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## THE WILDER SIDE OF CALIFORNIA SPECIAL EDITION: IN THE FIELD

Doug Wilder, Vinfolio

### Experiencing *Crush* with the SCHOLIUM crew Napa Valley, CA - October 1, 2005

I had the rare treat yesterday of visiting the working crush pad where SCHOLIUM PROJECT is produced. Unless you are part of the crew during full-blown winemaking operations, you are in the way, a distraction, and potentially in danger—with wet surfaces, hoses on the ground, people, forklifts, and trucks to contend with constantly.



Thanks to a mutual friend, Brigit Favia, I was there at the invitation of the man himself, Abe Schoener (pictured to the left). Abe is the creator of the cutting-edge SCHOLIUM PROJECT. When I arrived, I was warmly greeted by Golden Buddha and Olivia Brion, the four-legged co-pilots of winemakers Nicole Abiouness and David Mahaffey. Good-natured canines are talismans of seemingly every winery in Napa Valley. Olivia, a Standard Poodle, actually has her own wine produced by Dave at Heron Lake Winery. More on other good luck charms later.

Abe refers to the environment of White Rock Winery, the site where SCHOLIUM PROJECT is produced, as the University—virtually everyone involved from Christopher Vandendriessche (winemaker of White Rock who runs the custom crush program), to Abe, his assistants, and Nicole Abiouness (another client) were at one time or another part of the crew at Luna Winery.

I spent a good hour at the elbow of the Master where he explained the process of chilling the must with dry ice, the importance of sorting out water berry clusters, and why he bleeds white wine. Later we tasted a dozen barrel samples, some containing secret wine with no name. Believe me, there are some surprises in the works. The lineup of 90-point-plus wines released in July by SCHOLIUM was just the beginning. Schoener is the winemaking equivalent of a free-climber; taking huge risks for even bigger rewards.

Today, Abe was crushing Sauvignon Blanc for GLOS and a new source, Dinner Hill off Sonoma Mountain. The one batch of GLOS was bubbling away as dry ice pellets sublimated noisily to the surface. The concept here is to keep the must chilled before crushing, discouraging fermentation outside the barrel. Abe anticipates he will produce about 26 cases of GLOS in 2005, a huge increase from the 18 cases produced in its premiere vintage.

On another part of the pad, I climbed up a vertical ladder to hang out, literally, with grape goddess Nicole Abiouness, producer of delicious Sangiovese and Pinot Noir. Nicole was perched on top of an adjacent tank doing a punch down on her Pinot Noir. It is incredible to see the amount of effort involved in submerging the floating cap of grape skins in a fermentation tank. She actually needed the additional weight of a helper to break through the cap initially. Nicole had recently added some dry ice to the tank to ward off a heat surge she had noticed developing. With the heavy layer of carbon dioxide boiling off over the lip of the tank, from my point of view, Nicole seemed to be walking on a cloud..

Elsewhere, Christopher was performing the incredible ballet of moving 1,000lb bins of fruit with surgeon-like precision using the battle-axe of every winery—the forklift. Back on the pad, Abe's harvest intern Sarah Adkins (whom he snagged from the underground world of wine making talent at his Alma Mater St. John's College) is performing a myriad of tasks from sorting fruit and washing equipment to filling barrels and hauling hoses. Grunt work for sure. Abe explained that Sarah has a terrific eye for picking out water berry clusters on the sorting table. These grape bunches are auto-selected by the vines and shunted from the actual ripening process of the plant. The vine will remove sugars and acids from certain clusters, using it for plant fuel if the stress conditions warrant it. These inert clusters add nothing in the way of flavor to wine and detract generally by dilution of the must. I sampled grapes from a normal cluster and then a water berry cluster and immediately realized why this selection is important.

Abe dipped a steel pitcher into the bubbling froth of the 2005 GLOS Sauvignon Blanc and poured the opaque, sweet, and crisp must into a glass for me to sample—pips skin, juice and all. To illustrate the difference in fruit sources, we repeated this raw juice tasting exercise with one of the adjacent tubs of Dinner Hill Sauvignon Blanc that was partially affected with *Botrytis* and there was no comparison. The flavors were dramatically different.

From there, we entered the cave together, stemware and barrel thieves at the ready. The first stop was at a squat steel cube full of fermented NAUCRATIS LOST SLOUGH Verdelho, an obscure Spanish white varietal growing among

the levees of the Sacramento Delta. Next to the cube was a small 100 liter cylinder of *saignee* Abe had bled off to concentrate the must. Higher up on racks was the third part of this project fermenting in French oak. Much like with red wine, *saignee* drains a portion of the juice from the tank prior to fermentation to increase the ratio of juice to skin, thereby adding texture, richness and vibrancy to the juice that remains.

Further back in the cave, among barrels under the spiritual protection of *Maneki Neko* banners and icons, we tasted different lots of 2005 Maldonado Chardonnay; various Syrah barrels that may or may not be used; fresh Tenbrink Vineyard Petite Sirah; Carignane from an ancient former Ridge Vineyard source; a top secret wine that will never see commercial release; and two incredible fermenting tubs of what will be the first Maldonado Pinot Noir. Here are some images of the day with the crew.



Abe stirring things up, as usual



Nicole Abiouness in the clouds



SCHOLIUM Intern, Sarah Adkins



2005 Sauvignon Blanc GLOS



Brigit Favia, SCHOLIUM Den Mother



Bleeding juice from a bin

Abe plans on releasing the Verdelho in 1,000ml bottles with crown cap closures this December. There is less of this wine every day as it has become the traditional University *aperitif*.

As the day was winding down, Andy Erickson (winemaker of Hartwell, Favia, and Ovid) arrived with the beer. He and I visited with Jon Engelskirger, winemaker of Turnbull, who was picking up some fruit for a small batch project he is working on. Jon was driving his box van that serves as the projection screen for the three episodes of *Wedding Tree*

*Cinema* played every summer at his and his wife's West Side Rutherford vineyard (Jon's wife is Julie Johnson of Tres Sabores fame). Just another day in Napa Valley...

The wine of SCHOLIUM PROJECT is very limited production. For more information on reviews and future availability of SCHOLIUM PROJECT, contact Doug Wilder, Director California Acquisitions and Sales, at [doug@vinfolio.com](mailto:doug@vinfolio.com) or visit *The Wilder Side of California* at [www.vinfolio.com](http://www.vinfolio.com).

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