

SKY DEVIL

A wine for the time



THE FIRST THING that caught my attention, when Aspen wine purveyor Rob Leventhal told me



KELLY J. HAYES

about Sky Devil Wines, was the pedigree of the winemaker: Kirk Venge. Venge is a legendary Napa producer who has made wines for several outstanding labels that I have enjoyed. But as Leventhal, who is representing Sky

Devil in Colorado, talked further about the backstory and explained that co-founder Matt Vogt is a third generation naval aviator who is committed to improving the lives of veterans with his wines, I was intrigued on another level.

And then I saw the bottle. There, on the front label, was an image of a magnificent gull-winged F4U Corsair, a single-engine American fighter aircraft that is a relic from a different age. The image had the power and the classic beauty of, oh, I don't know, maybe a bathtub Porsche? The label was as evocative as it was understated, and I was compelled to find out more about

the wine and its origins. Such is the effect of good branding. This was not just another wine story. It was one for our times.

Sky Devil Wines was founded as a passion project by Vogt and his good friend Jeff Goldberg. "We had both enjoyed great wines together for years as consumers. We both liked big bold Napa Cabs," Matt explained. "Then one day, Jeff was offered an opportunity to buy two barrels of wine. It may sound like kind of a joke, but we sat down over a lunch with a glass of wine and began to put a plan together on a napkin."

It may seem like a cliché, but that napkin has turned into one of the most unique and inspiring wine projects in the Napa Valley.

Vogt is the real thing. He is the seventh naval aviator in his family going back to his grandfather, who served in World War II aboard the USS Nevada. A graduate of Princeton, Vogt was either on active duty or in the reserves for over 20 years before retiring in 2022. During operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, he flew Marine AV-8B Harrier jets with VMA-542 and VMA-231 as an attack pilot. "Many of the best times of my life were spent in the service of my country

and with the team that I worked with," he said with the conviction that only a veteran can convey.

For his part, Goldberg's grandfather had also been a Marine, having served in the South Pacific with an F4U-Corsair Squadron. As is often the case in Marine families, his sense of commitment and discipline was imbued into his family. So when Goldberg and Vogt began to put together a concept for their wine venture it was inevitable that those influences would be part of the package.

"There had to be some meaningful work, a sense of purpose that would be baked into the ethos of the company. We both wanted that," Vogt said. As the plan evolved, they decided to honor service and support veterans with their wines. This began with the name.

It seems that since World War II, Marines have taken special pride in describing themselves as "devil dogs," and Marine pilots have adopted the variation of "Sky Devils" to describe their airborne exploits. Indeed, in the classic film "The Great Santini," Marine pilot Bull Meacham (memorably portrayed by Robert Duvall) offers an exuberant toast to "that special breed of Sky Devil ... the Marine

dogfighter! There is not a force that can defeat us in battle, deny us victory, or interrupt our destiny — Marines!"

Not your usual wine moniker.

Next, they committed to providing educational and financial support to veterans. Both Goldberg and Vogt had past connections to Penn State University, which has a reputation for veteran education. In the summer of 2020, the pair endowed the Sky Devil Wines Business Innovation Fund, which provided funding for a pool of veteran talent. Vogt sees this as just the beginning of their initiatives, which will also offer pro-bono consulting services to veterans working to establish their own businesses.

But this is far from simply a charitable project. In fact, the two Sky Devil Cabernet Sauvignon wines that I tasted were superb in their earliest infancy (*see Under The Influence*). While producing fewer than 1,000 cases, Sky Devil Wines has endeavored to source the best possible mountain fruit and find a winemaker who could meet their lofty goals of producing not only wines that will sell but wines they love.

“We were really lucky to connect with (winemaker) Kirk (Venge),” Vogt says.

As affable as he is tall — he stands well over 6 feet — Venge is a towering figure in the Napa wine world, and fittingly was born in 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial. His father Nils (who himself served a tour in Vietnam as a naval reservist) attended the University of California, Davis and is recognized for having his 1985 Groth Vineyards Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon receive a 100-point score by Robert Parker, purportedly the first American winemaker to be so rewarded.

Kirk, also a UC Davis oenology grad, knew early on as he grew up in the Napa Valley that his dream was to make wine, and now he has not only achieved it, but he spends much of his time making the dreams of others come true by producing their wines as well. Clients have included such well-loved Napa wines as JAX Vineyards, Eleven Eleven Wines, Macauley Vineyard and, of course, his own eponymous wines.

The wines for the Sky Devil project are sourced from a variety



OPPOSITE: Matt Vogt, former naval aviator and current co-founder of Sky Devil Wines, stands proudly with the French oak barrels as his wines age. ABOVE: Wine on the vine. Grapes hang in the vineyards sourced by Sky Devil Wines. RIGHT: While not the plane on the label, Vogt flew the Marine AV-8B Harrier jets during his deployments as a naval aviator.

of top vineyards with a focus on mountain fruit and are made by Venge at Napa’s B Cellars Winery. High mountain vineyards are attractive to both of the partners, and they have been able to source a well-known vineyard in Knights Valley in Sonoma County that sits at 1,800 feet, sky high by California wine standards, just north of the Napa Valley.

And the sky is a place of inspiration for both the winemaker and the Sky Devil partners. “I think part of the attraction for Kirk is that we can talk both wine and flying. Kirk is a young aviator who flies a Cirrus SR-22,” says Vogt, adding with a laugh: “I want to talk about barrels and cooperages, and he wants to talk about planes and navigation.”

While Sky Devil’s previous releases have been Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines, there are plans afoot to release a Cabernet Franc and even a



Malbec based wine in the future. In Aspen, the wines are trickling into the market and are currently available at the Caribou Club and assorted wine shops including, appropriately, Airport Liquors in the Aspen Business center next to Roxy’s Market.

These are heady times for the Sky Devil team as they negotiate their way through a business that can be as difficult as it is pleasurable. “The sense of working with a team, of striving through hard work and having a goal, a purpose, is very much a part of what we do. Just like it was in the service,” an enthusiastic Vogt explained. “I get a sense of fulfillment when someone enjoys our wines, but it is also the process that is important. We have bootstrapped this thing, it’s not like a venture where we just bought a dream. It is a serious business, and we are making a go of it. We like it because it is hard.”

Oorah.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

2019 SKY DEVIL “FORMATION” CABERNET SAUVIGNON NAPA VALLEY



While I tasted a pair of Sky Devil wines, I found this 2019, their most recent release, to be a bit more approachable than the 2018 Reisacher Vineyards, Knights Valley release, both of which are available at Airport Liquors. The “Formation” may refer to the notion that the wine is a blend of multiple vineyards in Knights Valley (Sonoma) and Oak Knoll (Napa) or perhaps multiple grapes used in the blend, including small amounts of Merlot and Malbec. Reisacher Vineyards is now owned by the acclaimed Peter Michael Winery, by the way.

Both wines were deep and dense in the glass, and the first notes were of dark, black cherries mingling with a bit of mocha and bakers’ chocolate on the tongue. There was the smell of leather and a little earth, all in balance and harmony. But it was the mouthfeel that made both of the wines special. Tannic and bold, they hollered for a steak off the grill. Please make mine rare. These are wines of substance that will please the palate for an extended period of time.

Fly high.

Enjoy a fireside cocktail
with live lounge jam sessions!

Thursdays, 5pm - 6:30pm

TORO

BY CHEF RICHARD SANDOVAL

