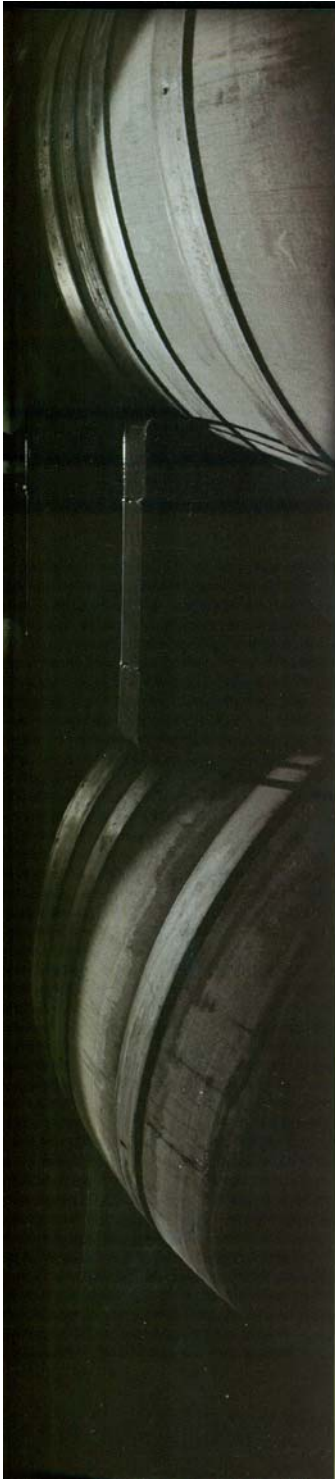


"ITS ACIDITY CAPTURES THE WIND OFF THE PACIFIC AND INFUSES THE WINE WITH COOL TONES OF RED BERRIES AND FOREST FLOOR ALONG WITH EARTHY MINERALITY. FOREST FLOOR? WHAT THE HELL? I DIDN'T TASTE NO DEAD LEAVES OR SQUIRREL SHIT. IT JUST TASTED LIKE GOOD WINE."



WHEN I GROW UP...

SKATER TURNS WINEMAKER, RYAN ZEPALTAS

WORDS: DAVE CARNIE
PHOTOS: BRIAN GABERMAN

My wife Tania and I started a food blog [www.foodondrunk.blogspot.com]. We're foodies. Incidentally, I should mention here that I hate the words "blog" and "foodie." Hate hate hate. But Food On Drunk (FOD) kind of treats food the same way Big Brother treated skateboarding. Food, like skating, is just the backdrop for silly business. But unlike skateboarding, everybody eats, so it's easy to tie food into any story.

FOD has a small following and I've had the fortune of meeting some new people, most notably skater and winemaker, Ryan Zepaltas. Ryan wrote me shortly after he read a post about our visit to the French Laundry in Napa. "Just writing to say I like your food blog," he wrote. "The [French] Laundry shit is hilarious. I have been lucky enough to eat there before. It is cool to see it from your perspectives. It is refreshing to see someone from the skateboard world be into food and shit."

Ryan, it turns out, is a washed up skater who got into the winemaking business. He owns a small winery in Santa Rosa, CA (Tony Trujillo's home town) called Zepalta Wines. A couple e-mails later, and I had a box of four bottles of Zepalta wine on my porch. "The food blog has finally paid off," I told Tania.

Ryan sent me two bottles of his chardonnay and two bottles of his pinot noir. They had cool labels. I admitted before I even tasted them that I probably wasn't going to like the chardonnay, but I'd like the pinot. And I was right. Tania liked the chardonnay, but to me it had a little too much of that characteristic oaky, buttery flavor. I almost exclusively drink white wines, but I like white wines

that don't taste like anything. Funny, I was able to kill the taste of Ryan's chardonnay with a couple of cigarettes and it was fine. I was rather embarrassed to admit, "Yeah, your wine is great... after a couple of smokes!"

"You have a very European palate," he said. "Lots of French people smoke cigs. So maybe that's how the French intended it to be: good after a couple smokes. You're more sophisticated than you thought."

On the subject of palates, Ryan and I began talking about why skateboarders have such shitty palates. As I wrote in my article "Ron vs. The Oyster" (up at kingshitmag.com), "Skateboarders don't eat shit. The skateboarder's palate is retarded. Literally. They eat like little kids."

Ryan agreed. "My skate friends are a pain in the ass to go eat with since to them a taqueria is getting fancy compared to the Taco Bell that they usually eat."

I confronted Tony Hawk years ago because I took exception to his sponsor, McDonalds. I argued that McDonalds was evil and regardless of his opinion of the franchise, he's a role model to a lot of kids and should be more keenly aware of what he's endorsing. And, as an athlete, endorsing McDonalds is like endorsing Marlboro. It's just trash. But Tony stands behind his McDonalds sponsorship. "I like McDonalds," he said to me. "I eat there and I take my kids there. In fact, when I'm in Europe, my favorite food is McDonalds." GASP! I was shocked. WHAT? Maybe in England, but what about in France, Italy, or Spain? You'd take a Big Mac over the greatest cuisine on the planet? Unfortunately, this is true of a lot of skaters.



"WINE AT THE SESSION WOULD BE AN INTERESTING CONTRAST AT THE SANTA ROSA SKATEPARK TO THE TWEAKERS DRINKING 40S IN THE BUSHES AND ALL THE HOMIES DRINKING NATURAL ICE AND PBR."



We were stoked to get a Gaberman photo for the mag—they're always beautiful—but I didn't realize dude had skills? I thought he was my age and we were going to get some early grab I/s chicken wing off a jump ramp photo. Which would have been fine, but a Frontside Nose slide is infinitely better. The vineyard in the background is a nice touch as well. Well played, gentlemen, well played.

"When I went on a skate trip to Spain a couple years back," Ryan said, "all the dudes were eating Subway, and shit like that. I'm like, 'There are all these cool-ass bistros, markets, and tapas bars everywhere, and you want fucking Subway?' The good food wasn't even that expensive. Mike Rusczyk was down, though. After skating all day, we would go feast like kings at these tapas bars eating fresh shrimps, foie gras, Jamon, good cheese, etc. while the others ate crap. The everyday wines there are cheap, too, so we would get multiple bottles at every meal."

Ryan, like myself, is a relative newcomer to the foodie scene. He's from Wisconsin. "Wisconsin was all about beer and hard liquor," he said. "Fancy food in my hometown was Olive Garden." After he finished school in Wisconsin in 1999, he moved into a room in his aunt and uncle's house in Santa Rosa. Ryan spent the summer skating, filming, "trying to come up," and being a general scumbag, but he was also introduced to some of the finer things in life. "They were the type of aunt and uncle that were total partiers, and they introduced me to lots of things," he said. "They also were really into food, wine, and entertaining folks. They always took me along when they went to dinner parties and fancy wine events. I quickly got used to fancy food and wine. I mean you've got to be a total tool if you can't appreciate the local food and restaurants in Northern California. Jack in the Box vs. foie gras? The transition to being a food and wine snob wasn't hard."

Towards the end of that first summer, as his money was running out, Ryan met a guy who ran a cellar at a winery. He was hiring. "I ended up working for this winery named La Crema for a couple harvests," he said, "and totally became stoked on the whole process. I decided to take it to the next level and go do an internship in New Zealand for winemaking. I went down to New Zealand to skate for a couple months and work for three. That was sort of the turning point where I decided that I wanted to take winemaking seriously."

It became very serious when he started Zepaltas Wines in 2005. He's gotten into making chardonnay, syrah, and also some Rose wines, but Zepaltas focuses primarily on the excellent pinot noir grape that is grown in the cool climate of the Sonoma Coast. Which, I failed to mention earlier, is excellent. Even the wine snobs like

it. "There's brightness to this wine's color and spicy aroma, more vinous than directly fruity," said *Wine & Spirits Magazine*. "Its acidity captures the wind off the Pacific and infuses the wine with cool tones of red berries and forest floor along with earthy minerality." Forest floor? What the hell? I didn't taste no dead leaves or squirrel shit. It just tasted like good wine.

I asked Ryan how he did it? Making wine seems like something reserved for the Francis Ford Coppola's of the world, not exactly something you'd expect from some dirty skater.

"Since I am not a trust fund kid, and I didn't get rich off software, or something like that, I didn't have a lot of money to build a winery," he said. "I rent space at the winery [Siduri Wines] where I work by day. It is an easier way to get into the business without spending millions on equipment and land. We have use of the facility, and equipment, and store our barrels there for aging."

The grapes come from different sections of other vineyards that he leases/contracts. They're custom farmed for him and he buys the fruit from the farmer. The grapes are then brought to the winery and processed. "The fall is the annual harvest time when the wines are made," he said. "It is a grueling time of the year. I usually put in 18-hour days managing my wines, my consulting clients, and of course my main job at Siduri Wines."

And he still manages to find time to skate. I wondered if he'd ever drank wine during a session? He didn't think so, but he did say, "Wine at the session would be an interesting contrast at the Santa Rosa skatepark to the tweakers drinking 40s in the bushes and all the homies drinking Natural Ice and PBR."

Which reminded me about the time I wanted to get sponsored by Coors. I never understood why everyone wanted to be sponsored by skateboard companies and shoe companies. I mean, sure, you need those things, but I wanted to be sponsored by something I really needed: beer. I've since transitioned to wine and I'm currently making a sponsor-me tape that I'm going to be sending around. I'm definitely sending a copy to Zepaltas Wines because Ryan totally gets it. "It's funny that Tony Hawk has Bagel Bites as a sponsor," he said. "If I were him, I would be hitting up a charcuterie or cheese company for a sponsor."

Exactly. To learn more about Ryan's wines, visit zepaltaswines.com