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For Immediate Release
Muse Management
Sao Anash
Sao.muse@gmail.com
805.686.0911

Andrew Murray: The Midlife Crisis Averted: He's Sticking with Syrah

Santa Barbara, CA – In 1990, Andrew Murray had the world by its tail. He was twenty years old if he was a day, and had a newly opened winery named after him. Soon thereafter, Robert Parker anointed him “one of the shining stars in the Santa Barbara firmament.” He appeared in photo spreads, hung out with the cool kids and garnered one critical rave review after the next. By the time he was just 25 years old, it seemed he could go nowhere but up.

In 2005, his parents decided to dissolve their interests in the wine business, and, with that decision came Murray's first life lesson, “With the sale of the property and the loss of the estate vineyard planted exclusively to Rhône varieties, I felt a giddy but dizzying sense of vertigo. I was at the edge of a precipice on one side and a mountain on the other. All the restraints of working exclusively with an estate were suddenly gone. It was both terrifying and very exciting. I could suddenly do or make anything I wanted.”

For the next few years, Murray turned inward and focused solely on his family and his winemaking. He moved his winery equipment into what was once an old brewery building in Santa Ynez Valley's backcountry, known as “Area 51” by truckers and locals alike for its remote location. Away from prying eyes and alone with his thoughts and dreams, he set about modernizing this remote warehouse building into a well-appointed production facility.

Now, having just turned 40 years old, Murray is in a reflective mood about the first half of his career in the wine business, “I've thought a lot about how I have now been in the wine business for over half of my life. I've been thinking about how little I knew back when I began. What I lacked in knowledge, I certainly made up for in enthusiasm. Then I started to think about how little I still know about this business. Don't get me wrong...I have learned quite a bit along the way, but I am lucky enough to be in a profession that is ever evolving and moving forward, even while always looking back. How cool is that?”

“I am always learning, yearning, striving. I am always looking around the corner to see what’s coming next, while completely appreciating the journey that I am already on and my very good fortune for all of my life’s gifts. I think back on all of the trends and buzzwords that I have already witnessed in my short 21 years in the wine trade...thankfully many were just fleeting, luckily others have lived on...natural winemaking, minimal handling, non-filtered, fined or un-fined, no sulfites, organic, merlot (and the four letter word that goes with it), high alcohol, de-alcoholizing, etc. I have witnessed my precious varieties, Syrah and Viognier, rise from obscurity to become a casualty of their own success. Through it all, I would like to think that I have learned, experimented, learned some more and acted and evolved carefully, and cautiously, all while staying focused on my beloved Rhone varieties.”

Indeed, Murray, an early proponent of Rhone varietals on the Central Coast, has not faltered in his dedication to Syrah, Viognier and other Rhone varietals, “As they were falling from favor over the last couple of years, I did not retreat from my love affair with these wines...rather, I crafted more of them and even did my part by purchasing and drinking more of them. I doubled down in their defense, staying true to my early, pioneering vision to become a leader in all things Rhone. I am not a follower of fickle fads nor do I chase the ideals set up on pedestals by journalists and critics alike. I won’t pick our wines unnaturally under-ripe in order to satisfy the new-found focus on a number, nor will I pick them arrogantly over-ripe in a futile attempt to placate others. Rather, I will continue to strive for balance, freshness, purity and honesty in our wines, while embracing the vineyard’s uniqueness and the qualities of our vintages.”

Murray’s Los Olivos-based tasting room, now in its 13th year, was recently remodeled and re-conceptualized; it is modern while remaining warm and welcoming. “We love having a presence in Los Olivos. It’s the nearest town to our home. It’s where our children go to school. It’s where we shop. To be connected to that town via a tasting room is very meaningful to us. We receive guests by appointment at Area 51, but we’re just as thrilled to have folks stop by and see us in downtown Los Olivos.”

Following years of soul-searching, Murray remains dedicated to producing wines of typicity and intrigue. “After a few years of introspection and experimentation, I am proud to shout from the rooftops that I stuck with my first love, Syrah.”

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