace and balance before the 'big ripe fruit bomb' era, and so this wave of wines was a homecoming of sorts.

I visited Ted Lemon of Littorai, a winemaker who epitomises what this new guard are looking to achieve: wines with freshness, brighter acidity, often with more modest ABVs. He's the cover star of Bonné's book. A serious track record began with studying winemaking in Burgundy, going on to work with wineries including Dujac, Roumier, Bruno Clair, and becoming the first

Californian specialists The Wine Treasury and The Vineyard Cellars have been holding an annual trade tasting at one of the Goodman group of restaurants for several years now, and each year it feels more relevant than ever before, the roll-call of top sommeliers and restaurateurs a testament to the groove and bounce that the wines now have in the UK. Other merchants have added more to their portfolios too.

Like any visit to a wine region, everything makes more sense once you've seen the vineyards, soaked up the feel of the place, eaten in the restaurants. Opening a bottle transports you back there immediately, and becomes part of the great pleasure of the wine experience. I'm a sucker for these wines, they press my buttons and make me smile. Even the Merlots.

California dreamin', indeed.



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