



In the Kind of World Where We Belong: An Interview with Drake Whitcraft

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Lately I've been in a Beach Boys sort of mood – the *Pet Sounds* era. It's what I have playing in my car when I pull up to this small, inconspicuous urban winery across from a stand of palm trees, an expanse of sandy white beach and the clear, blue Pacific. We're on Santa Barbara's waterfront, and Brian Wilson's plaintive voice adds texture to the day. It seems the fitting soundtrack for a sit-down with Drake Whitcraft, owner of Whitcraft Winery and a winemaker who is, by turns, also a musician and restless spirit.

Drake's father, Chris Whitcraft – a celebrated winemaker and the founder of Whitcraft Winery – died suddenly in the spring of 2014 at the age of 64. His health had been deteriorating for several years – so much so that Drake had taken over as full time winemaker by 2008. But his sudden death left Drake, then 32 years old, at the helm of a winery with great fiscal and administrative challenges, and a legacy that was rich yet tainted.

I wanted to check in on Drake, now 33, to see how he is doing these days and in particular to taste his Chardonnays. Though he is also known for his Pinot Noirs, Syrahs and the little bit of Grenache that he makes, I'm more enamored with his bracing, lean Chardonnays. There are few Chardonnays from Santa Barbara County that I consider as delicious and elegant as these.

We start off our day together with a tasting of his three sought-after, vineyard-designated Chardonnays, those of the Pence Ranch, Melville and the Presqu'île vineyards. My favorite of the three is the Pence Ranch, and so we kick off our day together talking about this vibrant, exuberant wine:

On the Pence Ranch Vineyard-designated Chardonnay:

I was at a point where no one would sell us fruit anymore. My dad had so many debts to vineyards, it felt like a gigantic mountain I had to climb. But then Brent Melville, who was involved in Pence Ranch in 2011, reached out and said, 'Hey, I've got this new guy I'm working for and he wants to sell fruit to winemakers.' So in 2011 I took a tiny bit of fruit and made 140 cases, and I really liked the wine.

The Pinot from Pence can really handle whole-cluster, and the Chardonnay can maintain super-crazy acidity – with very rich flavors, as well. I stir the lees for four or five months, which draws those flavors out even more. Pence Ranch is close enough to the Pacific to get that marine layer influence; there's this briney-ness to the berries, this saltiness in the air. I crave white Burgundy. I crave Chablis. My mouth waters for it. That's what I want out of my wines.

My dad wanted to make that style of wines – European, leaner, lower alcohol – but the farming wasn't really what it is now. I've looked through his notes, and his pHs are where I want mine, but his sugars were higher because back then the sugar would start to move but the pHs wouldn't. He would complain about that all the time. Back then, everyone was using the California sprawl – no vertical shoot positioning. Just not very good farming. He always wanted to make lean wines. That's what he liked to drink. I'm making my wines exactly the same way he made his – the same exact process – but I can make leaner wines because the farming is so much more evolved these days.

All of the somms I show these Chardonnays tell me they want to drink the Pence for themselves, but they end up buying the Melville- or the Presqu'île-designated Chardonnays because they have higher pHs and more alcohol. Don't get me wrong; I'm stoked on all three. They all have lower alcohols than most wines in the county. [*Drake's Chardonnays clock in between 12.7 and 12.9 % alcohol.*]

There are some wine lists these days that are focused on lower-alcohol wine, but even those accounts seem to buy as close to the other [*higher alcohol*] camp as possible, which is smart. You need to have wines you can sell. So let's say at one

of these types of restaurants, someone comes in and asks for a Rombauer Chardonnay. Well, if the sommelier recommends one of my Pence Ranch Chardonnays instead, they probably won't like it, but they may like my Melville- or Presqu'île-designated Chardonnays. And then, hopefully, those consumers say to themselves, 'Maybe this lower alcohol/higher acid approach isn't such a bad idea.'

On whether or not he considers himself obsessed with wine and winemaking:

Nothing to me is everything in this world. I won't get tied to anything in this world except for people. I never want some *thing* to matter so much to me that if it goes away, I won't know what to do with myself.

From the outside, people probably look at me – because I'm usually drinking a beer or playing music or at the beach – and think that I'm not really a winemaker. I've been around wine my entire life, so it's second nature to me. It's part of me, so I'm not always having to remind others that I'm a winemaker. And I don't attend a lot of these big wine events because I can't afford to.

I guess what I am obsessed about is the process that I was taught. That's why I refuse to change anything. We use the same old stuff we've always used. I'm obsessed with this respect for not adulterating a wine, but I don't go around talking about it constantly. I think some winemakers are just now discovering the making of non-adulterated wines, so maybe they feel they have to be boastful about it. But for me, it's the only way I think wine should be made. I don't have to demonstrate my obsession with it. Like, I love my girlfriend, but I don't go around talking about that constantly.

On taking over a troubled business:

When I took over, it was all trial by fire, because my dad never really showed me how to make wine or run a business. I had to figure it out for myself. I don't mean this to sound disrespectful, but I just figured out that I needed to do the opposite of what my dad had done, regarding how to run a business. First of all, I started to build relationships. My dad could be very gruff and he burned a lot of bridges, so I tried to repair those.

The decline of my dad's health was rapid. The last harvest he worked was the 2008 harvest. In 2011 he did drive a truck to Sta. Rita Hills to pick up fruit, but that was it, so I was already doing a lot, but when he died, I definitely panicked. I just

didn't think it was going to happen like that...so sudden. I had to take over all the books and learn Quick Books. I couldn't have maintained this place without my mom's help. She gives me fiscal guidance.

This is something I've always wanted to do. I just didn't think I was going to have to do it the way I did it. It came sooner, faster, just way more intense.

My dad was really good at pretending that nothing was wrong. By the time I took over winemaking in 2008, my dad had to file for bankruptcy. I still have a year of his bankruptcy debt to pay off. That's why I still live at home. It was really a worst case scenario. It's been so hard, but I try to maintain a level sense of everything. I don't ride highs because lows happen all the time. Life is amazing, but it is also a constant struggle, unless you're super-wealthy. And, even then, everybody's got struggles.

I am having a lot of success right now, but I'm not going to get caught up in it. I have no new debt. I pay all of my bills on time: my rent, bankruptcy court, growers...all of that stuff is a priority to me because I saw what happened with my dad. A lot of times he thought money was going to come in but it didn't, but he still spent as if it did. I'm not going to rest on my laurels until I'm about 70 and I can retire from winemaking.

On the grieving process:

Certain things trigger super sudden waves of emotion. Luckily, though, he wasn't a holiday kind of guy. He hated the holidays, so that makes this time of year a little easier. But at the beginning I'd just find myself crying in a corner of the winery for half an hour...sometimes 45 minutes, sometimes longer. Because I was so sad – so sad because I was missing him and because he would never see this place really succeed. Sometimes when I'm working the market, someone will ask about him and that will trigger this rush of emotions, but I'm getting better at controlling that. If I feel like I'm going to cry, I just think of something else.

On whether or not he has any regrets:

I wish I would have been more patient with my dad; just flat out nicer, because you only get one dad. I really didn't think my dad would go so soon. I had a huge argument with him right before he died. We were at the grocery store and he was buying all of this orange juice. He was buying, like, five cartons at one time, and he was diabetic. He insisted it was good for him, but I told him, 'Dad, there are

other ways to get your Vitamin C when you're diabetic. You can take supplements,' but he just insisted on buying all that orange juice.

On his mentor, Burt Williams, of Williams-Selyem:

Burt was my dad's mentor and now he is mine. He actually taught me more about winemaking than my dad did. My dad was kind of gruff and impatient. Burt just had, and still has, this really gentle way of explaining things.

He taught me that to be a good winemaker, you have to have a good memory. If you can remember vintages, and how things change with the fruit from year to year, that really helps a lot. A photographic memory is what you need to be a really good winemaker. He always tells me, 'Buy good grapes, get them to the barrel and don't mess it up.' And that's what stuck in my head...'less is more.' I think that's true in life in general.

On whether or not he considers his style of winemaking "Natural":

I call it real winemaking. Anything else its wine manipulating. I honestly wouldn't know how to water-back a wine. I'd have to ask somebody. I don't know the regimen for enzymes. I don't know any of that stuff. For a while there, I was really scared because I thought, 'If the winery doesn't do well, who will hire me? I don't know how to do anything except this hands-off style I've learned. I don't really even know how to operate a pump. I can make wine the way it was made before electricity was invented.'

All of my red wines are treaded with feet. I don't own a crusher/destemmer, so the only way to get a little bit of the juice out of the grapes so that the yeast can go to work is by foot. I think that's one of the reasons my red wines integrate stems well; my wines are dry and in-barrel in about 14 days. They're not sitting on the stems soaking up all this stemmy-ness for a month and a half. They're only on the skins for a little bit, so the stems incorporate really nicely into the juice.

Some people get grossed out when I tell them we foot-stomp all of our reds, so I explain to them that we first dip our feet in citric acid, rinse them really well with water. And I don't let anyone with funky feet tread my wines.

I explain to people that they might like their wines like they like their foods. Most people don't like to learn that machines made their food; they prefer when *people* make their food. I choose humans! A crusher/destemmer is hard,

cold and made of steel. The human foot is soft and supple. It's more natural and easier on the fruit.

On what his father would think of his more recent wines:

I think my dad would be super-stoked with my wines because my dad's mentor, Burt Williams, likes them, so I think my Pops would.

On how he blows off steam:

I play the guitar. I'll have an intense hour of playing and just getting everything out. And I write songs.

I also cook a lot. That's a huge distraction for me, because I really focus on it when I'm doing it. I do these layered meals; he takes four to five hours to prep his food, so that's a really good way for me to blow off steam. I have a lot of chef friends who give me tips. Everything I do is pretty rustic. I grill a lot. I make ceviche. I don't have an immersion circulator or anti-griller or anything like that. I used to have a deep fryer. Now I do almost everything on the grill.

I go on a lot of beer-cations, too. They don't cost a lot. I have two friends who live in San Diego, so I crash on their sofa and just go drink my favorite beers for a few days. That gets me out of the wine scene. I don't really like the pretentiousness that is involved in wine. I hang out a lot more with beer makers and beer drinkers than I do with winemakers or wine drinkers. They're just more my kind of people. Don't get me wrong, I know a lot of amazing winemakers who have helped me out a lot. They know who they are. But overall, I'm more comfortable around the beer crowd.

On whose wines he enjoys drinking these days:

Because I spend so much time in the cellar, I don't have a lot of time to go out and do wine research, so most of my recommendations come from the somms I do business with. The other day I had a great Chenin Blanc from Sandlands. It was so pretty and varietally-correct. I also got introduced to a Massican Sauvignon Blanc while I was in Chicago that totally blew me away. It was the most aromatic white wine I've ever had; it was gigantic in this tiny, beautiful way. This one somm, who knows I'm always in a Chablisian mindset, recommended Massican's Annia wine, and that was so great, too. I also like the wines that Ross Cobb and Jason Drew make [*both eponymous labels*]. And I really like Copain. And Jim Clendenen [*of Au*

Bon Climat] has always been someone I admire. He really knows how to make wine.

On whether or not he has aspirations of making a truly great wine:

No, I just want winemakers that I respect to like my wines. I don't plan to make a ton of wine. If my name is on something, I want to be involved every step of the way, and you can't be involved in every aspect if you're making a ton of wine, so a lot of people will never even have my wine because I won't ever make a lot of it. It's not that I don't care what people think, but it just doesn't ruin my day if someone doesn't like my wines.

Does he have aspirations to grow his production numbers, which currently land at about 1,500 cases annually?

I would like to get to 3,000 cases annually tops. I'd like to make more Chardonnay, but I need a bigger press, and I'm about five years away from being able to afford one of those. Right now I have a one-ton press, which makes Chardonnay-pressing days really long. I did three Chardonnay press loads this harvest, and that was a 16-hour day.

Stylistically, I think Chardonnay is one of the hardest wines to get right, and Chablis is my desert island wine, so I guess if I had to choose, I'd say that Chardonnay is something I really want to learn to make well.

Is being a young winemaker a chick-magnet?

Not really. Not having lots of money and living at home kind of takes care of that. 'Want to come home with me...but you have to be quiet so we don't wake up my mom?' Yeah, that doesn't work too well.

On whether or not it's discouraging to be a young person coming up in this modern world?

This American bubble that I live in – well, it's pretty nice. But the world is so troubled, and that's disheartening. One of the reasons I stick to natural winemaking is that I just wish all things were done that way – with as little impact to the environment as possible. But people are greedy, so that's not going to happen. I'd like to think you can help people to live a better life through any medium, and for me that medium is wine. I know it's such a small thing, but if one

of my wines has inspired somebody to be closer to nature – well, then that’s a good thing. I’d like to see us change our vernacular, too. For example, saying something is dirty usually implies that’s a bad thing. I think asphalt is dirty. Dirt is clean.

By the time we’re done talking, the sun is setting and a cold front is moving in off of the Pacific. A childhood friend of Drake’s, in town for the holidays, has stopped by the winery to say hello, and one of his employees is working on an upcoming wine club shipment. Although we’re nearing the end of the work day, the winery is still bustling. I start to feel like I may be in the way, so I gather up the rest of my things, say goodbye and start to exit. Drake stops me and asks, “Was I able to convey that I wouldn’t be anywhere without my Pops?”

I drive onto Cabrillo Boulevard, which runs parallel to the waterfront and passes by Santa Barbara’s famous Stern’s Wharf. Though it’s chilly out, I open up my sunroof and turn on the stereo. Brian Wilson’s voice spills out onto the dusk: Wouldn’t it Be Nice?

