

From Cellar Rat to Winemaker, Justin Murphy Uncorks His Bliss Under the Irie Label

A New Generation of Winemaker Emerges from the Paraiso Vineyard

BY LAURIE DANIEL



Justin Murphy grew up around wine. But it wasn't a line of work he had intended to pursue.

Wine "was around me all the time," says Murphy, whose grandparents, Rich and Claudia Smith, own Paraiso Vineyards in the Santa Lucia Highlands west of Soledad. "But I didn't really know what I wanted to do."

That is, until he signed on as a cellar rat at Courtyard Cellars, a big custom-crush winery outside San Luis Obispo, and subsequently went to work at Sextant Wines in the Paso Robles area. He thought, "This is really fun, really interesting." Slowly, an idea began to take root. Maybe it had been there all along and just needed some encouragement.

Murphy decided he wanted to make some wine of his own—90 cases of Paso Robles Zinfandel, to be precise.

That 2006 Zinfandel soon will be released under the Irie label. Irie is the name of Murphy's dog, but it's also a Rastafarian term that refers to positive feelings or emotions. "It's the mood when you drink the wine," the 24-year-old winemaker says.

Though he's enthusiastic and animated when talking about his endeavor, Murphy himself seems a little surprised by the course his life has taken. His grandparents were surprised, too.

"It was the furthest thing from our minds," says his grandfather, Rich Smith. But Smith says his grandson seemed to blossom at Sextant, where he went from dragging hoses to supervising a cellar crew. "All of a sudden, we turned around and he said, 'I want to be a winemaker.'"

But unlike some scions of wine families, who slide easily into a pre-ordained role at the family business, Murphy has created his own little niche. "What he's done to date has been independent of us," Smith says.

Even the choice of Zinfandel as his first wine was a sign of independence. Sure, Murphy likes drinking Paso Robles Zin. But Zinfandel was also something totally apart from what his family does. Paraiso Vineyards produces Pinot Noir, Syrah, Chardonnay, Riesling and a port-style dessert wine, but no Zinfandel. He wouldn't be competing with them, nor would he be confused with them.

Now -- with two vintages of Irie Zinfandel produced at Sextant under his belt -- it seemed like time to move home for the 2008 vintage. Murphy is renting 300 square feet at Paraiso Vineyards for his operation, and he's planning to expand: in 2008, he hopes to produce a little less than 500 cases, and he's adding Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to the lineup. The Cabernet



Justin Murphy & Irie

will be from Paso Robles, but he's keeping the other two varieties in the family: he's buying the grapes from Paraiso.

Murphy, who hasn't had any formal winemaking training, freely admits there's a lot he doesn't know. He doesn't have much of a background in chemistry, for example, and that sort of knowledge can be critical if a wine develops problems. "If something goes wrong, I have to ask," he says. But he figures he can get any help he needs at Paraiso, and his grandfather agrees. The whole process of creating a brand and selling the wine is a new challenge, too. First you have to figure out what you're trying to accomplish with your wine. In the case of Zinfandel, should it be big and jammy? More elegant and food-friendly? "I wanted to create my own style," Murphy says, "but I didn't know what that is because it was the first time." That first effort, the 2006 Irie Zinfandel, is plump and smooth,

with plenty of sweet fruit and some nice spiciness. It's ripe but not over the top.

Then there's the matter of the name and the label. "I wanted to come in with a free-spirited, relaxed approach to wine," Murphy says, explaining his choice of the Irie name. For a label, he turned to Blu Creative in Salinas, which took his ideas and translated them into a design. Dave Muret, director of marketing at Paraiso Vineyards, has helped him with some other aspects, such as the wording on the back label, which explains the origins of the name Irie.

Then there's perhaps the most difficult aspect: selling a new wine in a marketplace cluttered with boutique brands, long-established labels and cute critters.

"There are a lot of people making wine right now," Murphy says. "You've got to sell it."

His grandfather concurs. "I think

that the biggest challenge, from my perspective, is sales," Smith says. Smith says he offered to add the Irie Zinfandel to the lineup for Paraiso's wine club, but Murphy "hasn't got enough wine to supply the club."

Even before the label had gotten federal

"Everybody's behind me doing this," Murphy says. "It's nice to have family support."

approval (government red tape is another aspect of starting and operating a wine brand), Murphy started making sales calls to wine shops and restaurants. Although he says the response has been generally positive, there have been exceptions.

"It's different to hear from people who don't like your wine," he says a bit wistfully.

He expects to get some sales help from his longtime girlfriend, Megan Pastor, who has a marketing degree from Cal Poly and is working on the wine club at Paraiso. "I think it would be fun for us to go in together," Murphy says. "That would be the ultimate plan."

And the rest of the family stands ready to help out however it can. Smith says his rule for the family is: "If it's really what you want to do, and you're willing to work hard at it, jump in. ... if you care, and you're really excited about it, and I can help you, I will."

For now, Murphy is taking a methodical approach to building his business. "I think it will be a slow process," he says, "but eventually we'll be there." **ce**