

## TASTING ROOM PROFILE: EL SOL WINERY, LIVERMORE

By Jessica Yadegaran

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WINERY OWNERS are guys who wear ascots and have second homes on the Riveria, right? Not quite.

In fact, Hal Liske of Livermore is the kind of vintner I love writing about, because he's proof that we can all do it someday. Liske wears jeans and T-shirts and refers to vineyard managers as "hard-working SOBs." He's been making wine for 10 years — six commercially — and is the proprietor of El Sol Winery, an old chicken farm (he calls it "Casa De Cluck") just east of the Livermore National Lab.

Liske greets me with a stemless glass of sparkling wine. It's 4 p.m. In the distance, windmills dance along the Altamont Pass. The sounds of the neighbors' prize-winning pigs, goats and cattle mingle with the music of the Shins, which escapes from Liske's barrel room. The fact that Liske is 67 and listens to the Shins reinforces that he's a millennial's winemaker. More proof: Nothing he makes costs more than \$28.

One more gem: Liske doesn't enter wine competitions. "My customers will tell me if it's a gold medal or not," he says. Many are. He has a broad portfolio — 10 wines from California's unassuming grape-growing regions — and has a knack for bringing hot-weather grapes such as Mourvedre and Zinfandel down a couple of degrees in the glass. They're soft and elegant.

Before he made wine, Liske was captain of the Hayward Fire Department. Before that, a commercial beekeeper. He's self-taught when it comes to all his jobs. When he was on the squad, he cooked for the crew. On round-the-clock shifts, he whipped up fajitas, fresh pasta and what's-in-the-fridge soup. "The camaraderie was always around the meal table," he says. "It honored the family." It's my hunch that this camaraderie is what eventually drew Liske to wine.

In the early '90s, Liske and his wife, Kathy, took a wine class in Pleasanton taught by Dominic Scotto, then winemaker at Stony Ridge. They loved it so much, they took it four times. Kathy excelled at aroma identification. Hal? Well, let's just say he believes women have better noses — especially his wife, who once worked for Calvin Klein fragrances.

The Liskes bought the chicken ranch in 1996, and in 1998, a friend gave Hal 700 pounds of Zinfandel grapes. That was the beginning, or what Hal calls his "downfall." He made wine from it ("beginner's luck") and began scrounging and sourcing grapes from Lodi, Oakley and Brentwood, vineyards low on flash but high on quality. He did custom crush on the property for a few years, helping small Livermore wineries, until 2002. That year he made his first commercial wine, or what he likes to call the "oh-my-God Mourvedre."

Liske retired from the fire department in 2003. That same year, El Sol Winery was bonded. For two years, you could only taste El Sol wines on the weekends at Big White House Winery at the end of Greenville Road. But this past April, Liske began offering tastings in the barrel storage and bottling room at the ranch. It's a good vibe, like you're chilling at someone's house. The winery's official tasting room will be open in September.

There, among other wines, you'll be able to sample the 2003 Tracy Tempranillo, a berries-and-barnyard wine with a good whiff of saddle leather. His 2003 Livermore Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$24) has the most alluring nose I've encountered in a Livermore Cab. It was like

green olives, and could be attributed to Liske's use of Hungarian oak. Either way, it wasn't all hot and rocks.

Interestingly enough, only four of Liske's 10 current releases hail from Livermore. He loves sourcing grapes from underdog vineyards around California, and admits that he's a bargain hunter. He once made a Zinfandel from an Antioch vineyard that was pure sand, but the fruit was gorgeous. When asked why he offers so many different varietals, as opposed to the Chardonnay-and-Cabernet formula of larger regions, he is frank.

"Variety," he says. "I want people to visit me."